THE CULTURAL IMAGINATION
AND THE NATIONAL QUESTIONS

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The Québec Discourse

This issue examines contemporary developments in the national projects in Québec and English-Canada, and puts the question directly of the contrasts and convergencies between the "two solitudes". The recent appearance of two important collective statements of position—the *Black Rock Manifesto* and the *Manifeste du Mouvement pour un Québec Socialiste*—are indications both of a fundamental realignment of Québec politics and of the vitality of cultural critique in Québec as part of the public discourse. The predicament of the Parti Québécois, as it struggles with constitutional defeat from without and fiscal crisis from within, indicates a coming transformation of the nationalist debate in Québec. As these documents indicate, Québec is the centre of the most imaginative political discourse in North America. In Québec the national question is articulated most eloquently and forcefully in public debates which call not only for the revamping of political institutions, but also for the cultural revitalisation of Québec society. Curiously, while the American polis oscillates between social darwinism and a flawed liberalism and English-Canada is paralysed, seemingly having lost its will to survive, Québec remains the centre of the utopian imagination. Come what may, Québec has initiated a political experiment which is, in part, outside of the grim monotony of the technological life-order of North America.

In a continent in which skepticism about democratic politics and futility in the face of overwhelming power are normal responses, the sheer dynamism and heterogeneity of Québec politics are quixotic. The historical remembrance of the conquest, passed from generation to generation; the re-creation of the Québec polis as a forum for public debate; the will to remain marginal, in language and economy, to the pragmatism of North America: these are some signs of a society which has attempted to recover an authentic public life. While North America drifts towards stasis, if it is not already caught up in the adversities of a new plague, Québec remains as a centre of active political consciousness. It is the "other" to North America, and this because the concern with language itself is a metaphor for a grand reversal of the myth of progress, for the creation of a cultural life which is potentially democratic and communitarian. Thus, while the political economy of North America is ordered by the myth of accumulation, that of Québec is conditioned, however delicately, by the preservation of community. And while, in fact, the public life of the United States and English-Canada are ordered by the technological logic of political economy, the most vital tendencies

in Québec are cultural. This is a community in which writers, artists and playwrights are the articulators of the collective unconscious, and in which civil society exists outside the domain of political economy. If Ortega was correct in noting that cultural regeneration begins when intellectuals flee the institutions, then Québec is in the beginnings of a radical, but fragile, experiment in the recovery of civil society. Not every society is as bold as to throw off, in a single generation, the clerisy and to seek to limit the insistent demands of the market-place.

Of course, the political experiment that is Québec today is fraught with contradictions. The immediate future seems to point to the purging of Québec society as a whole through a classic, and convulsive, crisis of the over-burdened state. The defeat of the Parti Québécois in the referendum on sovereignty-association only now has its full price revealed. From the viewpoint of legitimation demands, the Parti Québécois is trapped in a classically over-extended position. Its range of political manoeuverability is limited by the swift, and inexorable, appearance of the suppressed fiscal crisis of the state. At the same time, the charisma of the Parti Québécois—it is, after all, the political expression of the national project—requires that it satisfy simultaneously a high and intense level of often contradictory expectations. To resolve the fiscal predicament of the Québec state, the Parti Québécois would have to start on the "weary journey" prophetically noted by Max Weber, from charisma to routinisation. To mobilise the popular base necessary for winning the referendum, the Parti Québécois obligated itself to a wide range of social commitments and, in fact, set in motion an economic planning process which depended, for its success, on the political manoeuverability to be gained from the popular mandate of the referendum. As long as the PQ could plan on the basis of radically altered future, it could displace objective, economic contradictions—the absence of a coherent strategey of socialised production or of control over capital accumulation—to the sphere of social economy. Deficit financing, the expansion of social services, the growth of the public sector: these were, in the end, contradictory of the actual postion of the Québec government as nationalist and social democratic in its objectives, but radically dependent in its foundations on the capricious logic of advanced capitalism. Consequently, the defeat of the PQ in the referendum caught the government in a position of surplus-commitments, but with a deficit of means to satisfy these obligations. And, like a classic social democratic state, the government is now over-authorized in the social sphere, but under-powered in the political arena. The "continuously repressed crisis"[1] which Jurgen Habermas has alluded to as the fate of the state in advanced industrial societies is emblematic of Québec. Here, the crisis is displaced successively from the economic system to the sphere of social economy. Or, as Habermas has stated, that while the "crisis" has its origins in the economic system, "the welfare state no longer allows the crisis to explode in an *immediately* economic form".[2] A second front is opened, the front of "collective consumption", and it is in this general area of state funding for social services, education, medicine, etc., that the most decisive, but nonetheless deflected,

struggles take place over the growing irrationality of Québec political economy. The supressed fiscal crisis of the Québec state thus erupts first in the *displaced* form of the "overloading" of the mechanisms of social and political economy of a social democratic state. Québec hovers today between history and routinisation, between utopia and economic necessity.

