On Politics

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Reflections of Emily

The Life and Art of Emily Carr from a Postcolonial Perspective

Sylvia Nicholles

Many academics in political science and related disciplines struggle with the concept and even the very definition of the term “postcolonial.” How do we decide who is postcolonial, who can legitimately speak about colonialism, and how does this translate into action? This essay is an exploration of the Canadian icon Emily Carr as a political actor who struggled to find her place in the colonial structure, before rejecting it in favour of those the structure had excluded and with whom she felt more comfortable: the indigenous peoples of the west coast of North America. Carr’s connection with them eventually inspired her life’s work and led her to what she characterized as the happiest days of her life, enjoying the solitude of the western Canadian natural landscape with her menagerie of animals.

Can we read the life of Emily Carr contrapuntally to attribute to her a “postcolonial personality”? How did she understand and relate to the indigenous peoples and places she painted? Was her art a challenge to the colonial structure she was brought up in? Does Carr represent

_Sylvia Nicholles is a political science student struggling through her final year. She still has yet to work out what her definition of politics is, but she’s getting there through her study of urban politics and theory._
Edward Said’s migrant, “whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages?” Certainly these questions are much too large to be answered conclusively in this essay, but through a discussion of Carr’s early life, her resistance to the structures placed upon her, her voluntary exile into the marginalized villages of the indigenous peoples she felt comfortable with and her spiritual journey into modern art, I will examine the complexities surrounding her life, work and relationships. I will explore whether she was an embodiment of the process of enacting theory into reality and if she represented a lived experience of resistance against a colonial structure. Finally, I will end with an exploration of what promise Carr’s lived experience holds for those attempting to forge a common citizenship with people who have been excluded by colonial and imperial structures.

Carr’s relationship with the colonial structure she was born into in the late 19th century was complex. Her English colonial settler family in the metropolis of Victoria, British Columbia was highly religious. At this time, Victoria was the older, more settled city in relation to Vancouver. Carr was born to Richard and Emily Carr in 1871, the same year that British Columbia became a Province of the Dominion of Canada, placing her squarely into the colonial settler society of Fort Victoria. The building of Victoria as a fort is symbolic of the creation of the binary between metropolis and periphery, a dualism noted by Antonio Gramsci. Fortresses are built to guard, to protect, to fortify, and this is what the settlers of Victoria did in their culture and society. Said explains that this process of entrenching a culture “differentiates ‘us’ from ‘them’, almost always with some degree of xenophobia. Culture in this sense is a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that.” Rebellion against the xenophobia of her culture was prevalent in Carr’s actions and her life. However, her childhood affected her; the colonial structures that were imprinted on her at an early age were not something she could easily give up. Inclined to both rebellion and conformity, the separation between colonial society and her Western Canada is a dualism that Carr struggled with her entire life.

Early Years

Emily described her father, Richard Carr, as “ultra-English, a straight, stern autocrat.” Richard was known for doting on Emily; however, he would often say that she should have been a boy. She rebelled from a young age, and after losing her mother at age fourteen and her father
two years later, she resisted her strict older sister, the matriarch of the household. Carr travelled to San Francisco at the age of nineteen to study art. In America she began to identify herself as Canadian, but from English parents.\(^7\) This trip to San Francisco affirmed her as an artist and marked the beginning of her lifelong work. Carr began to question the extravagance of the times she lived in, an extravagance made particularly clear when her art school in San Francisco moved from an old, run-down building to a newer, more elegant mansion. She comments, “we were a great deal more elegant here but we were not so cozy or so free as we had been in the old place...humanity was closer down there than up here.”\(^8\) Carr describes a painting that hung in this mansion that reflected the then-ongoing colonization process: “Its subject matter was a long row of cannons and across the mouth of each a man was bound awaiting the signal, ‘Fire,’ which would scatter him to bits. I shall see the dreadful agony of those faces as long as I live.”\(^9\) Her comments reflect an antagonism to art representing the brutal realities of colonization, and may have been the beginning of her moral unease with the subjugation of the "other" to the colonial structure.

Upon her return to Victoria, Carr travelled to Ucluelet (on Vancouver Island), where the indigenous peoples gave her the name Klee Wyck, or "Laughing One." This visit shaped later trips to other villages, and feelings towards the people and the places she attempted to capture in her art. Carr felt great sympathy for the indigenous tribes of the West Coast and she firmly blamed European colonization for their poor and dispirited condition. She befriended the people in Ucluelet and reveals in Klee Wyck that she felt “comfort and pleasure in the company of the First Nations people.”\(^10\) Carr displays this notion of non-conformity to conservative Victorianism throughout her life: travelling solo as a young woman to London; her manner of dress later in life; her love of animals; her outspokenness; and, perhaps most importantly, her attempts to create distinctly Canadian art. To Carr, this meant defining the Canadian West as not only a settler territory, but also one in which the indigenous communities were involved. As Carr was acting in a time when Canada was still defining itself, her vision of Canada was uniquely separate from the civilizing missions sent to what were then defined as the "peripheries." She looks back in Klee Wyck to “her experiences with Indians\(^1\) and her visits to Indian communities, giving us an image of the fully engaged, self-forgetting artist, ‘fighting’ her way through to her subjects, responding intensely and openly to their messages.”\(^11\)

\(^{1}\) Please see Appendix 1 for my digression on the use of this word.
Michael Shapiro articulates an interesting relationship between art and nation building, as “[v]isual media, like the literary genres and print media...articulate a spatiotemporality that facilitates collective identity, for a ‘nation’ emerges as a mode of ‘moulding and interpreting space,’ as well as a locus of attachment.”¹² Carr’s paintings reflect her choice to identify as Canadian, and her unique definition of what Canada encapsulated is important when reflecting on her challenge to how the colonial settlers defined Canada. Carr’s Canada was not one of building communities of exclusion, but rather a place of respecting, learning from, and creating citizenship based on a Canada shared with the peoples that already lived there.

Carr travelled to London in 1900, inspired by two artists who came to Victoria to paint; their prognosis of the Canadian landscape was that it was “crude, unpaintable. Its bigness angered, its vastness and wild spaces terrified them.”¹³ Carr’s time in London was fraught with homesickness, in part because “so few [in London] accepted Canada. These people called us Colonials.”¹⁴ Carr refused to let go of her Canada and allow it to be "polished" out of her, as her family in Victoria wished: “I am Canadian, I am not English. I do not want Canada polished out of me.”¹⁵ Her time in London confirmed that her life work was more important than conforming to the societal norms of the era, including finding a husband—she rejected two potential suitors during her stay. Carr’s non-conformity in London led to her being diagnosed with hysteria, a form of illness “commonly diagnosed for women at the time. It was thought to be the result of women’s emotional nature and their denial of their ‘God-given’ and socially ordained roles.”¹⁶

Carr’s return to Victoria indicated to her sisters that she was not going to conform, nor be “gentled” by England. Rather she says, “I was more me than ever, just pure me.”¹⁷ This rebellious sense of self caused her to be dismissed from her first job for the Vancouver Art Club, which she characterized as “[a] cluster of society women who intermittently packed themselves and their admirers into a small rented studio to drink tea and jabber art jargon.”¹⁸ Carr was deemed too shy, and not cosmopolitan enough for their liking. This pushed her even further from adult Victorian society towards children, animals and those excluded from colonial society: the indigenous peoples. In Vancouver, Carr began a lifelong friendship with Sophie, a woman from the Kitsilano reserve. Despite the language barrier between the two women, this bond was later

¹ See Appendix 2. Emily’s rejection of colonial attitudes towards women is nicely summarized in these cartoon sketches.
characterized by Lawren Harris (an "official" member of the Group of Seven) as proving "that race, colour, class and caste mean nothing in reality; quality of soul alone counts. Deep love transcends even quality of soul...It is unusual, so deep a relationship between folks of different races." Harris' opinion is not undisputed, as Carr never attempted to learn Sophie's language; however, the relationship was still significant in that it transcended barriers of race.

Emily and her sister Alice travelled to Alaska in the summer of 1907. Carr saw this trip to Alaska as a transformative experience, giving purpose and direction to her life and her art. She writes: "[we] passed many Indian villages on our way down the coast. The Indian people and their art touched me deeply...by the time I reached home my mind was made up. I was going to paint totem poles in their own village settings, as complete a collection of them as I could." This trip had a profound impact on Carr's understanding of art and what she could learn from the indigenous peoples: "Indian art broadened my seeing, loosened the formal tightness I had learned in England’s schools. Its bigness and stark reality baffled my white man’s understanding." Through revering their art forms, Carr was able to express the hybridity of her personality and her struggle to find her place within (or out of) colonial society. She states, "I was as Canadian-born as the Indian, but behind me were Old World heredity and ancestry as well as Canadian environment. The new West called me...but the flavour of my upbringing pulled me back. I have been schooled to see outsides only, not struggle to pierce...I had learned a lot from these Indians." Carr probably wrote the above quotation from a literal perspective, but it shows her recognition of the outside/inside dichotomy that had been impressed upon her by her experience in London. Carr's mention of how much she learned shows not only her sense of respect for indigenous people and their art, but also her ability to transcend the racist colonial travel literature popular in the era. Overcoming the deep racial biases of her time and trying to encapsulate the sense of power that shone out of the indigenous art she witnessed became themes in her painting later in life. Carr conveyed a wish to go inside the subject, beyond the boundary, and truly understand what she was creating. Her ability to think outside of the dichotomy shows her as a postcolonial actor, which stems from her inability to situate herself in available societal categories.

She confirmed her growing respect for the indigenous other through her dialogue with a potential buyer from England. This woman wanted to use Carr's sketches to illustrate her own lectures, entitled "In-
dians and Artists of Canada’s West Coast.” Allowing this woman to borrow the sketches would have brought Carr a large amount of positive publicity; however, Carr refused:

“Thanks, but I’m not going to Vancouver.”

“What! You cannot be so poor spirited! My work is patriotic. I am philanthropic. I advance civilization — I educate.”

“You make nothing for yourself exploiting out Indians?”

“After expenses, perhaps just a trifle…. You will not help the poor Indian by lending the Alert Bay sketches? My theme centres around Alert Bay.”

My interest woke. “You have been there? Are you familiar with it?”

“Oh yes, yes! Our boat stopped there for twenty minutes. I walked through the village, saw houses, poles, people.”

“And you dare talk and write about our Coast Indians having only that much data.”

This dialogue, recounted in Carr’s autobiography, shows her need to go inside, to truly understand. She rejects the colonial belief that one can understand and educate about a whole culture after a brief encounter with the other. Whether Carr was able to truly understand and to be on the inside of the culture is debatable; however, her attempts to go beyond a superficial understanding are commendable given the society she lived in, and should be understood as political actions.

**Encounters with Modernity**

Carr’s quest to go beyond the surface led her to study art in France, where she was introduced to the modern art movement. She arrived in Paris with her sister Alice in 1910 and came into contact with another artist, Henry Phelan Gibb. While Alice was shocked at Gibb’s art, Emily saw in it potential inspiration for her own art—at the recommendation of Gibb, she immediately signed up to study at L’Académie Colarossi. (Unfortunately she fell ill shortly after and, diagnosing herself with an "allergy to big cities," left for Sweden to recuperate.) Through her encounters with modern art, Carr found a way to redirect her sense of rebellion into visual expression, which allowed a deeper, more spiritual connection with the subject she was painting. Her time in France would give her the tools she needed in order to find a way to pierce the surface,
and her exposure to radical artists and ideas allowed her to channel her defiance of the colonial structures into art.

For Carr, her introduction to modern art in France did not mean that modernism itself was her goal; rather it was a "means to accomplish the recording of First Nations material." Upon her return to Canada another ambitious sketching trip ensued, this time to coastal and central northern British Columbia for six weeks. Before Carr, it is unlikely that any European woman took this trip unescorted. She came to identify the art of the indigenous peoples with a larger understanding of both nature and spirituality. Carr was never overly cognizant of the subtle meanings of the art she admired; however, her connection to the indigenous art she saw would influence her identification with nature and with being Canadian. Modern art became her medium for expressing the deep sense of connection she felt with nature. At a time when this style of art was rejected and even frowned upon, her belief that this style of art was the only way to capture the British Columbian landscape differentiates her sense of otherness from the art culture that prevailed in Victoria. After this trip, Carr attempted to sell her entire collection to the government of the time, but was rejected. She built a house, became a landlady and did not paint for the next fifteen years.

In 1927, Eric Brown introduced her to the art of the Group of Seven. He explained that these painters were also working in the modern, abstract style, and her introduction to them prompted Carr to start painting again. She submitted fifty sketches and paintings to the Canadian National Gallery in Ottawa and began a connection with the artists in the group, who were also trying to create a uniquely Canadian style of art. They rejected any association with "metropolitan" art, understood either in the colonial sense or in reference to cultural capitals.

This introduction to the group also introduced her to the ideas of theosophy. Through her struggles with theosophy, Carr began to reiterate the belief "in the central role of nature for the artist and the idea that an artist's work should grow out of a profound attachment to a place and absorption of its underlying character." The development of the natural theme found in attachment to space would prompt a new way of thinking about place and what she was capturing in her art. This movement towards a more profound attachment to the places she was painting would prompt her to use the lessons of power she learned from indigenous art to shift to a new locus of art: the nature of the West. Carr continued this theme until a serious heart attack confined her to hospital care, where she began to write about her experiences. Carr went on her last sketching trip in 1942, and passed away on March 2, 1945.
Reading into Carr’s Art: What Type of Canada?

Carr spoke publicly about her art only twice, defending modern art and articulating a new way of thinking about seeing. Through these speeches, Carr defended her choice to engage with distortion as a technique to go beyond the subject of the art. She defined her art as "creative art," using the definition a child once gave it: "I think and then I draw a line 'round my think." She explains further that her art attempts to capture the bigger actuality of the thing, the part that is the same no matter what the conditions of light or seasons are upon it—the form, force and volume of the thing, not the surface impression. It is hard to get at this. You must dig way down into your subject, and into yourself. And in your struggle to accomplish it, the usual aspect of the thing may have to be cast aside. This leads to distortion, [which] raises the thing out of the ordinary seeing into a more spiritual sphere, the spirit dominating over the subject matter.

She articulated that in the step to abstraction, the forms of representation are forgotten. Created forms expressing emotion in space take the place of the represented object. Carr commented that this way of seeing is called "pure vision," which is the vision that disconnects the subject from all practical and human associations. While it is clear that she was talking about her art, this philosophy also played a role in her relationships with the indigenous peoples and her attempts to overcome the dualisms that had been imposed on her.

Carr took the advice of Lawren Harris to shift from the indigenous theme to nature. She began to make movement, not place, her symbol for the expression of "something bigger." Reinvention of the Canadian natural space through movement is the theme for her later art, and is part of a larger spiritual journey. This shift also had political undertones, as it articulated her Canadian identity. Shapiro points out that often the nationalist project can be attached to landscape paintings, as "[l]andscapes, whether focusing on single monuments or framing stretches of scenery, provide visible shape; they picture the nation. Rather than mere depictions, landscape paintings often testify to 'political intentions.'" He explains that many landscape paintings have the effect of symbolically converting land into national space.
Do Carr’s paintings narrate a particular kind of Canada? Shapiro’s point is well taken—while it may not have been Carr’s intention to create a certain image of Canada, her art certainly has contributed to the nation-building dialogue. However, her Canada was not the same one as that which the colonial settlers had in mind. She did not create her art in order to impose an expansion of her colonial roots onto Canada. Rather, her deep respect for indigenous art forms and their lifestyles questioned the “inevitable progress of history.” Carr’s art attempted to go beneath the surface and encapsulate the spirit of the subjects she was painting, rather than to create a space in which civilization took precedence over the natural. Carr’s suggestion that she was "allergic" to big cities confirms her discomfort in colonial settings, and her simple, eccentric lifestyle casts doubt on the need for progress and the mission civilisatrice.

