

THE CANADIAN LEFT AND MARXISM

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Norman Penner, *The Canadian Left; A Critical Analysis*. Toronto: Prentice-Hall of Canada, 1977, pp. 287.

Norman Penner's *The Canadian Left* is an attempt to make sense at one sitting of the historical experience of Canadian socialism. Some of its material is new, particularly that from the pre-1914 period, and some of it covers ground that has already been gone over in greater detail by such historians as Young, Rodney and Avakumovic, but only with Penner are the respective parts of Canadian socialism brought together in some kind of coherent unity and juxtaposition. The book's style is adequate, its grasp of historical material extensive and its tone is equable and broad-minded, although devotees of the Communist Party of Canada will quarrel with this latter judgement. Penner's suggestive insights will not only absorb the more academically minded students of socialism in this country, but they will as well be read, and profitably so, by socialists *de la rue*, so to speak. *The Canadian Left* is what a work on socialism should be — intellectual without being abstruse, theoretical without being impractical.

Much of the historiography of Canadian socialism has been concerned with the founding and development of the C.C.F./N.D.P. What existed before that is therefore prologue, the details of which can be safely overlooked. Only recently has attention been given to English-Canadian socialism before 1914. Penner's work continues this recent emphasis and provides an intriguing interpretation of the pre-1914 period. Contrary to the views of the 'cultural' school of Canadian socialist historians, Horowitz, Robin and McNaught among others, who generally argue that socialism in this country will usually be found to be non-Marxist, Fabian, empiricist and constitutionalist, Penner argues that the predominant emphasis before 1920 was in fact Marxist and, if not always revolutionary in practice, at least revolutionary in its attitude towards capitalism. It was the Socialist Party of Canada and the Social Democratic Party that carried the torch of early socialism in this country, and they were by no means temperate British gradualists.

1917 was the great watershed in Canadian socialism, says Penner. The Bolshevik Revolution established the primacy of Leninism in the world Marxist

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community and convinced many socialists of the efficacy of both revolutionary methods and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Canadian Marxists from the S.P.C., the S.D.P. and the Socialist Party of North America founded the Communist Party of Canada in 1921 and it quickly became affiliated with the Third International. Those Canadian socialists who were more reformist and gradualist in outlook and who looked to the example of the British Labour Party were destined to wander in the wilderness along with the radical remnant of the farmers' movement until they found each other in 1932/3 at Calgary and Regina with the founding of the C.C.F. Penner seems of two minds over the significance of this division in the ranks of Canadian socialism. Looking at the matter negatively the spirit of sectarianism that has bedevilled the Left owed its beginnings to this split. On the other hand he seems to feel that the emergence of social democracy as a separate political force was probably inevitable, given the likely ability of Canadian society to make reforms to its economic system. In this case the founding of the C.P.C. as a separate revolutionary movement could not have been surprising. As it was, says Penner, we have gotten the worst of all worlds. Not only was the Left diametrically split in two, but soon after its founding the C.P.C. came under the hierarchical and dogmatic influence of Stalin and the Communist International. The rule of Moscow forced Canadian Communists to acquiesce to haphazard and arbitrary policies that rejected principle and made an absolute of pragmatism and opportunism. Penner's elaboration of the circumambulations and contradictions of Canadian Communist policy is the most engrossing and illuminating part of his book and provides him with his most sobering conclusion, that an unconcern for principle must lead to political disaster, the eventual fate of the C.P.C. While the C.P.C.'s abject submission was assuredly perverse, it was at least sometimes humorous. The very same party that could so consistently castigate the C.C.F. as a perpetrator of social fascism on three distinct occasions considered Mackenzie King a suitable political ally, and once, in 1954 in a fit of nationalist excitement, laid a wreath at Sir John A. Macdonald's monument in Queen's Park! The dialectic moves in mysterious ways its wonders to perform.

Yet, says Penner, the Communist Party's record has in other respects been noble and exemplary. In the 1930's especially, it helped organize the unorganized, conducted numerous extra-parliamentary campaigns, played a major role in the founding of industrial unions, and kept alive the spirit of Marxist enquiry, when particularly after 1945, to do so condemned its members to social and intellectual ostracism.

In spite of this Penner is more critical of the C.P.C. than he is of the C.C.F.-N.D.P. The latter, he claims, embodied, and still does, a social democratic tradition of reformism that was the inheritance of the influence of the farmers' movement. Its precedence over other left-wing groups and parties in this country, he feels, lies in the simple fact that it embodies whatever nascent class

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consciousness the Canadian working class has attained. The C.C.F.-N.D.P. has not been without skeletons in its own closet and has at times for example shown an insensitivity, like the Communists, to the national aspirations of French-Canadians, but altogether, Penner seems to say it has behaved more in accordance with its admittedly more limited lights than the C.P.C.

All in all, Penner concludes that socialism in Canada could have done with more help from the intellectuals. Particularly early on, socialism was the ideology of self-taught men and thus tended to be dogmatic and sectarian. Canadian socialism has also shown the paradoxical qualities of being at once insular and not sufficiently concerned with the application of abstract socialist principle to Canadian circumstances. But if there is a final lesson that Penner is most intent on imparting to his readers it has to do with the paramount need for the primacy of moral and intellectual principle in the ongoing experience of the Canadian Left. The Communist Party especially but also the C.C.F.-N.D.P. became ineffective and irrelevant when their feet strayed into the ways of pragmatism. Commitment to principle gives strength to the Left as the life of Woodsworth so completely attested.