The Québec discourse is now fragile and vulnerable precisely because it is caught in the critical task of transforming the heterogeneity and plenitude of the cultural imagination into the critical realism of democratic socialism. And this task, which is really a contemporary experiment in establishing a dynamic harmony between politics and ontology, is constantly kept off balance by the application of external shocks: the problem of capital disaccumulation; the use of federal fiscal policy to destablize the Québec government; the continuous "drag" of economic crisis. The cultural imagination, which is always utopian and progressive at one of its poles, can under the pressure of external shock oscillate as quickly to its other polarity—the tragic sense of fatalism. A politics which are informed by cultural vision are, indeed, relentless. Normalisation, the falling back into the technological life-world of North America, is resisted only at the price of living between the margins of utopia and fatalism. It is not at all clear, at this time, whether Québec society will, or can, succeed in harmonizing culture and economy. There are few examples in contemporary history of the successful integration of the fullest degree possible of cultural freedom within a democratic polity and a communitarian society. Every tendency in North America combines to draw this radical experiment in cultural freedom back to the norm, the structures of dependency, of technological society. The success or failure of the Québécois in rethinking and, moreover, relieving the dialectic of domination is surely an early-warning system for those who would also attempt to name, and then to resist, dependent being.

Domination in English-Canada

While the historical specificity of English-Canada makes meaningless a "parallel" national project, there is something of fundamental value to be gained from the Québec experience. For too long, the national question in English-Canada, the question of how best to comprehend and to overcome domination, has had three decisive limitations. First, resistance to dependency has been articulated within exclusively economistic terms. While in effect the industrial sociology of the nineteenth-century may indicate the material contradictions of a colonised economy, this perspective cannot account for other significant dimensions of Canadian dependency. Like Québec, but with its own historical pattern of development, English-Canada has experienced not only political coercion and economic oppression, but it has also experienced two other "deep structures" of dependency—cultural repression and social supression.[3] Indeed, cultural domination now successively reproduces and amplifies itself at the level

of economy. Second, critiques of Canadian dependency have often been vacantly negative in character, analysing the structures of external constraints but leaving unarticulated the precise character, the ontological possibility, of our situation within the North American discourse. Cultural identity is not a given but a social possibility. And as such, the coming to national self-consciousness requires the breaching forever of the suppressed discourse of Canadian thought, and the difficult exercise of thinking anew the relationship of English-Canada, Québec, Latin America and the United States. A positive and informing vision of an alternative society can only mean a coming home, really for the first time, to the New World. Third, the national project in English-Canada has become a static meditation at the level of politics and philosophy because the struggle against domination has radically severed means from ends. A thesis on Canadian domination which would claim to be politically vital must harmonize the critique of dependent being with the analysis of dominating institutions. The national question is vital only if the political practice which its statement encourages is intrinsically transformative. The absence of intrinsic values as *the* fundamental principles of the cultural, and hence political, imagination condemns perspectives on Canadian dependency to repetition and dogmatism.

The national question in English-Canada is thus, at once, a matter of three interrelated questions, each of which responds to a limitation in the traditional equation of self-determination with the critique of industrial economy. The renewal of English-Canada must begin with a theory of domination which is sufficently comprehensive to provide an internally consistent explanation of the patterns of cultural repression, social suppression, political coercion and economic oppression. What is needed is a theory of dependency which links ideology-critique with an explanation of the class-specific distribution of power and wealth in Canadian life. In addition, the national question can only be put if we are prepared to rethink the meaning of the New World for an understanding of the Canadian experience. Our cultural identity is unique precisely because Canada has acted traditionally as an archimedean point, an intellectual mediation, between the technological dynamism of North America and the historical foundations of European consciousness. The Canadian fate is as yet unknown. It remains to have its genealogy discovered and its future disclosed within the labyrinth of the New World. And, finally, the national question involves, really for the first time, the incorporation of a theory of intrinsic public morality into the discourse on dependency. As in Québec, the struggle against domination could be made self-reflexive if the act of resistance were itself an agency for the transformation of the logic of Canadian society.

Rediscovering Regionalism

One brilliant beginning for the development of a more adequate theory of Canadian dependency has been made by the essayist George Woodcock. In an