Erin Manning interprets Carr’s painting Old Time Coast Village as associating the landscape with an un-problematized emptiness, thus justifying the interpretation of the landscape according to European ideas of expansionism and settlement at the behest of the indigenous population. It is entirely possible to interpret this painting in such a manner; however, I believe that the absence of the indigenous inhabitants of this village may have more to do Carr’s respect for them, and should be understood as an emphasis of the nature surrounding the village, rather than an omission. The emphasis in the painting on movement and the deeper meaning found in nature is not depicting a Canadian West ready for expansion and settlement, rather it is a confirmation of the deep connection Carr felt with nature.

Perhaps the act of reading art or literature contrapuntally is an exercise that attempts to attribute too much weight to works of culture produced at a given time. Certainly, Carr would not have seen her work as political. She rebelled at the structures placed upon her, but she did not think abstractly about her work; rather, she believed that “workers should work and talkers should talk.” Carr's art has captivated Canadians in part because it embodies her deviance: her devotion to going past colonial boundaries, to challenging the mainstream norms. It has made her a complex, compelling character. This may be because of her status as an outsider. Said characterizes an outsider as one able “to comprehend how the machine works, given that [the outsider and the machine] are fundamentally not in perfect synchrony or correspondence.” This was certainly true of Carr’s life and her abhorrence of the cultured, metropolitan centres she would ultimately seek to escape.
Other ways of life are often colonized in the city; in order to function in the city, one must conform to it. Maybe this is an explanation of why Carr could never fulfill the expectations of the metropolitan, colonial world she lived in. This world dismissed her experience as outside and discrepant. However, my aim in this essay has been to show that her experiences as an embodiment of the nomad, the person who has to migrate, gave her the ability to transcend the dualisms that surrounded her. Edward Said highlights that the aim of his work in *Culture and Imperialism* is to juxtapose the discrepant experiences of the colonizer and the colonized. His political aim is “to make concurrent those views and experiences that are ideologically and culturally closed to each other and that attempt to distance or suppress other views or experiences.”

Said highlights the discrepancy of experiences in order to expose and dramatize the political importance of differing cultural interpretations. Carr’s work and life are examples of living a discrepant experience and challenging the political orthodoxy of the time, although she would not have characterized it as such. She questions the alleged universalism of the metropolitan narrative of the indigenous other that was being constructed at the time in conjunction with the creation of the Canadian state.

How do Emily Carr's paintings affect the western viewer and their conception of their own culture? How does this exposure to alterity, embodied in "one of their own," force the westerner to reconsider the relationship between self and other? Said points out that “we cannot deal with the literature of the peripheries without also attending to the literature of the metropolitan centres.”

My contention is that we can extend his contrapuntal analysis of literature to art, and specifically for this paper, the work of Emily Carr. By exposing the type of schooling she received and her rebellion against what was expected of her as a Victorian artist, she effectively represents a bridge between the periphery and the centre through her abhorrence of the metropolitan and her inability to completely become part of the periphery. Her art forces one to question pictorial, impressionist paintings of Canada and search for the deeper meaning of citizenship in a shared land. Because Canada has an indigenous population that continues to suffer from the abuses of the colonial structure that was forced on them as part of a civilizing mission, questioning what it means to be “Canadian” is an important prerequisite for creating something new.

Carr’s experiences remind us that Canada is a created concept and something that can be re-conceptualized. Her idea of Canada was created through her status as an outsider and also as someone who had
elements of being on the inside. In this sense, she represents Said’s nomad, but not as someone who did not have a home—she clearly did, that of her Canada West—rather, as a nomad in the sense of developing a rebellious questioning of what European settlers were defining as Canada. In this sense, she contributed to creating dialectics between the metropolis and the periphery through her actions and experiences as one cast out of colonial society. She therefore challenges western Canadians to reconsider how we think about Canada, and, indeed, the relationship between self and other.

**Conclusion: Invoking the Other**

In *Postcolonialism*, Robert Young says that "[i]n any system of force there will always be sites of force that are, precisely, forced, and therefore allow for pressure and intervention," and lists the following as themes in the books of French-Algerian sometime-exile Jacques Derrida:

> Force and its traces in language from which there must be emancipation or which at the very least must be subject to resistance, madness as the excluded other of the operation of reason, inside/outside structures, the same and the other, ... identity that is different from itself, ... the destabilizing encroachment of the marginal, ... the constitutive dependency of the centre on the marginal or the excluded, dissemination and the concept of a diaspora without the end point of a final return, and above all history as violence, ontological, ethical and conceptual violence....

All of these themes can be found in Carr’s life. She did not perhaps recognize her actions as giving a history to the marginalized, silenced other, but certainly she challenged colonial structures through her violence done to a blank sheet of paper. The "exclusion of madness to the reason of the sane" is particularly relevant to Carr’s life, as she fell ill and was committed to two institutions to overcome her illnesses while in the colonial centres of London and Paris. Significantly, she found her health to be the best while in nature, giving the eccentric, perhaps even "mad" side of herself priority over the wishes of others that she conform. I see this rebellion as a political act against the structure, and an example of using "madness" to one’s advantage.

I shall end with a few comments from Brian Massumi’s *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*. In doing so I am attempting to contextualize Carr’s life as an example of
putting theory into action using deviance and rebellion, creating a new way of thinking about the postcolonial world we find ourselves living in. Deleuze and Guattari embrace the schizophrenic’s detachment from the world as an attempt to engage it in unimagined ways. Schizophrenia, to them, is a positive process, an inventive connection, expansion rather than withdrawal. They use this schizophrenic model, and the idea of the rhizome to challenge the "arboreal" idea of knowledge which stipulates "the discourse of sovereign judgment, of stable subjectivity legislated by 'good' sense, of rocklike identity, 'universal' truth, and (white male) justice." The nomadic essence of rhizomatic thought does not respect the artificial division between representation and subject, nor between concept and being. This is much like Carr’s idea of pure vision, the act of abstracting from the subject and creating intersubjectivity that goes beyond the representation. This attempt to go beyond is a step towards thinking contingently and embodies theory in action.

Perhaps Carr best summarizes it when she says:

Real Art is real Art. There is no ancient and modern. The difference between the two is not in art itself, but lies in environment, in our point of view, and in the angle from which we see life...Now there are as many ways of seeing things as there are pairs of eyes in the world, and it is a mistake to expect all people to see all things in the same way...it is a mistake for anyone to try to copy another’s mode of seeing, instead of using his own eyes and finding his own way of looking at things.

She offers us this question: How can we go beyond our colonial past to find our own way of looking?

Appendix 1

And so, I digress. Through the process of writing this essay, I have struggled with the appropriate terminology to refer to the indigenous people of Canada. I would prefer to live in a country where the dichotomy between "us" and "them" does not exist and my struggle with which word is appropriate and respectful would not be an issue. However, this is not the case. The word "Indian" is one that conjures a negative image of the process of marginalizing this group of people and is a term that is inappropriately foisted upon a multiplicity of different peoples and cultures within Canada. This term has the effect of universalizing and can be used to justify attempts to "civilize" and co-opt "them" into "the system." The legacy left by the universalizing terminology of the "Indian" or
the "pre-modern" other is a tragic and terrible one in Canadian history, and one that still needs to be dealt with. As Paul Gilroy suggests in *Post-colonial Melancholia*, race is a category that we have not been able to properly address.

To return to Carr's use of the term, one can see that there could be much controversy over how she applies the word "Indian." One could easily dismiss her usage as simply a relic of the age she was writing in: this certainly plays a part in the language she uses. However, when I began to look deeper into her writing, I saw that many of the narratives that involve her "Indians" are in fact descriptions of the situations she found herself in. Furthermore, many of these are positive descriptions of her relationships with these people. Carr was definitely in a position of racial and social privilege over the indigenous peoples she interacted with. Her writing does make an attempt to strip the word of its powerful negative connotations as it associates "Indian" with descriptions of the friendliness and warmth she encountered. It should be noted that not all of her experiences were of acceptance and warmth. Many times she was not accepted or even acknowledged in the communities she visited. Crucially, however, her descriptions of these times are not littered with the word "Indian."

Carr's inability to transcend her language barrier is summarized when she writes of her trip to France: "I did not know French and would not learn. I had neither ear nor patience."48 She rejects French and illustrates her inability to think outside the colonial English discourse of her time. Her use of the word "Indian," then, reflects her struggle with finding her place in the society she lived in. She refused to use the word negatively; however, she still used the word imparted during her colonial upbringing, instead of transforming the speech of the time by learning indigenous languages.

Perhaps through speaking in a colonial language she wished to present an opposing viewpoint of the people she interacted with in her trips to the villages and in her friendship with Sophie Frank. My contention is that we cannot know conclusively how she personally felt about the indigenous peoples she had relationships and encounters with. However, for her time, the positive portrayal in her writings suggests an attempt to go beyond colonial portrayals of "the Indian" to a more respectful understanding of the cultures she was interacting with, albeit limited by her inability to articulate a new, localized point of reference.
Appendix 2

When the World Gets One Too Much

When the World is Midling Fair

*When the World Gets One Too Much*/When the World is Midling Fair* (c. 1905), in Braid, *Rebel Artist*, 40 (reproduced with permission).
Notes

4 Said, *Culture*, xiii.
6 Ibid., 8.
7 Ibid., 30.
8 Ibid., 87.
9 Ibid., 87-88.
14 Ibid., 131.
15 Ibid., 138.
16 Braid, *Rebel Artist*, 48.
18 Ibid., 275.
19 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 29.
23 From a 1911 tourist brochure: “It is not often that one would want to call a tourist’s attention to an Indian village, for the average encampment of habitation of the ‘noble red men’ is not the most attractive site for study. But in the T’linkit towns, we have no such hesitation, for the curiosities to be seen in their houses and surroundings, they are certainly one of the strangest people on earth” (Northern Pacific Railway brochure quoted in Stewart and Macnair, *Reconstructing*, 17).
25 Ibid., 286.
29 Braid, Rebel Artist, 74.
30 Ibid., 91.
31 Lamoureux, The Other French Modernity, 43.
32 Theosophy can be described as any of various philosophies "professing to achieve a knowledge of God by spiritual ecstasy, direct intuition, or special individual revelation" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).
33 Shadbolt, The Art, 58.
35 Ibid., 12.
36 Shadbolt, The Art, 78.
37 Shapiro, Methods and Nations, 106.
38 Quoted in ibid., 126.
39 Carr, Fresh Seeing, iii.
40 Said, Culture, 25.
41 Ibid., 32-33.
42 Ibid., 318.
45 Derived from biology, "the rhizome assumes very diverse forms. Any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other and must be" (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987], 52.).
46 Massumi, 1.
48 Carr, Growing Pains, 288.
A Council of Futility?
The Council of the Federation’s Inability to Alter
Intergovernmental Dynamics

Brandon Hillis

Within the Canadian federal system, there are two chambers of representation: the House of Commons, which represents the will of the Canadian electorate, and the Senate, an appointed body, which was created to provide, among other things, provincial and regional representation. However, given the well-documented deficiencies of the Senate, which stem from its lack of legitimacy as a result of it being an appointed body, and from its inequitable distribution of representation throughout the country, the Canadian federal system operates without an effective central institution to advocate for and represent regional interests and concerns. As such, much of the responsibility for such representation has fallen to the governments of Canada’s provinces and territories. From

Brandon Hillis is currently a fourth-year political science honours student at the University of Victoria. His primary areas of academic study have been Canadian politics and intergovernmental relations. As well as winning him a scholarship, this essay has served as inspiration for his honours thesis, which discusses the Council of the Federation in a comparative context. He owes a great deal of thanks to a great many people, including: Wendy Magnall and his parents, Jim and Jo-Ann, for their long hours of proof-reading and editing; UVic’s Dr. Herman Bakvis for his comments and suggestions; and Dr. Hamish Telford from the University College of the Fraser Valley for getting him interested in Canadian politics and all of this intergovernmental stuff in the first place.
1960 to 2003, the Annual Premiers’ Conference (APC)—a relatively informal gathering of provincial (and eventually territorial) premiers—served as the chief organizing body for the provinces to fulfil their responsibilities and to respond to federal initiatives in a unified manner. In 2003 the premiers, sensing the need for a more institutionalized arrangement, ratified an agreement to create the Council of the Federation, an organization that would “transform the APC from an annual meeting into a permanent organization with staff and a budget.”¹ The council would be better equipped to put forth challenges and responses to federal government initiatives, thus creating a more unified front and altering the balance of the federal-provincial relationship. Additionally, institutionalization would help to improve inter-provincial relationships.² Has it worked? Much of the existing literature maintains that it has, or that it will. However, an analysis of the effectiveness of the Council in addressing issues such as equalization payments and internal trade, combined with an analysis of more critical literature, suggests that the Council has failed to distinguish itself from the APC, and has thus failed to significantly alter intergovernmental dynamics at any level.

**Background**

By 2003, the concept of a Council of the Federation was not a new idea: “[ideas date] back at least to the work of Québec Liberal leader Claude Ryan in his [1980] *Beige Paper*.”³ However, the proposal most similar to what was agreed upon in 2003 was released in 2001 as part of an electoral platform created by Québec Liberal Minister Benoît Pelletier.⁴ In this document, the Council was envisioned as a much stronger body than it would become in 2003. It would be “an intergovernmental body within the executive branch of government,” including in its membership the prime minister.⁵ Additionally, it was proposed that the organization be given constitutional status and veto powers, and also suggested that the Council may become an “alternative to the Senate.”⁶

The main impetus for the establishment of the Council likely came from the fact that, with the exception of the Mulroney government, the voices of the provinces had long been viewed by the federal government as little more than trifling annoyances.⁷ Chrétien’s distaste for working with the provinces and his lack of concern for provincial needs was exemplified by his statement on equalization: “sometimes on Monday I feel like giving the provinces more money, and then on Tuesday not.”⁸
Unfortunately, the other provinces, especially Ontario, feared that Québec’s proposal would only result in the provinces “ganging up on Ottawa,” and thus Charest could convince “the premiers to accept [only] a watered-down version of the [initial proposal].” The Council created in 2003 thus differed from the Québec proposal in that it had no federal membership, and there were no mentions of vetoes, constitutional entrenchment, or Senate replacement. Despite the diluted nature of the final product, Canada’s premiers proudly proclaimed on December 5, 2003, that they were equipped and ready to usher in a “new era of constructive and cooperative federalism.”

The Literature to Date

Not surprisingly, much of the literature published by the provincial governments holds the Council in high regard. There is also strong support within academia for the Council as an organization and as a departure from the APC, notably from Peter Meekison, the pre-eminent authority on Canadian federalism, and from academic and Québec civil servant Marc-Antoine Adam. It should be noted that Meekison’s optimistic assertions were speculative, given the time in which he was writing. Adam, however, writing in 2005, asserts that the council will be able to bring necessary balance to the Canadian federal system.

