

## IDEAS OF CANADA

*Vincent di Norcia*

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Leslie Armour, *The Idea of Canada and the Crisis of Community*. Steel Rail Press, Ottawa: 1981; pp. xvii, 142. Notes, bibliography, no index.

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Leslie Armour is an exceptional Canadian philosopher both for having studied the history of Canadian philosophy and then relating it to Canada's "crisis of divided community" (ix). Regrettably, his rambling formulation of a conservative idea of Canadian political community is neither cogent nor comprehensive.<sup>1</sup> His discussion of regionalism (5f) is blind to the contradictions in Canadian reflections on space. Goldwyn Smith's regionalist continentalism opposes Creighton's centralist Laurentianism; but both rest on the *same principle*: geographic determinism. Armour's discussion of technology unsystematically elides economic, spatial, political and cultural concerns (ch. 3).

Nonetheless we can gain some insight from the deficiencies of Armour's approach to an organic idea of Canada, its polity, and its cultures — notably in the primacy he gives to cultural community —.

### Organicism

Armour derives his conservative organic model of Canadian society from nineteenth century Scots and *Canadien* philosophers like John Watson and Louis Lachance.<sup>2</sup> He seeks a "communalist" path between Marxism and individualism which shows the individual and society as symbiotic (x, xiii, 12), — a quest he shares with liberals like Henri Bourassa, L.-J. Papineau, Eric Kierans, and indeed the Bi-Bi Commission.

But Armour's conservative model of Canadian thought and its problems neglects the rich liberal and socialist veins in her ideological tradition.<sup>3</sup> His organic Idea of social harmony rests on a traditionalist model of historic continuity. He rejects enlightenment liberalism because of its revolutionary excesses and individualism. But freedom is an old Canadian, and *Canadien*, virtue: *habitants* were notoriously independent. English and French both rebelled against London's vexatious rule. Socialist movements have long opposed class, regional, and foreign dominion.<sup>4</sup> Our traditions moreover bespeak change as well as continuity, conflict as well as harmony. And if, as Armour suggests, the Canadian polity has remote roots in the Roman empire and Plato's Athens (25,

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45), they were mediated by Roman republicanism and the contractual democracy of the Italian communes.<sup>5</sup> Only by evading Canada's democratic traditions, then, can Armour transpose his opposition to liberal contract theory and individualism into an abstract Idea of organic order (48f).

Armour's organic idea of Canadian society's "collective relationship to nature" (117) involves a holistic model of society which paradoxically excludes evolution. The nineteenth century liberal opponents of Armour's conservative sources, however, accepted evolution.<sup>6</sup> It is a fundamental of both liberal gradualism and socialism, indeed of modern society's ambiguous dynamism.

Armour accepts the somewhat liberal notion that a "plurality of communities" may legitimize" some common institutions (x, ch. 2), to which he posits the correlative thesis that a community "shows itself in the institutions it legitimizes" (15). Such common institutions, he seems to say, legitimize the public authority of government by their shared traditions (19, 26), and the harmonious "community of meaning" they express (77). Such institutions should not be too many, too large, and should not conflict (16f). The polity is legitimate, if I understand Armour correctly, inasmuch as it expresses the harmonious community of meaning in different social institutions.

There are however two relationships to which this model applies: among social institutions and between them and government. Their common meaning is not easily discerned. And, as Armour's central concern itself indicates, deep conflicts cleave Canadian society. They must be fully and fairly articulated, if they are to be resolved. This, as Canada's liberal and socialist traditions have long maintained, entails the democratic demand that governments should openly articulate social conflict. These conflicts are not resolved but exacerbated to the extent that public authorities follow an elitist idea of organic order and social harmony. Legitimacy has to be won. Loyalty is not a one-sided duty of the subject to the state. Rather, the tradition of participatory democracy stretching back to Athens itself holds that political obligation is mutual.<sup>7</sup>

### Political Order

Armour offers scattered criteria for evaluating the Canadian state (9f, 16f, ch. 7): it should embody communal order, rather than individual freedom. Legitimization should be expressive rather than contractarian. It must be culturally pluralist. It should avoid the extremes of statism and regional or cultural fragmentation (29). He alludes to Charles de Koninck's (a Quebec Thomist) opposition to *le grand état* (135) and the Tremblay Report's philosophic paean to decentralism; but he neglects to note the illiberal provincial statism which imbued that report.

Despite his talk of cultural communities as the basis of a renewed federation (ch. 6) Armour does not broach a classic Canadian federal ideal of democratic cultural politics: a voluntary pact between the Canadian and *Canadien* cultures and/or the provinces.<sup>8</sup> This is probably because of a conservative aversion to any social contract. Instead Armour offers a corporatist model of a culturally plural state. He rejects the universal state favoured by Scots idealists like John Watson,

in favour of Lachance's traditional *Canadien* view of government as the superordinate public authority which coordinates less sovereign non-public institutions such as the family church, and cultural or national communities (89f). Armour is silent about the authoritarian bias of *Canadien* corporatism, which it shares with liberal models of a business/government partnership.

Armour appears to deny that moral values are embodied in political systems. He cites Lachance's view that the state is value neutral: it is not a moral agent and has "no goals of its own" (129). Its goals come from subordinate institutions. The state only seeks power (129); but, I note, private institutions, too, seek power for itself. He appears also to accept Watson's liberal belief that the state may set rules for all groups as long as it does not interfere with the individual's private life (89f). But surely political systems are not value neutral in their function of setting rules for subordinate institutions; and they must express society's goals, whether as Watson's "common reason" or Lachance's "common good" (cf 83f).