elegant monograph (and one which deserves major public debate) *The Meeting of Time and Space*,[4] Woodcock has called for a rethinking of the cultural imagination in Canada. He proposes, in effect, that the only possible basis for cultural renewal is an explicit recognition of Canada as a society conceivable only in regional terms. "We are in cultural terms, as we should be in political terms, a confederation of regions".[5] Regionalism expresses a central and important truth about Canadian society. "The full consciousness and experience of one's region in a non-exclusive way enables one to understand better other lands and other regions."[6] In Woodcock's view, regionalism expresses the truth felt by Spaniards, "...the most intensely regionalist people of Europe, when they used the term *patria chica* to describe...the geographical feeling of locality, the historical feeling of a living community, the personal sense of ties to a place where one has been born or which one has passionately adopted".[7] To the intellectual patriot, Woodcock's thesis is haunting for it calls to mind that our entry into technological society has been made possible only at the price of historical estrangement and cultural forgetfulness. So much so in fact that the actual experience of regionalism—the memory of Northern Ontario, the Maritimes, the solitude of the prairies—becomes a regressive political category. It is not an insignificant sign of cultural repression that both liberal and orthodox leftist analysis combine to denounce the regionalist experience as somehow alien to the centralizing qualities of the Canadian discourse. Such political orthodoxy is like "forgetfulness of being" itself. It forgets that the origins of ontology are found in memory, in the immediacy of place. It also hides from attention the obvious fact that in the age of hyper-technology all sectors of society are regionalist in derivation. The centre is now only a provisional site, subject merely to the capricious whims of a "bingo economy".[8] Or, as Woodcock states so eloquently, there has never been a genuinely creative political or cultural initiative which has not been based on a regionalist impulse. Canadian democracy, such as it is, continues to reflect the tragic experience of prairie populism the precursors of Canadian literature are to be found in the Maritimes and the prairies; labour militancy has always been a product of the margins. Even the Great Lakes region is distinctive in its intellectual contributions: it is from Toronto that there has emerged a series of masterful studies of the crisis of civilisation, a fitting mode of reflection for a region which is brushed daily by the experience of technology. In pointing to the regionalist impulses of Canadian culture, Woodcock's intentions are to indicate that Canada is a society different from the highly centralist cultures of England and France. The recovery of the Canadian cultural imagination begins with the fact that Canada has a number of "competing cultural centres", much like Spain, Germany and Italy.

In its most concrete expression, the national question is bound up with the creation of a new "way. of seeing" which reflects the reality of Canada as a confederacy of regions, an alliance of cultural centres. This act does not begin in the abstract, but on the basis of recovering the suppressed discourses of the regions. For once, the indigenous, popular cultures of the confederacy of regions must be allowed to speak for themselves, to articulate their own understanding of

the relationship between emotion, locale and expression.

It is Woodcock's thesis that regionalism contrasts with the pseudo-unities imposed by political constraints. "Provincialism and regionalism are not exactly the same, since provinces can be created by an arbitrary fiat of superior governments, for they are merely political constructs, whereas regions come into being by more organic and less formalized processes".[9] Regional discourse begins as an expression of cultural freedom—the fusing of the imagination with the realities of a people's setting. Viewed as an alliance of "mature and autonomous regional societies" (as opposed to the "centralized and long-outdated nation-state of the type developed in eighteenth-century Europe"[10]) the Canadian reality would be rethought, or perhaps re-imagined, from its roots. It is, in the end, a common cultural tradition, distinctive but non-exclusive, which would be the basis for a new social accord among the regions of Canada. And what is to be the principle of unity? Woodcock suggests that the regionalist impulse, the rethinking of Canada as an active confederacy of heterogeneous cultures, would possess appreciation as its intrinsic value. Regionalism is not limiting, any more than true confederalism is. The full consciousness and expression of one's region in a non-exclusive way enables one to understand better other land and other regions." Woodcock argues that the political significance is clear:

> I am sure that this view of confederation is different from the centralizing and Jacobinical interpretation of Canadian political structures posed by Pierre Elliot Trudeau and his ruling Liberal Party, but I am convinced it is more in accord with historical truth, more fitting to geographical factors, and closer to the cultural actualities of Canada, where literary and artistic tradtiions are not homogeneous, but have developed variously in various parts of our immense country and can only be seen in their full richness if we understand how they differ mutually and how they interweave into the general culture of the country.[11]

Woodcock's thesis on regionalism as the indigenous basis of the Canadian cultural experience is an appropriate beginning-point for a renewal of the Canadian imagination. It speaks not only to the tragic consequences of cultural and economic dependency, but suggests that by coming home to the popular culture of the regions—Newfoundland, the North, the "Free City" of Montréal, Ontario, British Columbia, the Maritimes—we can begin to recover a cultural tradition which will distinguish English-Canada, like Québec, from the homogeneity of North America. The intention would be to develop cultural plenitude by "connecting again" to the most indigenous impulses of Canadian society. This is, therefore, an appeal for an end to the estrangement of a dependent society. The thesis follows that cultural regeneration begins only by seizing the particular. The appreciation of the arts, music, writing, drama,

photography and poetry of a region and of their method and pace of development is the one and certain foundation for a more vital cultural imagination. And also, it might be added, for establishing a basis of common, but critical, appreciation between the cultural sites of Québec and English-speaking Canada. In this way we would begin again to recover the legacy of Canadian thought and to create the foundations of an indigenous cultural discourse.

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Notes

1. Jurgen Habermas, "Conservatism and Capitalist Crisis", *New Left Review*, 115 (1979).

2. *Ibid.*

3. This image of human domination as containing four intersecting dimensions of dependency was developed by Michael A. Weinstein.

4. George Woodcock, *The Meeting of Time and Space: Regionalism in Canadian Literature*, Edmonton: N. West Institute for Western Canadian Studies, 1981.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

6. *Op. cit.*, p. 37.

7. *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

8. This term was devised by Mel Watkins to describe the accidental relationship between social needs and economic planning in a resource-based economy.

9. Woodcock, p. 11.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 23

11. Op. cit., p. 11.