Others have adopted an openly critical view of the Council. Scholars Alain Noël and André Burelle represent two examples of this, with the latter arguing that the Council is little more than “a new lobby by provinces and territories to obtain... fiscal resources.”

Despite the fact that improving relations among the provinces and territories is a primary objective of the Council, discussion on this subject is sparse. However, the main critique of the literature is the ceiling on research; discussion on the Council has been largely absent since 2003. As such, there is little recent academic research on the Council on which to base a discussion of its effectiveness as an organization and the validity of the claim that it is a significant departure from the APC.

A Departure from the Annual Premiers’ Conference?

Despite the sanguine statements of many of the organization’s supporters, a comparison of the Council of the Federation and the Annual Premiers’ Conferences suggests that the former is, as suggested by Noël, “little more than a light institutionalization” of the latter, and thus pre-
sents little evidence to justify itself as a significant departure from prior practices.¹⁴

The most significant alteration has been the creation of a permanent secretariat. The secretariat and several steering committees operate year-round to compile and provide information to Council members.¹⁵ Such tasks were the responsibility of whichever province was hosting the APC until 1975, when they were given to the Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat.¹⁶ Other than this “light institutionalization,” however, there is little to suggest that the Council represents a significant departure from its predecessor.

While there are numerous similarities between the two organizations, two stand out as exceptionally detrimental to the operation of the Council of the Federation. The first regards the Council’s membership. As previously mentioned, the agreed-upon model of the Council precluded the membership of the prime minister.¹⁷ While this may not have overt effects on the discussion of issues that are solely of interprovincial concern, such an absence certainly diminishes the Council’s effectiveness as an institution tasked with improving relations between the two levels of government.

Without the prime minister as a member of the Council, meetings between the first ministers occur only at the behest of Ottawa. The premiers, despite repeated calls for change, the most recent being the 2003 APC—where, ironically, they called for annual first ministers’ meetings, but rejected a proposal to include the prime minister in the council—have been unable to alter this practice.¹⁸ This problem continues, as despite his stated intentions to meet with the provincial leaders on a regular basis, Stephen Harper has yet to convene a first ministers’ meeting during his time in office.¹⁹ With Stéphane Dion leading the federal Liberals, it appears that reprieve from this intergovernmental dynamic is unlikely. Given Dion’s actions while serving as the Minister for Intergovernmental Affairs during the Chrétien era, it is likely that the status quo will persist regardless of which party emerges victorious in the next election, and first ministers’ meetings will continue to be held at Ottawa’s whim.²⁰

The second similarity is the consensus requirement. Adopted “to [portray] an image of provincial solidarity,” this condition has become a constraint on the council’s decision-making abilities, something that will be shown later in this essay to have considerable effects on the Council’s attempts to put forth a policy statement regarding the equalization program.²¹ As asserted by Ian Peach of the Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy, “a consensus rule gives tremendous bargaining power to holdout
jurisdictions, which can use the threat of disagreement to seek more favourable terms, generally at the expense of [an agenda] that reflects Canadians’ policy preferences and desires."22 Furthermore, and more relevant to the council’s struggles with equalization, this condition will be shown to extend discussion on time-sensitive matters and lead to the council’s exclusion from discussion on pertinent issues.

**Altering the Federal-Provincial/Territorial Dynamic**

In failing to evolve from the APC, the Council of the Federation has proven to be largely ineffective at altering the dynamics of federal-provincial relationships. Positive developments have been short-lived and have been overshadowed by the council’s overarching ineptitude within this arena.

The 2004 First Ministers’ Conference chaired by then-Prime Minister Paul Martin and the subsequent actions of the Harper government in 2006 provide an example of the short-lived nature of the Council’s positive achievements. The agenda for the meeting, which was focused on health care transfers, was determined by the Council, something previously unseen in the Canadian political system. This alone represented a significant shift in the intergovernmental dynamic in favour of the provinces. Furthermore, at the conference, the members of the Council were able to secure a ten-year, $41 billion accord on health care, a considerable gain from the six-year, $12 billion plan that Martin put forth at the beginning of the conference.23

However, any feelings of jubilation among the members of the Council proved to be fleeting, as the Harper government announced that they would not be honouring the Martin health care accord.24 While this may not have been done to spite the provinces and the Council (in the 2007 budget, the Conservative government provided for an accord on health care very similar to the Martin plan; this suggests that the goal of the Harper government was not to take away health care funding but rather to put a Conservative stamp on the accord), the very fact that the Council failed to issue an official response condemning these actions suggests that it lacks the political muscle to stand up to federal actions.

Additionally, and as previously alluded to, the consensus decision-making rule of the Council has hindered its attempts to alter the intergovernmental dynamic, something most clearly seen in its handling of the federal government’s proposal to address the fiscal imbalance by reworking the federal equalization program. Given the Harper government’s commitment to engage in consultation with the Council on this
issue, and given the program’s provincial significance, it became the issue of discussion between the premiers in the lead up to the 2007 federal budget. In March 2006, an independent commission struck by the Council of the Federation published its report on the fiscal imbalance, titled *Reconciling the Irreconcilable*. The document confirmed the existence of the fiscal imbalance and, more importantly, provided several recommendations on its reconciliation. The most substantial and controversial recommendation was “that the equalization program... [be calculated] with [the] inclusion of 100% of natural resource revenues,” including non-renewable natural resources, which have long been excluded from the calculations. As could be expected, this issue quickly became the focal point of disagreement between the council members.

Newfoundland, Saskatchewan, and Alberta quickly—with the exception of Alberta’s brief flip-flop on the issue—rejected the commission’s recommendation, as such an inclusion would increase the amount of money from their provinces sent to “have-not provinces,” and would reduce or eliminate the amount of money received by Newfoundland and Saskatchewan in the form of equalization payments. Conversely, and not surprisingly, provinces that would have benefited from this change pushed for its inclusion (led by Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Ontario), with Ontario desperately seeking any changes in the equalization program that would reduce the amount of money that leaves the province as a result of equalization transfers. Because of the hard-line stances taken by these provinces, and because of the requirement for consensus rather than a simple majority, the Council has been unable to develop an official and unified stance on equalization.

During a February 7, 2007, conference call that replaced a Toronto meeting to discuss the equalization issue, the premiers chose to abandon discussion on the program, instead preferring to discuss “issues that [stood] a chance of yielding a consensus.” It was “touched on only briefly,” and the Council managed only to agree to a vague and general statement that they “expect the federal budget to include measures on equalization.” Rather than attempt to put aside their different views on this (admittedly contentious and difficult) issue, and through that use their combined influence to force the federal government to acquiesce to their demands, the premiers decided to negotiate bi-laterally with the federal government. By supporting bi-lateral negotiations, the council is negating one of its primary objectives: the creation of a unified front to respond to federal initiatives. The purpose of this unified front is to “make it [difficult] for the federal government to [use its] divide-and-rule tactics” of the past. As a cohesive unit, the Council would, ideally,
put an end to bi-lateral negotiations, thus preventing provinces from being overwhelmed by the larger and more powerful federal government.\textsuperscript{33} However, the Council has now failed to achieve this objective in the face of one of the most important issues faced by the provinces in recent years. Furthermore, by failing to put forth an official stance on equalization, the Council of the Federation was excluded from discussion regarding the federal equalization program.\textsuperscript{34}

By failing to develop a position on equalization and by abandoning the Council in favour of bi-lateral meetings with the federal government, the Council of the Federation has proven itself ineffective in its attempts to alter the intergovernmental dynamic, not simply because it has been ignored or treated as a lobby organization, as some scholars contend, but as a result of ineffective internal operating procedures and inflexible Council members.

**Issues of Interprovincial Concern**

In committing itself to “strengthening interprovincial-territorial cooperation,” the Council pledged to focus its efforts, at an early date, on the “[enhancement of] internal trade... [and] labour mobility” throughout the country.\textsuperscript{35} To this effect, at the February 2004 meeting in Vancouver, the Council released an ambitious “workplan” aimed at improving the Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT). To date, this topic has been largely ignored by the media and by the academic community, both of which have instead preferred to focus on the council’s actions in the federal-provincial sphere.

Signed into existence by Canada’s first ministers, the AIT came into force on July 1, 1995.\textsuperscript{36} The agreement’s primary goal is the “elimination of barriers to trade and economic mobility between the provinces.”\textsuperscript{37} The AIT has been less than successful since its inception. This can largely be attributed to the frail enforcement mechanisms made available to the Internal Trade Secretariat, the organization tasked with administering the dispute resolution process.\textsuperscript{38} The dispute resolution, in brief, works as such: following a meeting with the disputants, which arises only after a variety of “negotiation, consultation and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms” have been exhausted, the judicatory panel releases its verdict.\textsuperscript{39} However, the enforcement methods hinge on the consciences of the provincial and territorial governments, as governments can choose—and have chosen—not to abide by the panel’s findings.\textsuperscript{40} As a result, the AIT is largely unenforceable, and as such, many of its aims have yet to be met.
Recognizing a wide range of criticisms of the AIT dispute resolution mechanisms, the Council set out to fix these procedures in their 2004 work plan. The plan also included commitments to “address labour mobility issues” between provinces, as some governments had failed to “meet the... 2001 deadline for eliminating residency-based policies re (sic) occupational mobility” and to “accelerate the harmonization of regulations and standards” between provinces and territories.

By the release of its 2006 progress report on internal trade, the Council had made little headway in achieving the goals of its 2004 work plan. The discussion on enforcement procedures has failed to progress substantially, as the Council has yet to agree to any new compliance mechanisms. With regards to labour mobility issues, only a survey had been completed, with the results suggesting that “labour mobility issues merit higher priority.” Similar progress had been achieved concerning the harmonization of regulations and standards between provinces and territories, and in many other areas. As may be indicative of committee work, much of what was presented at the 2006 meeting regarding the 2004 work plan consisted of commitments to further meetings and reviews; the 2006 progress report contained few references to objectives that had been reached and dishearteningly states that complete labour mobility will not be reached until 2009.

Analysis of a recent press release from the Council suggests that little has changed since the 2006 progress report; the Council continues to recommend further meetings and reviews and fails to make significant changes to the state of inter-provincial trade in Canada.

Several provinces appear to have abandoned the prospect of waiting for the Council to improve internal trade issues and have sought resolution through entering into bilateral agreements with other provincial governments. Most notable are the “recently [restructured] Québec-Ontario Cooperation Agreement on construction labour mobility, [and] the Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility Agreement recently signed by Alberta and British Columbia.” Signed in 1999, and amended in 2006, the Ontario-Québec agreement allows for unfettered mobility between the two provinces for a variety of trades people. The BC-Alberta agreement, which came into effect on April 1, 2007, seeks to remove impediments to trade in a variety of sectors, including labour mobility, transportation and agriculture, effectively replacing the AIT as the dominant internal trade agreement between the two provinces. This agreement has dispute resolution mechanisms superior to those found in the AIT and in the Council’s 2006 recommendations; “non-compliance can result in [fines] of up to $5 million.”
While neither agreement explicitly states that the Council has failed in its attempts to deal with labour mobility and internal trade in a timely fashion, it can be strongly inferred. Were the provinces confident that the Council would be able to resolve the problems associated with internal trade, they would have chosen not to enter into bilateral agreements. As a result of the council’s poor handling of the AIT, and the subsequent actions of several of its member provinces, it is difficult to believe that the Council has been, or can be, effective in meeting its objective of improving interprovincial and territorial relations.

Conclusion

The Council of the Federation was created amidst great hope; the provincial premiers believed that the Council would become an organization for which the provinces could unite in their responses to federal-provincial and interprovincial-territorial issues. Unfortunately, for the provinces, the premiers, and for supporters of a decentralized federation, it has quickly become apparent that the Council is ill-equipped for its task, and is actually little more than a “light institutionalization” of the old Annual Premiers’ Conferences. The only significant development has been the establishment of the secretariat. Since its inception, the Council has been unable to engage some of the most significant issues on the intergovernmental agenda, i.e., equalization and internal trade and labour mobility. Thus, the Council has failed to alter intergovernmental dynamics beyond what existed during the reign of the Annual Premiers’ Conferences. However, there may still be hope, as the Council recognizes that it will need to “evolve, as required, in order to ensure its maximum effectiveness.” 51 It is possible that, in order to become an effective appendage of Canada’s federal system, the Council may have to change its aims significantly. As evidenced by the publication of reports such as Reconciling the Irreconcilable and the existence of the secretariat, which is tasked with gathering and compiling information for the Council members, the Council has shown itself to be an apt organization for research and development. It has failed, however, in the implementation of programs, largely due to the inhibiting consensus requirement. It is possible that the Council may be a more useful body if it restricts itself to the fields of research and development and distances itself from the implementation field, thus becoming something of a “think tank” for provincial governments and an arena for dialogue and the exchange of ideas. If the Council is to evolve into a more effective institution, it must occur
soon, as the Council is presently ineffective, and is in danger of being cast aside and forgotten.

Notes

5 Pelletier, 93.
6 Pelletier, 93; Meekison, “Council of the Federation,” 3.
15 Adam, 2.
17 Noël, “Model,” 2.
18 Papillon, 126; Meekison, “Council of the Federation,” 3.
25 Department of Finance Canada, 19.
28 Canada Press, “Premiers Divided.”
31 Ibid.
32 Adam, 1.
33 Adam, 1-2.
34 Canadian Press, “Flaherty.”
35 Peach, 2-4.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 16.
47 Council of the Federation, “News Release: Progress”.
American Identity and
the "Grand National Philosophy"

The Shift of the United States from Republic
to Liberal Empire

Jonathan Hopkins

Under the duress of a prospective military intervention by the United States of America, beleaguered Dominican president Juan Isidro Jiménez resigned his post in May, 1916. Within a matter of weeks “U.S. warships were located off every major port city of the republic.”¹ The U.S. initially deployed its armed forces to the Dominican Republic to provide security for its legation amid internal political unrest; however, this evolved into a stabilizing mission, taking the form of direct military rule.² A newspaper editorial aptly captures the overarching validation for the armed intervention by the U.S. in the affairs of this Caribbean nation: “[the military occupation] is to be done in the interest of peace…to enable the Do-

Jonathan Hopkins is currently finishing his third year at the University of Victoria. He would like to thank Professor David Western for his encouragement and suggestions on the original draft and the On Politics editorial board. Born and raised in Surrey, B.C., Jonathan has lived in Northern Ireland and the Dominican Republic. His academic interests include international relations, political philosophy, and Canadian politics. A record collector and rock n’ roll enthusiast, outside of academic life Jonathan enjoys playing music, writing, and walking his dog Abe. Upon graduation he is planning on pursuing a career in journalism.
minican people to develop their industries.\textsuperscript{3} American military officials maintained control over the nation for eight years, and when the U.S. withdrew their forces they installed Generalissimo Rafael Molina Trujillo in their place. A ruthless despot, Trujillo would eventually leave behind one of the most notorious dictatorships in the history of Latin America. The events that transpired in the Dominican Republic during May, 1916, illustrate one of the many historical incidents that showcase the U.S.’s problematic role in the world as a liberal empire. On one hand, the principles that the U.S. was founded on—the rule of law, liberty, and equality—offer a model form of democratic governance in the eyes of many across the globe. On the other hand, the U.S. has often interfered in the affairs of sovereign nations in ways that seem to directly contradict the ideas and values that constitute its identity as a nation. This essay examines how an enlightened republic evolved into an empire. I argue that the seemingly contradictory nature of the U.S.’s role as empire is not contradictory at all: the central idea that has historically justified the U.S.’s imperial behaviour—liberal capitalism—also constitutes an essential part of its national identity.