A corporatist approach might, I suggest, be appropriate to articulating and resolving society's conflicts, but only if it is structured democratically, with federal forms of representation, accountability, and especially popular participation. For the polity to define a society's common good, it must perform the ethical tasks of fully and fairly airing its social tensions.

### Culture and Community

Only a common culture with a "sufficient unity" (12), Armour writes, can be the basis of political community. Community is based on a particular social culture as containing "everything which gives meaning to our lives" (140). His concept of culture is ambiguous. It refers to both "descriptive" or particular social cultures (e.g., Italian, French), and to "evaluative" culture (19f, 79). Specific symbols, rituals embody the shared values of a social culture (20f, cf. ch. 6), to which a society's arts, literature and intellectual works give articulate expression (17f, cf. ch. 2). But 'art', Armour holds (following Arnold) discloses a universal evaluative culture which transcends class divisions and cultural differences. The closest Armour comes to recognizing democratic notions of popular culture,<sup>9</sup> is his view that Canadians should be able to recognize themselves in their popular media (24f). His cultural theory is essentially elitist. And a 'universal' elite culture would homogenize particular cultures.

Indeed, cultural and regional *fragmentation* is Armour's *bête noire*: but he barely alludes to cultural dominion, viz, of whites over Indians, English over French, the empires over Canada itself, and he is silent about the racism of his conservative sources.<sup>10</sup> His solution is to search for some shared or universal values, amongst Canada's different regions and cultures, and especially in the conservative Scots and French roots of her intellectual culture (xiv, 12).

But, in the cultural sphere dominion means homogenization and democracy means diversity. Armour does favour some democratic constitutional protections for cultural community rights, but neglects to support individual freedoms (130f). Nor does he distinguish between the fundamentally different cultural

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claims of aboriginal peoples, Canadian cultures, and immigrants. Aboriginal rights are just that: the rights of *pre-Canadian* societies. But Canadians and *Canadiens* are *national* communities claiming their rights as citizens; and immigrant groups merely seek ways of preserving some of their *non-Canadian* ways, as befits the Canadian commitment to a cultural mosaic.

Armour remarks on Jacob Schurmann's liberal talk of national self-determination (103). But he nowhere recognizes this basic principle of cultural democracy in regard to aboriginal or Canadian cultural communities. The nation, he obscurely holds, is "the moral structure of the community" (99; cf. ch. 7). Somehow, "the culture itself is the ideal coordinator" of social institutions, not the value-neutral state (129). Armour does not demonstrate moreover, how the neutral super-ordinate corporatist state which coordinates all other institutions, including cultural communities, can derive its values from the nation (or nations?) as a moral community.

In fine, Armour's conservative approach to a Canadian social theory is disappointing and unclear. It inhibits the perception of popular culture and its practices of democratizing everyday life. Yet a democratic cultural politics would better articulate, and more likely emancipate a culturally diverse Canadian community. From it a non-homogenizing politics of Canadian culture is far more likely to arise. The organic conservative idea of Canada, I conclude, cannot offer Canadians hope for developing their society. It does not disclose the richness of our distinctive intellectual, ideological and cultural traditions.

There is no 'Idea' of Canada. Nor should there be.

Philosophy  
University of Sudbury  
Sudbury, Ontario

### Notes

1. George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* still offers a more persuasive conservative view of Canada; but it, too, is flawed: see my "Beyond the Red Tory: Rethinking Canadian Nationalism", in the forthcoming winter issue of *Queen's Quarterly*.
2. Pp. 12, 80f. See A. B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's: 1979; C. Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*. Toronto: Oxford, 1970; S.E.D. Shortt, *The Search for an Ideal*. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto, 1976); and Y. Lamonde, *Historiographie de la philosophie au Québec 1853-1971*. Hurtubise; Montreal, 1972; for more accurate pictures of Canadian intellectual history.
3. As found in W. Christian & C. Campbell, *Political Parties and Political Ideologies in Canada*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1974) and Pat Marchak, *Ideological Perspectives on Canada*. 2d ed., Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1981.
4. See Denis Monière, *Ideologies in Quebec*. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto, 1981, pp. 41f; N. Penner, *The Canadian Left*. (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1977), chs. 4,7; and G. Baum, *Catholics and Canadian Socialism*. Toronto: Lorimer, 1980, ch. 1.
5. See Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978, 2 vols.

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6. See McKillop, op. cit., pp. 128ff, 154ff, 186f; and Shortt, op. cit., pp. 20, 84, 104, 133. Of the authors referred to all but one (MacMechan) of those born in Canada (Schurmann, LeSueur, Macphail, MacMechan, and Adam Shortt), accepted evolutionary theory and liberalism.
7. See C. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970, and *The Problem of Political Obligation* (Wiley: New York, 1970).
8. See chs. 4-7 of E.R. Black's *Divided Loyalties. Canadian Concepts of Federalism*. McGill-Queen's: Montreal, 1975, and my "Fédéralisme, l'état et la démocratie," *Philosophiques* (avril, 1981).
9. On which see S. Crean and M. Rioux, *Two Nations*. Lorimer: Toronto, 1983, ch. 3.
10. See C. Berger, op. cit., pp. 116f, 129f, 147f, 226f; McKillop, 197; in Shortt: 35 (Macphail), 74 (Cappon), 89 (Hutton) and 113f (Adam Shortt).