My main quarrel with the argument of this book has to do with the author's ambiguous use of the term "Marxism". Nowhere does he specify what he understands by this word, and this is unfortunate in a work that is intent on advancing an unusual interpretation of the position of Marxism in the canon of Canadian socialism. We are told that Marxism 'predominated' on the Canadian Left before 1921 and that since then it has been a source of strength to the Left and has done much to complement the efforts of the C.C.F.-N.D.P. Penner informs us that Marxism actuated not just the S.P.C. and the S.D.P. and later the C.P.C., but also was present in the thinking of James Simpson, Frank Underhill, the League for Social Reconstruction and that it always played some role in the C.C.F. What is this Marxism that has, relatively speaking, been so ubiquitous?

Penner is clear that it is not Leninism *simpliciter*, because Lenin, and Stalin for that matter, are in his opinion not infallible interpreters of Marx. At times he seems to suggest that Marxism is equivalent to the recognition of the growth of monopolies; on other occasions Marxism equals the economic interpretation of history or the advocacy of revolution or simple criticism of capitalism. Marxism, I recognise, has come to mean some or all of these things in the minds of many, but they are characteristics that either singly or together are not peculiar to Marxist socialism. Also the features of Marxism that I believe most distinguish it from other socialisms, the labour theory of exploitation and the account of the collapse of capitalism, are in fact largely if not completely overlooked by Penner in his discussion of Canadian Marxism. Clearly any conception of the prevalence of Marxism in this country depends on what we understand by that term in the first place. Penner defines it broadly and

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discerns its presence in all sorts of places. If it is defined more narrowly, and I think correctly, its role is greatly diminished.

Also, we must distinguish between two senses of Marxism, one which can be applied to the pre-1914 period, and the other to the years after the First World War. What finally defined Marxism as a separate, distinctive and some would say superior version of socialism was the Bolshevik Revolution. Socialists, like everyone else I suppose, find it difficult to quarrel with success, and there could be no doubting the success of Lenin and his Bolsheviks. This easily led to the belief not only in Marxism's superiority over other socialisms but also to the feeling among some that Marxism was the only valid socialism, an attitude that was certainly present in the C.P.C.'s view of the C.C.F. However, before the First World War, while "Marxism" was in some sense predominant, I think it was perceived as something unexceptional, as one of several socialist traditions each of which had some sterling validity of its own. To be sure there were elements in the S.P.C. before 1917 who thought that Marx's theory of exploitation and class struggle were next to revealed truths and that other dissenting 'socialists' were not in fact socialist, but there is a sense in which socialism in English Canada at this time was more varied, pluralistic and indeterminate than Penner suggests. Robert Blatchford, who probably had a large impact on the English-Canadian working class before the First World War, recommended at the end of *Merrie England* that his readers not only read Marx's *Wage, Labour and Capital* and works by the Social Democratic Federation and its leader H.M. Hyndman, but also the writings of Carlyle, Ruskin, Whitman, Dickens and the Fabian Society. And as Penner points out, Canadian socialists at this time were as likely to read Henry George and Edward Bellamy as Karl Marx.

On one other small part of the history of the Canadian Left I would disagree with Penner. As with much else in this country, the centre has only with some difficulty been able to impose its will on the peripheries. Woodsworth in Ottawa from 1921 to 1942 was certainly important, if not crucial, in the establishment of the C.C.F., but was he as important as Penner makes out? Confining ourselves to Manitoba as an example we find that not only was Woodsworth late for the beginning of the Winnipeg General Strike, he was also absent at the founding of the Independent Labor Party of Manitoba, and while he was in Ottawa he participated little in the day-to-day affairs of the I.L.P. Certainly he was most important in the founding of Canada's national democratic socialist party, but without the often equally brilliant work of regional leaders like F.J. Dixon, S.J. Farmer and John Queen there would not have been in existence in the provinces the wherewithal to constitute a national party, and it is time that historians began to acknowledge this fact.

In general Penner seems to be optimistic about the future of Canadian socialism. There will always be socialism, he seems to say, as long as there is

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capitalism. He is particularly encouraged by the increased interest in Marxist speculation among left-wing groups and in the universities. Never in our history have so many Canadian intellectuals considered themselves Marxist. And yet if one confronts the condition of Canada today from another perspective, one without implicit assumptions about the rationality and progress of history, a different picture emerges. The C.P.C. is moribund, and many of the splinter groups on the Left seem to be irrelevant to any serious sort of socialist politics. There is a resurgence of neo-Marxist and critical speculation in the universities, but much of it is abstruse and without a clear point of contact with the organised political expression of the Left in the N.D.P. and the trade unions. The N.D.P. itself presently seems mainly concerned to batten down the hatches and ride out the storm of right-wing revanchism. And colouring everything is an uncertainty over the very future of Canada. Moreover, new issues crowd in, ones that socialists, with their 19th century confidence, were perhaps oblivious to: environmental collapse, the proliferation of nuclear waste and technology, the possibility of resource depletion. The future of Canadian socialism as of so much else would seem to be highly problematic. Norman Penner should write another book, *The Canadian Left; the Way Ahead*.

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