The roots of the American empire can be traced back to the genesis of its statehood. The espousal of revolutionary ideas did not hinder the framers of the U.S. constitution from envisioning an American empire.\textsuperscript{4} In fact, they always had their sights set on expanding their territory. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, firmly held that Cuba would become the property of the U.S.; if not, he would acquire its territory “piece by piece.”\textsuperscript{5} In a similar vein, American constitutionalists prophesied that their territory would expand into British North America, encompassing the entire North American continent.\textsuperscript{6} It is true that American forefather George Washington sought to direct the nation away from obtaining colonial possessions, based on his belief that foreign military ventures would raise taxes and be costly for domestic life; however, he also predicted that the U.S. would carry “some weight in the scale of Empires.”\textsuperscript{7} Furthermore, although the Spanish-America War in 1898 is commonly referred to as America’s first drive for territory outside its borders, it is important to note that, according to the U.S. State Department, there were over a hundred military interventions abroad between 1798 and 1895. Additionally, the American-Mexican War (1846-1848) saw the U.S. acquire half of Mexico’s territory.\textsuperscript{8} Whether this early period constitutes imperialism or empire-building is a matter of semantics, but what is important is that the genesis of America’s later imperial ambitions are found in the very origins of the U.S. as a nation-state.
How could the American revolutionaries—those celebrated in the annals of American history for their opposition to the British Empire—justify their advocacy of a future American empire? In their essay "Toward a Republican Empire: Interest and Ideology in Revolutionary America," Cathy Matson and Peter Onuf explain that the kernels of the U.S. empire are found in the way in which economic and political interests were radically redefined in the collective mindset of American society. In other words, the prevailing economic thought of eighteenth-century America, mercantilism, originally viewed the mass accumulation of property as a deviation from republican values. However, it was only in light of reconceptualizing republican ideology that American thinking changed and popular opinion began to favor classical liberal economics. As Matson and Onuf write, the new liberal economic paradigm viewed "commercial enterprise [as]... directly linked with historical progress, [whereas] ... servitude and poverty were associated with the absence of 'wants' in a primitive, precommercial economy." This crucial shift in thinking spawned powerful ideas that run throughout U.S. foreign policy to this day.

This new way of conceiving political economy in the U.S. became the key ingredient in the ideological impetus of the American empire: freedom and political liberty became synonymous with liberal capitalism. Imperial expansion came to be seen as a beneficial policy that promised opulence. Venture capitalist merchants working abroad were no longer seen as thieves or swindlers as they had been in earlier republican thinking. Instead, they became mythologized, romanticized, and incorporated into American public life and discourse:

Merchants served the nation by venturing into a world that was usually at war and always infested by pirates, deceitful debtors, and ruthless competitors. As a result, the traditional conception of commercial enterprise as a means of "fraud upon strangers" began to give way to approval of the exchange of "refinements" which enriched and civilized the national community.

Therefore, the roots of what might appear to be a contradiction would not have been in the minds of many Americans at the time. Spreading liberal economics was not imperialism, but rather travelling overseas to "freely" trade with backward parts of the world. These early capitalist merchants were beacons of civilization and ambassadors for America's freedom.
The powerful liberal idea that freedom meant the liberty to own property also had an immense impact on the structure of the U.S. government. For example, in its initial conception the dominant interpretation of the country’s constitution impeded concerted efforts to colonize other territories.16 These barriers were removed, however, by American revolutionary James Madison in light of the country’s need to expand its markets, a view clearly tied to liberal capitalism.17 Noteworthy American historian Walter Lafeber writes:

By 1829...an aged [James] Madison, soon to be known as the Father of the Constitution, concluded that regardless of how well the constitutional system had operated since 1789, its future was limited. In a century, he figured, the U.S. population would reach 192 million. The landed frontier would have ended, and its passing would mark the turning point in the nation’s development. Without a frontier for further expansion, property holding would become difficult, especially for the crucial agrarian sector.18

James Madison’s new interpretation of the constitution in the nineteenth century resulted in the U.S. shifting away from its traditional policies, buoyed by George Washington—that the United States should avoid taking part in foreign conquest and possess a small standing army so as to keep the perils of taxation to a minimum.19 But it was not simply ideational factors insistent on economic expansion that constituted the U.S.’s transformation from republic to empire. Policy-makers acting on these ideas consciously altered the structural nature of one of America’s foundational institutions—the constitution. Madison’s reinterpretation of the constitution accommodated expansionism, but it did so in consistency with values emblematic of the nation’s heritage, namely, economic liberalism. Lafeber refers to the period of 1850-1889 as the “roots, not the fruits of empire.”20 James Madison’s landmark reinterpretation of the constitution also paved the legal road for the U.S. government’s colonial acquisitions at the turn of the twentieth century.21

The Spanish-American War was justified by the same aspirations of economic expansionism prevalent in the earlier nineteenth century. With a paralyzing economic depression from 1893 to 1897, the belief in the U.S. “that expansion was the essential feature of American history...[was] elevated...into a grand national philosophy.”22 American president William McKinley became a staunch advocate of this thinking.23 With America’s social ills and financial situation deteriorating domestically, McKinley prescribed as a remedy the acquisition of new terri-
tory for America’s exports.\textsuperscript{24} With liberal economic notions of exploring markets and opening up trade fuelling the drive to acquire foreign markets for American goods in the background, the U.S. went to war with Spain in 1898. In the three month armed conflict, America’s victory resulted in the U.S.’s acquisition of Guam, Cuba, the Philippines, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico. Despite this acquisition of territory, President McKinley resisted any reference or suspicion of American imperialism.\textsuperscript{25} Speaking at an elite function, McKinley told his audience that “no imperial designs lurk in the American mind...what we really want is a market for our surplus.”\textsuperscript{26} In sum, McKinley did not see America’s military actions abroad as imperialistic because liberal capitalism—including the acquisition of foreign markets—is at the core of American policy and identity. Just as McKinley saw forging new markets in other nations as non-imperialistic, those before him believed liberal capitalism to be America’s contribution to the world. As Bernard Porter mentions, “that sudden shift to a more obvious kind of imperialism in 1897-8 was not really ‘aberrant’; it followed on quite logically from what had gone before.”\textsuperscript{27} Thus, the Spanish-American War was a crucial historical event in America’s maturation into empire. However, the ideological suppositions that justified this conflict derived from the founding of the U.S.

The promise of liberal capitalism was also extended to the Philippines while it was under U.S. occupation. Naval strategist and Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan held an influential position in crafting the U.S.’s foreign policy during Theodore Roosevelt’s administration (1901-1909). He believed that there was no inherent contradiction in ruling the Philippines, as America’s enlightened rule would replace the brutality of the Spanish.\textsuperscript{28} Moreover, he was certain that “colonial policy benevolence and self-interest could blend happily.”\textsuperscript{29} Mahan cautions that the Filipinos “may not return love for their benefits,” but this was attributed to their lesser capacity for reason—their infantile intellectual capacity hindered their grasp of liberal capitalism.\textsuperscript{30} Secretary of War for Theodore Roosevelt (1904-1908), and later president, William Howard Taft refused to give independence to the Filipinos, who he deemed were the equivalent of children, until they learned the benefits of “a capitalist market economy.”\textsuperscript{31} When criticized that America’s rule over the Philippines was not by their consent, Taft retorted that “[the Declaration of Independence], when it speaks of the consent of the governed, has reference to people having knowledge as to what are their own best interests.”\textsuperscript{32} The U.S. was not modernizing and developing the archipelago as part of an imperial mission; rather, it was justified because the Spanish and the Filipinos had failed to make good of their land and comprehend
their interests. Taft never saw any contradiction when opening up markets for U.S. businesses. Indeed, those businesses that refrained from free trade between the Philippines and the U.S. Taft referred to as the "quintessence of selfishness."

Regardless of the rhetoric and propaganda that portrayed the U.S.'s mission as humane and civilizing during its colonization of the Philippines (whereby America would bring its affluence and civilized liberal values to the Filipinos), the imperialism of the U.S. did not differ substantially from other colonial powers. The same signposts of underdevelopment and immiseration that had rocked Britain's colonies in Africa—disease, mental illness, and alcoholism—were apparent during the U.S.'s imperial control of the Philippines. Michael Adas uses the U.S.'s colonization of the Philippines as a case study in the hypocrisy of American statesmen vis-à-vis America's imperial actions abroad. He found that U.S. foreign policy had learned nothing from its occupation of the Philippines: "[the] setbacks and the larger failings of the American effort to 'modernize' the Filipinos were largely forgotten and overlooked."

Taft, a precursor to influential American president and thinker Woodrow Wilson, was similar to McKinley in wholeheartedly embracing the development of the Filipinos along the lines of modern capitalism. Like many influential American statesmen before him, Taft foresaw the U.S. growing into a global force, and he predicted that someday the U.S. would control the wider Western Hemisphere, ignoring the plight of the Filipinos.

The period in American foreign policy that became synonymous with Wilsonian idealism—whereby American president Woodrow Wilson declared the right of national self-determination and the end to secretive diplomacy—relied upon the same idea that has its origins in the founding of the republic. Not unlike his predecessors, Wilson held to the notion that liberal capitalism was at the ideological heart of the nation, an economic/political paradigm that policy-makers and much of the American public view as analogous to freedom itself. As political scientist Chalmers Johnson writes:

With Woodrow Wilson, the intellectual foundations of American imperialism were set in place. Wilson laid over his own hyperidealistic, sentimental, and ahistorical idea that what should be sought was a world democracy based on the American example and led by the U.S.

Woodrow Wilson illustrates the seemingly contradictory nature of the American Empire. Despite his rhetoric of civility, he carried on the leg-
acy of economic liberalism found in McKinley's policies. In Wilson's legendary Fourteen Points, his program for peace after WWI, Woodrow articulates his idea that "equality of trade" would "remove...all existing trade barriers." He saw the aim of laissez-faire economics as political liberty, and because he saw the world this way he never questioned the undemocratic and violent methods by which America imposed its will on the affairs of other nations. On the topic of Latin American foreign policy, for instance, Wilson once stated that "[w]e are the friends of constitutional government in [all of the Americas]; we are more than its friends, we are its champions...I am going to teach the South American republics to elect good men!" Wilson never perceived his actions as imperialistic. He understood the U.S.'s role in the world as merely "showing the way" to less-developed nations, pedantically instilling American liberal values overseas by schooling sovereign nations on the freedom inherent in liberal capitalism.

Thus far the historical occurrences described have long been in the past. Perhaps U.S. foreign policy has changed? Both U.S. actions to maintain its empire and American expansionism in the name of free market economics are alive and well today. As there was no contradiction in the minds of American forefathers and presidents when it came to expanding the territory of the U.S. for economic gain, the same is true today regarding economics and political freedom. The former Undersecretary for the Department of Defense and one of the chief architects behind the United State's invasion of Iraq in 2003, Paul Wolfowitz, illustrates this point. When asked by journalists why the response to North Korea's and Iraq's hostilities warranted different reactions from Washington, he responded by saying: "[l]et's look at it simply. The most important difference between North Korea and Iraq is...the country [Iraq] swims on a sea of oil." Just as Mahan believed extending the values of liberty could co-exist with self-interest, Wolfowitz sees the U.S. occupation of Iraq today in the same way. Moreover, the current Bush administration adopted a policy paper Wolfowitz had penned in the early 1990s regarding the U.S.'s role in the world that demonstrates the ideology of Wolfowitz and other influential decision-makers in the Pentagon. Strikingly similar to the logic and drive toward foreign markets in early generations, The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (2002) romantically proclaims that the U.S. has a responsibility to spread the liberal capitalist values at its core. It reads: "[the U.S.] will actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world." Thus, the U.S. government today is holding to its imperial practices demonstrated throughout its his-
tory. But seeing as the U.S. has insistently viewed liberal economics an embodiment of political freedom, it is questionable that the U.S.’s role in the world as an empire is contradictory.

In closing, thus far we have seen that there is no contradiction inherent in the nature of the United State’s position in the world as empire. The quintessential idea that vindicated U.S. imperialism historically, namely, free market capitalism, forms a central feature of the nation’s identity. As Matson and Onuf show, the ideological roots of the U.S.’s ascendancy to empire originated with the adoption of a liberal oriented political economy. This powerful transformation greatly impacted American political life. James Madison’s reinterpretation of the constitution favoured the expansion of U.S. markets and pulled the country away from traditional understandings of the U.S.’s role in the world. His justification coincided with the expansive predilections within liberal economics. These notions travelled throughout the nineteenth century and manifested during the dawn of the twentieth century during America’s war with Spain. It is in this period that America emerged as a global power with the ardent belief that its actions were not imperial but benign. McKinley rejected any accusation of imperial ambitions—America was merely acting upon the foundational belief of forging new markets for the benefit of all. Taft and Wilson also carried on this legacy, albeit with an air of liberal internationalism. Taft would refuse the independence of the Philippines until they had opened up their economy and practiced the economics of civilized peoples. For Wilson the liberty within capitalism superseded alternative principles such as national self-determination. In this he saw no contradiction. Why? Because the ends of liberal capitalism were analogous to liberty. Policy-makers today like Paul Wolfowitz have tenaciously employed this very same logic, demonstrating that political freedom and liberal capitalism are not only on an equal plane, but that they are symbiotic, and foundationally American.

Notes


10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 517.

12 For example, contemporary author Francis Fukuyama shares the view that economic liberalism is historically progressive by nature. He lauds the United State’s historical influence over Japan in helping “create a truly universal consumer culture.” This in turn assisted in “the spread of economic liberalism throughout Asia, and hence in promoting political liberalism as well” (Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?,” *National Interest* 16 [1989]: 3-18.).

13 Matson and Onuf, 516-517.

14 Ibid, 503.

15 Ibid.


17 Ibid., 706.

18 Ibid.

19 Johnson, 44-45.


22 Porter, 69.

23 Ibid., 108-109.

24 Zinn, 12.

25 Ibid., 22.

26 Ibid.

27 Porter, 68.

28 Keirnan, 120.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Michael Adas, “Improving on the Civilizing Mission?: Assumptions of U.S. Exceptionalism in the Colonization of the Philippines,” in *The New American Em-
33 Adas, 154.
35 Adas, 180-181.
36 Ibid., 181.
37 Ibid., 182.
38 Noam Chomsky, Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance (New York: Henry Holt, 2003), 64.
39 Johnson, 51.
41 Smith, 110.
Loans to the Vulnerable

The Ethics of Microlending

Joel Ratcliffe

Microcredit and microfinance have received considerable attention recently in both aid and business communities. The year 2005 was named the International Year of Microcredit by the United Nations, and in 2006 Grameen Bank and founder Muhammed Yunis jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize for their contributions to poverty reduction in rural Bangladesh. However, the merits of microlending remain a topic of great debate. Centred largely in Asia and Latin America, the numerous studies on microcredit and microfinance have displayed significant variations in their findings. Many aspects of microlending are widely disputed, such as the ability of microcredit to reach the core poor, the way that it affects women and families, the commercial potential of microfinance, the ethics of profiting from the poor, and ultimately whether governments should act to either promote or regulate microlending. This paper addresses only the final two: are borrowers without collateral too susceptible to coercion to justify commercial microfinance? Should states regulate such...
practices to prevent exploitation? To answer these questions, I observe a number of key conceptual and methodological areas of concern within the field of microlending in Asia and Latin America and consider whether commercial microfinance as an industry might benefit or exploit the poor. I conclude that commercial microfinance is not suitable for the most vulnerable in society for three reasons: microfinance institutions have too great an interest in lending to those who cannot repay; data is too easily manipulated to show that programs are helping those they are not; and borrowers with no other source of credit are too vulnerable to defend themselves from aggressive lenders.

A crucial distinction for this paper is between the commercial microfinance industry, which originated in the 1990s, and non-profit microcredit initiatives, which began approximately two decades earlier. In Asia, microcredit is said to have begun with the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. In 1974, the country suffered a severe famine, putting millions of people at risk of starvation. In 1976, Muhammad Yunis, a Bangladeshi economics professor frustrated by the futility of his lessons in helping those in need, began giving small loans to nearby villagers so they could invest in small businesses. After his initial microloans proved both effective and repayable, his lending project and capital pool began to grow. In 1982, with the help of special government legislation, the Grameen Bank was officially created, and it has continued to grow considerably over the past twenty-five years. Today, the bank is a large, self-sufficient financial institution. It is owned by its seven million members and lends approximately US $60 million per year.¹ Microcredit in Latin America is said to have begun in 1961 with what is now called ACCION International. In the case of ACCION, the work of student volunteers in shantytowns outside the Venezuelan capital of Caracas has turned into an international organization of microlenders, spanning twenty-three countries within Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, Africa, and North America. Since 1996, ACCION and its affiliate microlenders have lent nearly US $9.4 billion to 3.97 million people.² In both Asia and Latin America non-profit microcredit remained the only existing form of microlending throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

In what follows, I reserve the use of the term microcredit for non-profit microlending, and microcredit institution (MCI) for any non-profit bank, credit union, or nongovernmental organization (NGO) that provides microcredit.³ Although most MCIs still charge relatively high interest rates and in some cases have rapidly growing assets, profits are reinvested or donated to other causes. Most MCIs are based upon the assumption that access to credit is a fundamental human right, and that
the provision of credit to the poor is thus a form of social and economic
revolution. Although this distinction is not made by much of the litera-
ture, it is quite an easy distinction to make when discussing the institu-
tions themselves.

The term microfinance is a product of the 1990s. Although it is
quite often used inclusively to refer to all aspects of microlending, in-
cluding microcredit, savings, insurance, and management assistance, I
restrict my usage of microfinance and microfinance institutions (MFIs) to
commercial microlending and the associated services. By the time of the
1997 Microcredit Summit in Washington, D.C., twenty years of apparent
microcredit successes had entrepreneurs from around the world excited
about developing the microfinance industry. After the conference, which
was concerned with poverty reduction on a global scale, the microfi-
ance industry underwent rapid proliferation, with commercial banks
and private businesses engaging in microfinance programs. Today the
term microfinance may refer to a broad set of practices, of which a com-
prehensive account is quite impossible.

Although the term microfinance emerged at the same time as the
implementation of many additional credit and support services, MCIs
generally adopted similar programs at the same time. Thus it is not actu-
ally useful to distinguish between microcredit and microfinance by the
kind of services provided. Conversely, as discussed below, the differ-
ence between microcredit and microfinance is absolutely crucial for the
well-being of vulnerable borrowers and therefore state regulation: com-
mmercial lenders can too easily disguise harmful practices with positive
repayment figures. I use the term microcredit only to refer to non-profit
microlending; I use the term microfinance to refer to commercial, profit-
driven microlending, and MFI for institutions thereof.

The terms microcredit and microfinance encompass a wide vari-
ety of enterprises and projects throughout the world today. Despite
common generalizations about the prevalence of microcredit in Asia and
microfinance in Latin America, commercial and non-profit microlending
can be found in numerous forms and on every continent. As such, few
generalizations about this particular form of lending are meaningful un-
less qualified by institution, region, or specific practice. Although this
paper does attempt to consider global practices of microlending in ag-
gregate, my intent is to discuss certain qualitative and theoretical aspects
of microlending that relate in some way to all practices of lending to the
poor. The aim of these broad generalizations is to separate the micro-
credit from microfinance, and thereby allow further research to more
accurately discover the impact of each kind of lending and prevent the exploitation of the poor by aggressive moneylenders.

Despite significant academic ambivalence, much of what is written about microlending is positive. For example, there is general agreement that it has changed many lenders’ attitudes toward helping the poor and has provided credit to large numbers of people who would otherwise be excluded from the financial institutions. In addition, the reported benefits to borrowers are numerous. In 1993, for example, a study by the Grameen Bank found not only positive financial indicators of increased employment, income, and assets of its poorest borrowers, but also numerous personal welfare indicators, such as improved diet, schooling for children, and better access to clean drinking water, contraceptives, and toilet facilities. Many remain highly critical of the methods used in Bangladesh and elsewhere to make these sorts of claims; nonetheless, stories of success abound. Whether or not microcredit has (or at least has the potential to) pull millions out of poverty is far beyond the scope of this paper. Regardless of the many methodological difficulties related to proving the success of microcredit, it has been associated with the financial and social empowerment of the poor.

Another associated benefit of microlending is the potential social gains for women within borrowing communities. In a 2005 study, Frank Tesoriero reports progress against oppressive social structures in southern India by women’s self-help groups (SHGs) created for local microcredit enterprises. In certain rural regions of India, where some still practice female foeticide and infanticide, women are often exploited and commodified minorities. Taking the view that poverty is more than a purely financial condition, the study focuses on the social and economic opportunities of women in SHGs. The study surveys a sample of 387 SHGs of twelve to twenty members, all of whom are extremely poor. Using financial records, surveys, and in-depth interviews, the project seeks to develop a broad understanding of the women’s experiences. Although the study notes few economic gains, its results are quite positive: Tesoriero reports an overall trend toward social empowerment for women in their communities. The SHGs led to unprecedented community involvement, with some members even being elected to local civic councils: “[t]he change from women needing permission to leave their home to full and enthusiastic participation in the economic, social, and political life of the villages captures the startling extent of empowerment outcomes.” And so, although the financial gains from local microcredit schemes remained modest, the study concludes that the
social aspect of community borrowing is hugely instrumental in increasing borrowers’ capabilities, a key aspect in poverty reduction.

However, there is also evidence that microcredit can have much less empowering effects on borrowers. For example, a 2006 study by John A. Brett of women in El Alto, Bolivia shows detrimental effects at the household level for borrowers from a local microcredit program, which effects are obscured by focusing on the institutional level. The study is an ethnographic account of twenty-eight women who borrow from Promujer and Crecer, two prominent MCIIs of the region. The women in the study, most of whom are classified either as poor or very poor, attempt to increase their household income with such ventures as knitting sweaters at home. In most cases, they have no free time outside of managing their households, and so they must do income-generating work after their families have gone to bed. To repay loans, the women frequently are forced to borrow money from friends and family, and only break even at the best of times. However, although the women work harder, sleep and eat less, and make no profit from their businesses, they repay their loans on time and show, on paper, an increase in total household income. By the standards of many institutional surveys, the hardships of these women would be considered stories of success.

This brings us to a crucial problem within the study of microcredit and microfinance. Brett’s study led him to the conclusion that microcredit research must be conducted at a household level, taking into consideration the many hidden costs that are overlooked by studying institutional outcomes. With the exception of the most recent studies and a small number of older ones, Brett argues that the relatively high cost of ethnography has made researchers excessively reliant upon misleading institutional measures of costs and benefits. However, as his study indicates, unqualified data can be dangerously misleading. For example, one easily-quantifiable cost that is often ignored by institutional surveys is the transaction costs, including the cost of transportation, food, childcare, and time lost travelling to markets and MCIIs to sell goods and make payments, sometimes in areas lacking public transportation. Together, these costs may have dramatic effects on borrowers’ incomes and lifestyles. Only with thorough investigations such as Brett’s ethnography can we get a clear picture of the conditions that affect the options of borrowers.

A number of sophisticated methods have been created to try quantitatively to gauge the impact of microcredit and microfinance, although none is able to answer the range of questions raised by microlending practices. To establish whether a certain group is being
reached by a program, the Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest (CGAP) has created a poverty assessment tool (PAT), which uses a weighted index to measure the outreach of microlending to the poor, but tells little about the effect of the programs. To study impact, a number of researchers began the Assessing the Impact of Microenterprise Services (AIMS) Project, which compares the development of participants to a control group. However, there are a number of unobservable factors that could lead to upward bias, such as self-selection of subjects and the fact that those approved for loans will already be the most likely to succeed.\textsuperscript{11} In addition, although there have been countless studies conducted regarding the cost-effectiveness of MFIs, they too cannot be assumed to accurately correspond with studies of outreach and impact. This has led to the conclusion that future studies, if they are to offer any significant insight, must address outreach, impact, and cost-effectiveness at the same time.\textsuperscript{12}

The methodological difficulties of research on the effects of microlending allow researchers to gather data in ways that tell distinctly different stories. For example, consider the women in Brett’s study of microcredit in El Alto. Were his research methods different, he could have told a greatly different story. From the standpoint of outreach, the story is a success from the moment the women are given their loans. From the standpoint of the lender, the project is a success because the women were able to repay their loans on schedule, and the institution can build a profitable market upon such practices. Even basic surveys of household impact may show these women to be successful on the grounds that they were able to maintain their businesses and their total income increased. However, only at an experimental, ethnographic level can we see that the programs did not benefit the women at all. This can be generalized to the entire region: whereas Latin American MFIs can provide data showing high levels of repayment and even increases in family income, such statistics may not actually correspond to an increased standard of living.

This leads us directly to why commercial MFIs must be distinguished from non-profit MCIIs. Given their ability to show positive results even within negative experiences, commercial enterprises have a significant conflict of interests.\textsuperscript{13} As long as commercial institutions seek profit, that necessarily must be the aim of their programs. And, as we have seen, a lucrative market does not necessarily correspond to benefits for borrowers. Furthermore, as long as microcredit and microfinance are confused for one another, supporters of microlending are unable to advocate one without the other: the success of idealistic MCIIs in Asia is
thought to correspond somehow to the practices of MFIs throughout the world. Thus it is extremely difficult to distinguish between truth and falsity, aid and business. In addition, because the extremely poor generally have no other options, they are easily forced into borrowing money they cannot repay. Nobody would choose starvation over a loan he cannot repay. It has been suggested that the majority of chronically poor borrowers use microfinance for basic consumption, not income promotion, which means that borrowers are in extremely vulnerable positions.14 If an institution relies upon a profit base for its continuation, it must lend to those it may profit from, not those who will benefit from the loans.

This suggests that some form of state regulation is needed to protect the vulnerable from predatory lending by MFIs. The first question policy-makers must address is how to prevent the exploitation of the poor by MFIs. Although thresholds of vulnerability are difficult or impossible to pinpoint exactly, it is not impossible to design legislation that could potentially lessen the likelihood of exploitation. For example, because administrative costs are fixed at a certain rate per loan (e.g., the wages paid to staff for meetings and paperwork), smaller, more short-term loans require relatively higher interest rates. Were a local government to place restrictions on the rate of interest a commercial MFI could charge, it would prevent the institution from making very small loans to very poor clients. Or, instead of restricting the lending process, governments could determine a maximum point to which interest could be charged on such loans, such as the total amount that would be paid if the loan were repaid on schedule plus a given percentage. A third option would be to create a rigorous investigation process with distinct criteria to assess whether a given loan was repayable in the event of a default, and have the MFI liable for the cost of hiring an independent investigator. Such legislation would prevent or simply dissuade MFIs from aggressive lending since they would lose the monetary incentive to lend to those who have less chance of repaying their loans. Were MFIs subjected to such regulations, MClS alone would be able to lend to the most vulnerable.

The aim of such legislation would be to permit the microfinance and microcredit industries to reach those they can benefit most. The transitory poor, those who may fall temporarily into poverty as a result of fluctuations in income, often draw upon microfinance in times of need. Microfinance may also provide opportunities for low-income earners to create their own savings where the regular commercial banks would not.15 For these less vulnerable borrowers, microfinance is far less
likely to be exploitative. Similarly, there seems to be a point at which extremely poor borrowers are unreachable by microcredit. There are a number of barriers to borrowing for the core poor. Primarily, those who borrow to meet their basic needs have far less chance of having investment returns that can cover the generally high interest rates of microcredit and microfinance. As a result, the core poor are the least likely to be able to repay their loans. Many of the core poor do not seek loans, are denied by the lenders, or are ostracized by groups of borrowers who see them as a liability.\textsuperscript{16}

This suggests that microcredit and microfinance are most valuable to different levels of need. Given the difficulty for microcredit programs to reach the core poor, including those extremely disadvantaged physically or socially, the need for states to provide a "social safety net" remains unchanged. The most vulnerable of the working poor, however, have great potential to benefit from non-predatory microcredit loans, as well as the community created by group borrowing. Microcredit is most suitable for those who remain poor from lack of opportunities, but are too vulnerable to accept potentially coercive microfinance. And finally, the economically active poor—those who are both familiar with managing money and able to support themselves already—may benefit very much from a sophisticated microfinance sector. It is already clear that the commercialization of the microfinance industry has allowed for the rapid development of microlending in many areas and has attracted a wide range of financial experts. As the commercial financial sector is able profitably to lend to more disadvantaged clients, MCIIs can focus on those most in need. By making the distinction between the two groups, policymakers can prevent exploitation by predatory lenders while allowing the microfinance industry to grow. People at different levels of need would have access to credit, but only the kind of credit that is appropriate for their situation. The establishment of the different thresholds of borrower vulnerability will be quite difficult but is absolutely necessary.

In conclusion, non-profit microcredit and commercial microfinance must be distinguished from one another, as microfinance is not appropriate for the most vulnerable poor. Commercial microlending will necessarily experience a tension between seeking profit and the betterment of its borrowers, and data is all too easily created to show benefit where there is none. The poorest borrowers are far too vulnerable to be subjected to predatory lending, and governments must restrict the commercial banking sector from exploiting the poor. However, the widespread implementation of such policy is unlikely given the dearth of studies that properly differentiate between microcredit and microfi-
nance. If the entirety of microlending is studied as though it were homogeneous, researchers will continue to be baffled by the extreme variation in findings. Thus the first step toward properly addressing the systemic problems in the microlending industry is for researchers and policymakers to distinguish between non-profit microcredit and commercial microfinance: in addition to asking whether microlenders help those in need, it is worthwhile to ask whether or not they are intending to do so.17

Notes

3. I have not actually seen the term MCI used in the microcredit literature; however, this paper seeks to show the necessity of such a distinction.
5. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 330.
12. Ibid., 413.
13. While MCIs may also be under pressure to show good results to attract donor funding, the primary concern of aid donors is — by definition — social improvement, not profit.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 396.
African Urbanism and the Global City

Travis Paterson

Debates over the effects of globalization have led to various claims about politics today and where politics might be headed. Some analysts have pointed to outcomes that include the decline of the nation-state, the "clash of civilizations," a rise in global conflict and a decline in local control.\(^1\) Regardless of the veracity of specific claims, the greater interconnectivity that comes with increased contact with people from diverse backgrounds from all over the world demands a revaluation of our conceptions of politics.

By privileging the sovereign nation-state political science finds itself working within the discursive horizons that the nation-state prescribes. Alternatively, cities offer a political ontology that is closer to the reality of how our globalized world functions. By privileging Western cities urban political science is missing an opportunity to learn about

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Travis is from Lantzville, B.C., a great town to grow up in. Many people wonder what went wrong with Travis. Travis is interested in African politics and has written an article arguing that Africa will be the most important continent for geo-politics in the coming years, economically, politically and culturally contested by the United States, China and Islam. Travis kept this article on his laptop, not trying to publish it, and was mightily dismayed when he discovered that he couldn't sue the Harvard Review for recently printing his ideas. Back to Lantzville litter-patrol for Travis. He would like to thank all the students he exchanged ideas with, and Dr. Magnusson, who pushed him to think seriously and not be a "stupey-dupe."
other cities—African cities being the focus here—and how this knowledge can be used to understand all cities. Therefore I argue that we should decentre the state as our object of investigation and instead look to the city as a political space that is more helpful in understanding politics. We should also better understand how African cities work.

In their Notes and Sketches Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno reflected on what they saw as the culmination of Western civilizing logic. In a world shaped by advanced capitalism, the culture industry and urbanism, Westerners had forfeited reflection and mediation in order to align themselves with the drives and desires of society, propaganda, the party and the sovereign nation-state. The authors are speaking specifically about Western civilization; in contrast they mention Africa as “the last part of the earth which has vainly sought to protect their poor herds from civilization.” Their analysis points to a perceived binary between Western order on one hand and African disorder on the other. In the Eurocentricism in Urban Theory section below I make the case that this perception is persistent throughout political science. In the final section I argue that rather than a binary there exist many similarities and connections between African and Western cities. The concepts of the global city and urbanism as a way of life help us breach the divide and recognize the informal order and disorder that exist in both spaces, spaces that are characterized neither by the order of unthinking conformism, nor the disorder of uncivilized herds. Jane Jacobs approaches this middle ground in her analysis of the global, yet local sidewalk ballet:

Under the seeming disorder of the old city, wherever the old city is working successfully, is a marvelous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and freedom of the city. It is a complex order... [we may] liken it to the dance— not to a simple minded precision dance with everyone... twirling in unison and bowing off en masse, but to an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole. The ballet of the good city sidewalk never repeats itself from place to place, and in any one place is always replete with new improvisations.

Decentering the State: The Global City

In his introduction to Powers of Freedom, Nikolas Rose describes state-centric analyses of politics as “obsolescent” in an era when world politics has transcended the boundaries of the sovereign nation-state:
We are seeing the proliferation of forms of politics and types of contestation which cannot be calibrated in terms of the dichotomies of traditional political thought. The challenges posed to the idea of the nation state by the themes of globalization and localization are too familiar to require much elaboration.... These challenges disrupt the images of spatialization and communication that underpinned conventional notions of nation states, their territorial unity and governability.\(^5\)

Rose describes these conventional notions of the nation-state as deriving from nineteenth-century philosophical and constitutional discourse, which "imagined a centralized body... with a monopoly of the legitimate use of force in a demarcated territory."\(^6\) Rose employs Foucault’s concept of governmentality; in these terms, government "refers to all endeavors to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others... it also embraces the ways in which one might be urged and educated to bridle one’s own passions, to control one’s own instincts, to govern oneself."\(^7\) Town Hall meetings, church groups and community watches are some examples of processes where people convene, debate and govern themselves. Rose adds that "from this perspective, the question of the state that was so central to earlier investigations of political power is relocated. The state now appears simply as one element ... in multiple circuits of power, connecting a diversity of authorities and forces."\(^8\) Rose encourages us to decentre the state in our political analyses and to look elsewhere for ways of understanding the complex forces of globalization and localization that characterize contemporary world politics.

Warren Magnusson’s work on the global city and urbanism as a way of life takes up this challenge in positing the city as an alternative political space and drawing our attention to the connection between governmentality and the city’s practices of local self-government. The term global city refers to the fact that many if not all cities have an economic, social, cultural and political presence in the world. Magnusson argues that cities are “key switching points for globalizing cultures and organizational centres for social, political and religious movements.”\(^9\) Cities are also interconnected, hence the idea that we all live in a global city. He finds that “[w]hereas the state is characterized by sovereignty, cities are characterized by complicated practices of government and self-government.”\(^10\) He adds that multiple authorities are the norm in the city, and when cities provide agreeable conditions for people to live it is because of “the ensemble of activities that these various authorities mediate, not because of the sovereignty that particular authorities purport
Magnusson directs our attention to how this political ontology, or urbanism as a way of life, can lead to creative and promising ways to deal with the conflicts and challenges of contemporary politics:

The now familiar notions about global cities and the larger processes of globalization draw our attention to the way that cities work as connectors... [T]he city is unique in its capacity to generate productive connections between people who are alien to one another. One not need be of the same religion or community or share the same allegiance or vision of the future to connect with others peacefully and productively. The city facilitates this, by bringing people of diverse backgrounds together, and giving them reasons to cooperate and live peaceably with one another. ... To be "urbane" or "civilized" is to take difference in stride, react with tolerance and curiosity to alien customs, and to see the diversity of the city as an advantage. Every city is potentially global in that it welcomes people in and reaches out everywhere.

Thus far I have cited Rose and Magnusson to argue for replacing the state with the city as a tool for political analysis, and described the usefulness of the global city and urbanism as a way of life as concepts that lead us to new political possibilities that are more amenable to the diversity, complexity and connectedness of contemporary politics. But in order to gain a better understanding of the interconnectivity of the global city and of the variety of self-governance in diverse localities, we must extend our analysis of the city beyond the conventional confines of the West. Urban political theory has largely neglected to take into account the diverse realities of African cities, making it difficult to understand their experiences and overlooking the opportunity to use such findings to reflect on all cities.

Eurocentricism in Urban Theory

In an essay on the cultural politics of globalization, Dipesh Chakrabarty discusses the problems of interpreting Indian history through categories derived from modern political philosophy. He finds that "these categories, in spite of their global relevance and even origins, have never quite transcended the peculiarities of European histories within which they were initially conceived." Similarly, Siba Grovogui argues that for the most part African realities have not been taken into consideration by Western-derived modes of thought. He argues that dominant conceptions of nature, reason and time:
originated from parochial recollections or memories of the experiences and trajectories of Europe and/or European-derived entities. Although they left out entire classes of events, experiences and trajectories, most of them non-Western, these partial recollections and derivative observations served as bases for exclusive scientific verities.¹⁴

Groogou goes on to add:

Few Western theorists assume that Africans, their modes of thought, ideas and actions have been integral to the dramas of modernity. They appear in Western narratives only as appendages of Western makers of history; on terms defined by the latter; armed with ideas springing from Western intellectuals. The unstated implication is that these ‘others’ have not offered any valid discourses or practices outside of the strictures of the Western political languages and imaginary."¹⁵

Like Groogou, I am interested in how Africa has been left out of the dominant political discourse. Urban theory has in large part omitted the African city as a political space for testing political limits, boundaries and imaginations. This can in part be explained by language barriers and distance from Western urban centres and research institutions, but it is largely due to the fact that urban political analysis assumes an organizational density that is often embedded in the frameworks of laws, systems and institutions found in Western cities. The Western experience, which includes the industrial revolution, mass consumerism, modern amenities and liberal progressive freedoms that lead to certain structures of politics, economics and institutions, is taken as the norm. The absence of familiar structures and institutions such as a reliable police force, fire department, city hall or public transportation in even the largest African cities (such as Dakar, Kinshasa and Lagos) is perceived as an institutional thinness. Thus it proves difficult for Western urban theory to categorize and understand ways of African urban organization without understanding it as African disorder and/or lack of Western order.

Louis Wirth’s influential articles Urbanism as a Way of Life and The Urban Society and Civilization offer a point of entry into how urban politics at once narrows its focus on the Western city yet opens space for exploring the connectedness of global cities. In the latter article, Wirth writes that “[o]ur cultures are still many, but our civilization is one. The city is the symbol of that civilization.”¹⁶ Here Wirth points to urbanism as a globally shared experience, yet in the same breath he claims that
"our American cities, like modern cities everywhere, constituting as they
do the frontier of civilization, are parts and products of the expansion of
Europe."17 As such Wirth centres his analysis on the American city and
sees modern urban civilization as derived from the expansion of Europe.

Wirth finds that culture is distinguishable from civilization, as
the former emanates from diverse origins and is pluralistic, while the
latter is singular and emanates from urbanization. He maintains that
civilization originates in the modern Western city. Therefore we are left
with a vision of urbanism as a way of life and the consequent global civi-
ilization as products of Western experiences, instead of as interplay be-
tween cultures culminating in a shared global city. Wirth argues that:

the concrete and immediate social problems of Chicago and
the processes underlying them were, in their essential features,
the problems and processes of every city; that they were in
fact, typical of the whole of our industrialized, urbanized
world, and if properly analyzed would expose what this twen-
tieth century cosmos (or chaos) is and how it came to be.18

Wirth seems to indicate that our knowledge of the global implications of
one city, namely Chicago, can flow in one direction; that is to say that we
can posit the local experience of Chicago as the global experience of all
cities. He does not acknowledge the influence of other cities on Chicago.

Wirth also touches on a number of general qualities of the city
that exist outside of the Western context. These include the definition of
the city as a "relatively large, dense and permanent settlement of socially
heterogeneous individuals," and a description of the urbanite as sophis-
ticated, cosmopolitan and taking part in multiple groups and organiza-
tions of diverse interests. 19 These characteristics are evident with African
youth today who have been raised in urban environments where it is
normal to own a cellular phone, watch the newest Hollywood films,
sport American fashions, converse in multiple languages and still attend
church, mosque or traditional religious gatherings. It is also true of Afri-
can cities that they attract a large proportion of youth and working class;
that the birth rate is significantly lower than in rural settings; that
women are likely to have children later in their lives; and that more
mothers find employment.20 In all of these ways the African city appears
not so different from what we are accustomed to in the West. What we in
the West are perhaps not so accustomed to is how our cities and politics
reflect African experiences. I will describe some examples in the section
African Urbanism.
Turning our attention to other influential Western urban theorists we see that their approaches and subject material have also emphasized the Western experience of urbanism. Le Corbusier used modern, rational techniques to plan cities which abstracted from local experience in favor of a universal order. This search for efficiency and order is reflected in steel/glass modern architecture, grid street and power systems, urban transit and zoning. Similarly, Lefebvre, Castells and Jacobs all take the Western city as their point of analysis and thus associate the problems and issues of the city with those of Western urbanism, such as the production of space in Paris or social movements in American cities.

Since I am arguing that Magnusson's vision of urbanism as a way of life is a helpful concept for recognizing the complexity and connectedness of the global city, it is advisable to examine how effective these concepts are in understanding the African experience of urbanism, or conversely, if they are projections of specifically Western experience and modes of thinking. Magnusson argues that "[u]rbanism as a way of life is not confined to particular countries... it transcends the particularities of nations and cultures." He adds that, "the world is very much like a huge city, with a powerful but non-sovereign government at its centre." He also compares the municipality to the forms of organization we find within all cultures: "like the tribal authorities of indigenous peoples, or like churches or ethnic associations or business councils or professional bodies or countless other self-governing organizations, the municipality is actually formed out of the effort at self-government."21 Yet he recognizes that the concept of the municipality has closer ties to Western notions of the city than perhaps elsewhere: "the idea of a municipality as a political entity of a different type remains with us, especially here in North America."22

Certainly it can be argued that local self-government in African cities conveys different forms of organization than we see in the Western municipality, hence African urbanism as a way of life will express cultural particularities. We can see this in how most African cities often do not have a "powerful, but non-sovereign government at their centre." City halls and other public services usually lack the resources and the confidence of residents to constitute a strong presence in urban life. Rather, order in African cities often emerges "in situations characterized by a proliferation of authorities of many different types."23 Order emerges in the sense of Jacobs' "eyes on the street," where street vendors, telephone booth operators, young children, their protective siblings and mothers, relatives and friends congregate on the street and in the shade to escape the Sub-Saharan heat, to do business and to socialize. Business
is frequently conducted through informal contacts; policing is usually a communal affair, not left up to the local or state authorities; local transportation often looks like a 1970s Peugeot station wagon, pineapples and luggage stacked six feet above the roof, 8-12 passengers crammed into 5 seats, rather than a centrally organized bus system. In many ways the African municipality contrasts its North American counterpart—yet there are also important similarities.

The African city is a concentration of "a proliferation of authorities of many types." In light of Magnusson's definition of the municipality as a form of organization that "enables self-government more generally, something it can do by facilitating citizen participation, connecting authorities of different sorts with one another, and stimulating innovation,"24 I find that the African city is an intensive practice in local self-government, even more so than in Western cities. Therefore the African city can be conceived as an important example of the kind of non-sovereign, non-statist, local self-government that is consistent with the order of the global city. Still, returning to my original concern that "municipality" might express Western reality more effectively than African, I would caution that any analysis of African cities must allow space for the diverse and complicated forms of informal self-government that at first glance might appear more like disorder than our conventional understanding of order.

African Urbanism as a Way of Life in the Global City

What appears as "urban anarchy" there is related to the "sidewalk ballet" here. Practices then have an influence on popular culture and forms of collective action now. Louis Wirth recognized that modern cities were influenced by societies from other places and times when he stated that urbanism as a way of life bore the imprint of earlier folk societies, and that the population of the city is made up of heterogeneous people from rural and other urban environments. He argues that "we should not expect to find abrupt and discontinuous variation between urban and rural types of personality."25 Wirth was looking specifically at the American city and its hinterland. In light of the insights we have gained from post-colonial studies, especially pertaining to diaspora and the increasing interconnectivity of diverse peoples and cultures, I argue that we cannot expect to find abrupt and discontinuous variations between any societies that have adopted urbanism as a way of life. Reflecting on the work of Wirth and Magnusson, I argue that urbanism as a way of life describes the conditions under which much of the world's population exists.
Therefore the boundaries that appear to exist between here in the West and there in Africa are more flexible and porous once we centre our analysis on the city. I will offer two narratives that speak to this; the first looks at connections between times and spaces, the second describes the existence of urbanism as a way of life in the African city.

**Abomey à Ouidah: Le Berceau de Voudun**

In the centre of Bénin, the small, French-speaking republic to the west of Nigeria, lies the modern city of Abomey. A highway runs through the centre of town, lined by two-storey glass and steel government buildings on one side, make-shift markets made of wooden stalls lining the other. At the entrance to the city stands a fifty-foot tall statue of the last great voodoo king Gbehongzen, arm outstretched, palm facing out to the oncoming French imperialists in a historical gesture of resistance and refusal. The statue overlooks a plaza where today you can find artisans selling their work to tourists, most visiting from l’occident. Foreign contact has extended Abomey’s reach from beyond the immediate region, even beyond Africa, into what is today a global scope—leading to important connections and influences to places and times that might at first glance appear surprising.

Abomey’s status as a global city began long before airplanes and the Internet. It started in a similar fashion to how Magnusson describes the spreading-out of urbanism: “Cities spread out, link together, and ultimately colonize the countryside... The outside to the urban is gradually internalized, so that urbanism as a way of life becomes all-encompassing.”

From the 17th to 19th centuries Abomey was the site of the royal palace and capital of the powerful kingdom of Dahomey. The influence of Dahomey’s kings stretched across much of what is now southern Bénin, spreading their customs, languages and wars. Abomey quickly grew into an urban hub for trade, an expansion fueled by the slave trade with the Portuguese and French.

The road that leads from Abomey to the coast is called “La Rue des Esclaves” (the road of the slaves). It was along this path that the captured were marched to the waiting European ships where they would remain aboard until their arrival in the New World. Their point of departure was often the city of Ouidah, internationally known as the “Cradle of Voodoo.” It is here that every seven years voodoo kings, practitioners and followers gather to celebrate their tradition. It is also from here that voodoo began its spread to the New World.
Slaves were often settled in Brazil, the Caribbean and the Southern United States, where they took up new lives in subordination to their colonial masters. They carried their traditions with them: religion, song, dance; social, political, economic and cultural practices of organization and interaction. The flow of people and ideas changed the political landscape of the New World. In Brazil, African culture mixed with European and indigenous cultures to create a society that has been considered at once an example of hybridization and tolerance and a state of unrivalled urban poverty and violence. Yet among the disorder of São Paolo and Rio de Janeiro analysts are taking note of the informal local self-government and innovative strategies of survival. This mix also gave us Pelé, the world’s greatest soccer player, a popular figure whose symbolic importance goes beyond sport to the realm of race and politics; he inspired generations of black soccer players and helped break down the race barrier in professional soccer.

Abomey and Ouidah have also marked the political landscape of the United States of America. The influence of voodoo and African culture on evangelistic religion in the South is evident, where white ministers mix the gospel with snake handling, a practice common in Ouidah today. With the movement of African-Americans across the country we can see a proliferation of social and political movements, such as the civil rights movement and other forms of race politics mixing with religion and culture. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Motown music mixed New World politics with monotheistic religion and manifestations of African-American culture. Mohammed Ali is a famous example of the hybridization between sport, culture, race, religion and politics. His choice to refuse the US military draft and return to Africa to fight the famous “Rumble in the Jungle” brought the world’s attention to Kinshasa, the capital of Zaire (now the Congo), as a global city.

Back in Abomey, the traces of war and slavery that began the diaspora of Africans to the New World is ever present in the city’s memory. The royal palace has become a museum, recognized by the United Nations as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. At the other end of La Rue des Esclaves on the beaches of Ouidah stands another gigantic monument, "Le Portail des Esclaves," a representation of the arch slaves marched through on their way to the ships that would take them to the New World. In Ouidah and Abomey we find the shaping of other continents, other societies and other cities. It is an example of two African cities telling a story far beyond their apparent boundaries.
Dakar: Crossroads

The city... has attracted within its confines the racial and ethnic stocks of all the world and has more or less amalgamated them and blended their traits into a new aggregate of hybrids, here mingling with one another and there segregating themselves from one another, here collaborating and there at war, but in any case building a complex of cultures unprecedented in human history. This heterogeneity of the human materials in the city is at once a source of ferment and stimulation and of the frictions and conflicts that characterize modern society.27

When reading Wirth’s description of what we could call "urban multiculturalism" from a North American standpoint, we probably think of Montreal, Los Angeles or New York City. We may think simultaneously of racial friction and the cultural mosaic of which many of us are proud. We might even imagine that there is something unique about North America in the way people from all over the world are capable of living in our cities in relative accord. We overlook that North American cities were not the first to be home to such diversity and complexity.

Dakar, the capital of Senegal, is a cosmopolitan port city of 2 million people. Historically and geographically it is situated at the interstices of African, Islamic and Western cultures. Islam first came to the city in the 11th century; Europeans began trading there in 1444. Modern Dakar is one of Sub-Saharan Africa’s most important cultural capitals, where music and film gain international attention and a thriving economy makes it one of the richest cities in West Africa. But as Wirth noted, with complexity comes both stimulation and conflict. Though Dakar has remained the seat of a democratically elected government it has faced episodes of political violence. Throughout the 1990s electoral controversy often spilled onto the streets, but as the millennium ended Dakar was host to a peaceful transition of power. The city retains its position as a global hub of activity with a busy trading port and a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-religious population. More recently it gained the attention of extreme sport enthusiasts all over the world as the destination in the motorcycle-racing documentary “Race for Dakar.”

In an unexpected space and with origins in a distant time, we find a city that has been part of the global network many years before anything comparable appeared in North America. Urbanism as a way of life in Dakar has developed in a focal point between disparate cultures, where mundane, daily practices of trade, communication and local self-government have made for a space of exchange between peoples. How
this has been achieved, how practices of self-governance and exchange in an environment of diversity and complexity have resulted in a relatively congenial existence for millions of people, how Christians, Muslims and traditional religious followers have been able to maintain a beneficial coexistence, are questions that urban theory can explore in Dakar.

Conclusion

When we decentre the state and focus on the city as our object of analysis we open new avenues of understanding. The global city and urbanism as a way of life encompass the flows of ideas and people from times and places we might not otherwise recognize as influencing here and now, times and places we habitually relegate to there and then. Likewise, the African city is often depicted as wrought with disorder. This paper is a call to move away from a Eurocentric standpoint and to recognize the African city as an important political space for urban analysis. Rather than focusing on the lack of formal institutions, rules and infrastructure, urban analysts will find it instructive to focus on the informal practices of local self-government that constitute the African city. Such research is likely to provide results that are applicable to cities around the world, giving a better understanding of the complexity and connectedness of urban life.

Notes

3 Ibid., 209.
5 Rose, 2.
6 Ibid., 1.
7 Ibid., 3.
8 Ibid., 5.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 3.
12 Ibid., 5.
15 Ibid., 8-9.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 745.
20 Ibid., 20; 21.
27 Wirth, "The Urban Society and Civilization," 750.
John Measor

The On Politics Interview

with Clarke Ries

On Politics is reviving its dormant tradition of interviewing random political science professors at UVic on sundry topics.

Ries Why don't we start with you talking a little bit about your current work in the political science field? I know you specialize in Iraq, but within that what do you spend your time doing?

Measor My graduate and my thesis work is on the creation of modern political identities, especially in the developing world, specifically as you mentioned in the Middle East. I looked at Iraq, which had a lot of unique characteristics, especially in how their identity formation works. First of all, no one had done any work on it, which means it's a good niche for a young scholar to try and find something that other people

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This interview took place in mid-November 2007. John Measor is a Lecturer in the Department of Political Science, University of Victoria. He is completing his PhD in the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter (UK) on the formation of political identities in contemporary Iraq. Clarke Ries grew up in Calgary before moving west in 2005 to attend the University of Victoria. Following a stint in the creative writing department, he is now set to graduate with a degree in political science, after which he plans on joining either a clown college or the paratroopers.
haven't flesched out as much, and secondly because I was drawn to the region politically over the last decade due to sanctions, and thirdly because I think the Middle East is such an interesting part of the world—that if you can start getting political issues there you'll understand them anywhere, that there's some universals that come out of it.

Ries

_Besides or within the obvious answer of “the Iraq War,” are there any particular issues or questions that you've been struggling with or thinking about?_

Measor

My own work is on identity, and that branches out into what impacts [politics], how does it move forward, how do people within various parts of the world engage with questions of modernity and political power and identity across different platforms?

I'm working on a book right now about how YouTube videos and digital telephone technology has impacted how culture within Iraq and within Palestine impacts the conflicts there and the political movements there, how they express themselves. I'm co-authoring the book with someone else who's interested in those very same questions, but from the perspective of young Americans who are fighting in Iraq. Of course both groups are generating media, but they're not really speaking with each other. I guess the people who are in favour of that technology, or its liberatory or emancipatory functions, always feel there's a universal nature to it. That may eventually become the case, but right now it's just interesting that young Americans, whether they be soldiers or contractors or people working in the Coalition Provisional Authority, were sending or expressing these thoughts back to their own families, to their own society, countering or moving around or getting around or however you want to put it, their own media's and political authorities' spin on issues.

A lot of it was positive, "what we're doing here is good, this is what we're doing," this kind of thing. And Iraqis very similarly—or Arabs or Muslims that had come to Iraq to fight or to engage in what was going on there — very similarly sending messages home, even if it's ten metres away. The factor that arises from that is it becomes an age is-
sue, so you have a real dichotomy, whether it's the Westerners in Iraq or the Iraqis fighting the Americans, what have you, they all tend to speak to their own generation. It becomes this levelling agent. The Iraqi videos have an ability to get out to Palestine or to Lebanon or to India or to points far beyond, and to speak to that generation. They express themselves using clips from video games mashed with clips from their own actions, interspersing it with what they're doing and what kind of message they're trying to send; it really gives them the freedom and the ability to do it.

It's interesting; the young Americans are coming from a society where this is normal, their peers back home are doing the same thing, whether it be making YouTube videos about skiing or their own latest trouble blowing their nose. And yet here are the Iraqis, who have lived under complete media suppression, let alone censorship, and little or no access to outside media—to the technologies we're talking about—they're jumping in at the deep end and yet they're just as familiar and able to grasp the ideas and the creation of media rapidly, so it's really interesting to see the creativity they're able to bring forth and the story they want to tell.

Ries

Have any political theories, templates, or tools proven particularly adept or dysfunctional at characterizing Middle Eastern politics? The obvious example, I suppose, would be realism. A lot of people see the invasion of Iraq as being the culmination of realist theory, and a lot of other people see its subsequent failure as being a rebuttal of realism.

Measor

I think that whether it be realism or another political ideology or theory, the problem isn't so much the efficacy they deliver. The problem is that with so many of these theories we're looking for explanatory usages of them, and therefore people maybe look for too much from the theory, thinking that it's just going to neatly fit all of the events that they see, instead of just explaining one piece of the puzzle to them. This is common, especially with ideologies more so than political theories per se; [people] want their ideology to be an all-encompassing view that explains everything to them. Iraq once again is the perfect example of how that just
doesn't work. Of the seventy-seven catalogued and recognized reasons for the invasion put forth by the US administration, they don't all fit into a neat bundle. Whether any of them were actually the reason or not is also a very good question which I don't hope you're going to ask —

Ries  

On that note …

Measor  

[Laughs] But, in terms of the question of what the Iraq War speaks to, I think it probably speaks to any theory depending on what utility you get out of it, or how it explains things to you. Realism would be difficult of course because there isn't an Iraqi state any longer, so what is most important in the post-invasion period doesn't speak to realist principles. That being said, I think a lot of people are making a lot of hay, and it makes it difficult for someone like me, because everybody writes a book, writes an article, has an opinion these days based on presupposed notions of theory and ideology, and they try to shoehorn in Iraq, or Palestine, or any of these empirical examples or lived realities into their presupposed notions, and that can be very dangerous.

Ries  

That said, have you noticed a shift in tone of academic literature, or in the content or in the paradigms since the invasion of Iraq?

Measor  

No, but I'm probably cynical. I think a lot of people, unfortunately, tend to have their tool and they use it, and no matter how blunt an instrument it becomes after so much usage they tend not to be able to open the toolbox and use different theories and theoretical approaches to be able to understand things from different perspectives, to have a more robust understanding. They're more interested in proving a point — that their tool is the best tool. I think it's unfortunate because it can undermine those same peoples' positions. What they could have brought to the table using that tool is hurt because all the chatter around it takes away from the good points they were probably making.

Ries  

So when you see Western agents engaging with the Middle East, what kind of attitudes or education do you notice warp or change our perception of them, and vice versa?
I think it’s twofold. You have to start out with the fact that I do think generally people are still fairly ignorant, in a positive sense — it’s a very harsh word, but they’re ignorant of the region, they’re ignorant of the people who live there. They have some pretty wild notions of what type of people live there and what informs them or how they live their lives.

That being said, I think there has been a dramatic change in the last two years, in terms of accessibility to those cultures for anyone who is willing to give it ten minutes online. There’s a tremendous amount of literature from the region being translated, Arab and otherwise, increasing access — most people within the Middle East region now have some level of access to media, and an increasing ability to create media. In many ways, because new media is such a huge force in the region right now, they almost have less self-censorship than we do. At least for the present time, although this may change very quickly, a call-in show, or an internet chat room, even in English and therefore accessible to most people here, will appear dramatically more open than our own versions of the same thing. It’s very common in the Middle East region, for instance, for a government minister to go on television and take direct questions uncensored or unvetted from whoever calls in. I don’t think there’s very many Canadian ministers who would open themselves to that level of scrutiny.

As an aside, for instance, last week the Border Protection Service spoke for the first time since the man from Poland [Robert Dziekanski] was killed [at the Vancouver airport], and they said "we’ll take five questions" and there was nearly a riot in the media, so they backed down and said there was ten questions, so —

Do you see this as a question of naiveté on the part of the Middle Eastern ministers?

It’s not naivety. It’s that people haven’t worked out how [the media] is going to fit within their culture as yet.

Secondly, because the day-to-day reality hasn’t changed, in terms of how overwhelmingly controlled media
and society is within the region. All the states in the region are totalitarian, and very authoritarian-structured. If you’re in Egypt, you could never approach a government minister and talk to him, you could never complain about the service you were getting at a government wicket or to a police officer (unless you were engaging in a bribe), you’ll get beaten. You do not want to engage with the state at all on a day-to-day basis in the region. But if the government minister shows up on TV that night you can text in, and at least thus far there hasn’t been retributions. It may be naive in the sense that people tend to still put their names on their text messages — so maybe when the first guy who sends a text in disappears things will change, but right now it’s very fascinating how things are done.

Lastly, another thing that transforms [the media] is that it’s transnational, so if al-Jazeera’s broadcasting from Dubai, which is three countries away, about an Egyptian election, there’s not much the Egyptian government can do to go after the program, the host, or the channel. They can ban al-Jazeera and its reporters from the country but they can’t control their own population from watching it.

Ries

Speaking of media-projected realities, there’s been this highly-publicized downturn in violence following the American troop surge in Iraq. Does this make you all optimistic in terms of the American presence, or Iraq’s future? I know a lot of refugees are using this as an opening to return from places like Syria ...

Measor

To preface my remarks, long term I’m quite optimistic about Iraq’s future, however, I think my window of what the future is might be a bit longer than what other people might have in mind. I have incredible faith in the Iraqi people and the fact they know they’re Iraqis and that they know what that means — even if no one else does — and that they will be able to solve their own political problems in a fashion that will work for them. But, in the short term, in the interim, no, I can’t say I’m optimistic. When we talk about violence decreasing, we’re not talking about violence amongst the Iraqi population decreasing, even if it has. There’s no one who can give you an answer as to that being the case or not because quite honestly no one has kept numbers, statistics, or even in
any way a general metric to be able to gauge what the level of violence is amongst the society. We can all be happy that there probably is a downturn in violence, part of which probably comes from increased amounts of troops on the streets in Baghdad. But, you have to remember that follows a two year escalation of conflict within the city itself, and that much of the violence that drove that, much of the violence that was ongoing, was an ethnic cleansing of the city. The composition of the city has now been dramatically changed, to the point where most neighbourhoods are now cantons of one group or another, and to where the city went from about forty-five to fifty percent Shia to seventy-five percent Shia. [The Shia] won that war.

So, is the downturn in violence because of American forces or is it because there’s just no reason to ethnically cleanse any more — the fight’s over. That’s a very good question and now that the winners have to divide the spoils amongst themselves, it may lead to even further violence. I don’t think without actual knowledge on the ground, which doesn’t get portrayed in the media due to the level of violence (the media’s not hiding anything, they just can’t get there themselves), it’s very difficult to answer those sort of questions.

Ries

One of the things about Iraq, given the level of investment on the part of the United States, it’s turning into a reference on foreign intervention for a long time to come in terms of “should we, shouldn’t we.” When you look at the death toll in Iraq, which at this point has pushed itself up, by the latest estimate to approximately 1.2 million, do you consider this to be emblematic of the new nature of small wars? In terms of the casualty rates and the cost in terms of human life, is this something we should expect if we want to go into Darfur, or if we want to become engaged in a future conflict overseas?

Measor

I have no doubt that what’s happened in Iraq will inform that discussion immensely from here on out, and that will have both predictable and unpredictable consequences.

However, I don’t think Iraq actually was a humanitarian intervention operation. I referred earlier to the seventy-seven reasons that were given for US intervention by
the Bush administration, and that certainly was one of them. However, I don’t think very many people actually thought that it was a situation where humanitarian intervention was warranted. If you believe in the cause of the invasion, I think that out of the seventy-seven it might have been the seventy-seventh best reason. It just wasn’t part of that discussion, and for that reason, for people that favour humanitarian intervention and the promotion of the Right to Protect and other things that the Canadian government and the United Nations support, Iraq will become a quite large albatross around your argumentation and your ability to get your point out.

Personally I’m not a fan of intervention and I think it’s problematic for many of the reasons that perhaps Iraq might bring forward, but that again I can only stress that I don’t think it was a humanitarian intervention, so it’s not helpful—

Ries  
*Apples and oranges?*

Measor  
Yeah. Iraq was a full-fledged conflict between two states, and one state won. The problem in Iraq was not with the war phase; the execution of the military operation in Iraq was seamless and was actually carried out with very little bloodshed for what it was. The problem of Iraq was the post-invasion period, the last five years we’ve all had to live through, Iraqis more so than anyone else. That phase I think puts truth to the lies not of your question, but of the implication within your question, which is that it was a humanitarian operation. If it was a humanitarian operation you would have been prepared with field hospitals and food and all kinds of security. I mean, any kind of discussion about Right to Protect and humanitarian intervention, whether it be Sierra Leone or Darfur, any contingency planning for Darfur, the vast majority of the forces that would be going in would be police and not military. That was just not part of the equation in Iraq, and therefore you can either argue that they weren’t prepared, and there’s a lot of arguments for that, or you could say that that just wasn’t what they were there to do, and therefore it wasn’t a humanitarian intervention, that it wasn’t the goal from the beginning.
Ries  Would you consider Afghanistan to be more relevant?

Measor  The downside with a lot of these analogies or with using analogies to begin with is that each of them will of course always have their own particular peculiarities, in terms of the background of the country in question. For instance Afghanistan is... I don’t like to use the term “failed state,” but Afghanistan basically just hasn’t been a state for over three decades, and therefore in many ways, whether you believe in the nation state model or not, the objective of humanitarian intervention in Afghanistan is solely premised behind building a state from scratch. That is not how the mission was described to Canadians, it was not how the mission was described to anybody, but it is the mission and it’s a very difficult one. Iraq is completely different, because Iraq had a functioning and successful, centralized, well-staffed, and well-equipped state — until that state was consciously and by choice taken apart by military action.

Ries  So, post-US presence, because that’s obviously coming up at some point in the next few years, what sort of structure do you see coming in terms of the new state structure of Iraq, because there are several examples of possible paths in the region. You have Lebanon, and Lebanese political cantonization, and you have Somalia, where there’s actually several functioning states within the larger, non-functioning de jure state. Which direction do you see Iraq going?

Measor  The choice in Iraq is the choice that’s always been there for Iraq as a contiguous territory, to become a polity; which is that they have to decide whether it’s going to be centralized or decentralized. I think there’s widespread support within Iraq for a decentralized state, and obviously there are certain political forces which are dead-set against that, but I think long-term a decentralized state model will emerge which will be very Iraqi in its scope and in its notions.

I think the problems up until this point are that first, those decentralized models that have been proposed and indeed, imposed on the country in terms of its constitution, have been written by outsiders. This when there are Iraqis perfectly capable of writing their own constitution, and per-
haps not even any need to write a new constitution, that it's not so much a constitutional problem as it is political. So, the first factor was that the model that was proposed came from the outside and therefore everyone's going to oppose it simply because it's not an internal decision.

Second, any of the various models that get adopted by various political actors immediately get tainted by much the same problem. For instance, the confederal model which has been largely adopted in the new constitution. In an interview I did with Barham Salah, who was the prime minister of Kurdistan and a senior leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, and who is now a minister of the interior in Iraq, as he put it to me, he said "the biggest mistake we made was we didn't sell 'federalism,' we allowed — especially Arabs — to always see it as 'Kurdish federalism.'" In reality [federalism] solves many of the problems, because if you sit down and just read the constitution to most Iraqis right now, they would agree with what it's saying and not have trouble with it, but if you couch it in the way it's discussed on the streets, it has taken on sectarian and ethnic identities, which will always undermine it. It has to be seen as a consensus among the various groups, not as a divide.

The reason why it might actually be easier than in a place like Lebanon, is that whatever level of sectarian and ethnic enmity there is within the country, even if it's as advanced as many of us hope it isn't, those identities and those notions aren't congealed to the point where you have to negotiate between groups, you can negotiate across groups and you can appeal to Iraqi nationalism, whereas you can't do that in a place like Lebanon. Every group says they're working towards Lebanon and for Lebanon, but in reality they're working for their particular group. I don't think [Iraqis] have reached that stage yet. They may, but we hope it doesn't.

Ries

So in terms of both Iraq's internal politics and the politics of the region as a whole, the United Nations announced in June that there were approximately 4.2 million Iraqi refugees. How would you expect those refugees to affect both the recovery of Iraq as a state and the stability of the region as a whole?
I think this is one of the two or three biggest questions currently facing the region. The other two being — the one you asked — what will be the future political decisions of Iraqis on how to run their country, and secondly the potential for the expansion of the hostilities as they exist right now to spread throughout the region.

The refugees are a third important issue, and I think it should be pointed out that this is a massive number of people. In Iraq, this is a country of roughly thirty million people, about five million Iraqis were outside Iraq prior to the American invasion. Now, most left due to the regime, people that opposed Saddam or didn’t want to live under the regime. Many left during the Iran-Iraq War, because they just didn’t want to live in any society that’s conflict-ridden (not internally, but meaning they didn’t want to fight in a disastrous war). Most of the intelligentsia had to leave due to political reasons. So there was this massive number already outside. Post 2002-2003, it’s as high as 20,000 people a month into Syria alone, you’re looking at about 1.5 million Iraqis in Syria, about a million of those in Damascus alone, and now twenty per cent of the population of Damascus is Iraqi. You have about 300,000 to half a million in Jordan, and you have another million spread throughout the Gulf.

Those patterns have less to do with ethnic composition but rather with economic means. If they have money they end up in the Gulf, if they had a middle class income they’re more likely to end up in Jordan because they can buy property and build a house and try and start a new life. Of all these Iraqis, I’ve never met any who don’t want to return home.

So to answer your question, they will prove immensely destabilizing simply because countries like Syria especially, but even Jordan for that matter, aren’t getting any support in terms of dealing with this massive wave of refugees — the largest the region has seen since 1948, with the Palestinians. The longer this goes on, the more of a problem it will be, because these groups will start to organize. Refugee camps will be set up, political parties and political factions will form amongst them, and those groups will increasingly demand autonomy and control, both within the socie-
ties they’re in and back into Iraqi politics, so it could be an immense problem.

The last thing I’d say about the refugees is that, and there’s no empirical evidence to back it up, but I think it logically makes sense, that I think a lot of the people that are in these groups would be the Iraqis that are probably most needed in terms of tolerance back in Iraq proper. This is because most of the people that have left haven’t left simply because of the violence or simply because of socioeconomic reasons, a lot of them are intermixed couples, intermarriages between Sunni and Shia, Kurd and Arab, et cetera, and so it’s very difficult for them to fit into any kind of homogenized neighbourhood. They may have crossed the border to live for up to a year, but rapidly their funds run out, it’s difficult to integrate into a new society, and of course they just want to go home. They want to go back to the Iraq they knew, and whether that Iraq still exists is a big unknowable.

Ries

*In terms of the greater region now, there’s [The Annapolis Israel/Palestine Peace Conference] coming up, and it’s widely expected to be a failure. If it is, what should we expect the aftermath to look like? Who wins, who loses, what changes?*

Measor

This again is a big discussion within North American policy circles. The argument leading into the Iraq war, one of the seventy-seven reasons, was that peace in Palestine would come through the streets of Baghdad — that by changing the regime in Baghdad you would somehow be able to impact the Palestinian issue. Now of course that’s been turned around 180 degrees, “let’s create peaceful conditions in Palestine to placate Iraqis.”

To be honest with you, I think that’s completely misplaced, in the sense that if you solve the Palestinian question today, miraculously and for good reason, I don’t think it would change one iota the dynamics or the issues on the ground for Iraqis and the various Iraqi political groups. They’re arguing for their own society, they’re not terribly concerned with or tied up into Palestine.

But, increasingly and because of the role of the Americans themselves and the transnational nature of many of the political movements involved, Lebanon, Palestine and
Iraq are increasingly entwined with each other, so it's getting to be a big ball of yarn that's getting to be very difficult to break apart if you're trying to move that ball forward, to mix metaphors. The three conflicts will have to be solved within their local situations, they cannot be solved on a regional level. As much as it's important to keep regional actors out as force magnifiers and as people feeding some of these conflicts; nonetheless, it has to be locals who make the decisions about their own political futures.

Ries

Let's talk about another situation that has the potential to be more than local, which is Iranian nuclear technology. What changes would you expect in the power structure of the Middle East due to their pursuit of, if not weapons, than the capability of weapons?

Measor

I'm thinking these questions aren't the ones you asked Rob [R.B.J. Walker] last year. [See the Spring 2006 issue of On Politics.]

Ries

[Laughs] I have no idea what they asked Rob last year.

Measor

I thought you'd be asking questions like [mimics shrill undergrad student], "What about grad school?"

Ries

[Laughs] Yeah right.

Measor

Let me see, the impact of Iranian nuclear technology. Well, again, the local factors drive a lot of the Iranian position. I think it's grossly misunderstood even by many analysts that Iranian nuclear technology was not something that was developed under the Islamic Republic, it was something that pre-existed the revolution in 1978-79. It's very much seen, as many things are in Iranian politics, as a nationalist question. It's a matter of people wanting to have access to, and the capability of developing this technology indigenously, so that they have control over that level of technological advance. Considering Iran has been virtually isolated for about the last thirty years, especially from American technology and many Western technologies due to American sanctions, the indigenous capacity to do something like enrich uranium to
that level has implications far beyond nuclear technology, let alone weaponization.

I think that’s often missing from the discussion. If Iran wants to develop cancer treatments, if Iran wants to do a host of other things the basic science required is related. If you want to develop a centrifuge to enrich uranium it means you have to have certain metallurgical skills, you have to be able to machine tools to a certain level, you have to have computer technology to a certain level, you have to be able to write the code and the software for that computer technology, there’s ripples through such a government program that go far beyond nuclear technology. I think that though maybe in the way I’ve just put it, most average Iranians wouldn’t put it that way, they nonetheless are very much in favour of nuclear technology, because they do realize the spill-over benefits, and the simple pride that comes from the fact that they can reach the pinnacle of science. There’s not much more out there in terms of what any country can do to establish itself as being out in the forefront scientifically, maybe put a satellite in space, develop nuclear technology and perhaps some biochemical things that many in the public wouldn’t be able to recognize.

These kind of things are what’s really driving Iran’s nuclear program. As for weaponization, I’m sure there are many in Iran that are interested in weaponization, and therefore it would be a factor in the decision-making, but it is not what’s driving it.

That doesn’t mean that you necessarily have to trust the Iranians or think that they’re nice guys, it just means that you have to understand that if you want to take away that capability from them — now that they’re on the cusp of it or have reached it, depending on who you talk to — that it’s a lot for them to give up without getting something in return. If you merely end economic blockades and normalize relations and give them access to modern medical technology and economic development and all these kind of things, then it takes away a lot of the drive to be able to do this as a technology and probably placates a lot of their fears — as much as your own.

However, the second aspect of it is nuclear technology proliferation, especially in terms of weaponization
within the region. This is something which I think will be virtually unstoppable no matter what happens in Iran. I think that we have to understand that it’s as simple as where you put your feet down to get a perspective of the world. There’s nobody that doubts that Israel is a nuclear power, Pakistan is a nuclear power, Russia is a nuclear power, and so from virtually any international relations paradigm, it’s rational behaviour for them to want to pursue these technologies as a deterrent in an increasingly fractious situation in the region. If Iran gets nuclear technology and especially if they’re able to weaponize it, there’s no doubt that Saudi Arabia and probably Egypt as well will openly go for nuclear technology. It’s very much an issue — one that drove and informed the issue of Iraq over the last 15 years—which I think will bring all of us, if we’re honest about it, to some pretty hard decisions. Iraqis as a society in the 1990s died in the hundreds of thousands due to economic sanctions placed on their country simply because we wouldn’t (we being the Western civilized world) allow a certain regime to have access to these technologies. It had very little to do with weaponization, because it’s easy to say you don’t want a state like Iran or Iraq to achieve nuclear weapons and the delivery mechanisms they need to deliver those weapons efficiently. It’s another thing to do what happened in Iraq in the 1990s, which is to say that high schools couldn’t have chemistry textbooks and universities couldn’t have lab equipment. It gets into the duplicitous nature of modern technology and science. Anything can lead to weaponization, and if we’re going to say that countries like Iran and Iraq are not allowed those technologies simply because we don’t trust them, there is no way that they will engage with us as equal partners, because we are relegating them to an undeveloped status, something to which I don’t think anybody thinks they should be kept to.

Thanks to John Measor for taking the time to speak with On Politics.
Warren Magnusson

The On Politics Interview

with Amy Zicker and Sylvia Nicholles

The following is the second conversation between Dr. Warren Magnusson and undergraduates Sylvia Nicholles and Amy Zicker for On Politics. Unfortunately, a rather freakish accident prior to the transcribing process led to the permanent erasure of their first encounter. Hindsight says shorthand might have been a good idea. Nevertheless, the three were able to meet once more on Coast Salish territory for another rousing discussion on politics. Thankfully, the audio recorder didn’t fail catastrophically again — no one thought to take notes the second time around either.

Nicolles    I think we should start with the question that we ended with last time.

Magnusson  And what was that?

This interview took place in November 2007. Warren Magnusson is a political theorist with a particular interest in the urban and the local as sites of politics and government. He has written extensively on the theory of local government, the character of urban politics, the nature of social movements, and the forms of political space. Sylvia Nicholles is a political science student struggling through her final year. She still has yet to work out what her definition of politics is, but she’s getting there through her study of urban politics and theory. Amy Zicker’s current deliberations regarding politics and all that is political are indebted to iconoclasts the world over. As a result, this bio proves problematic.
Nicholles  The tough one: what is politics?

Magnusson  Oh. I knew you were going to start out with the hard one! Well, I think there are two sides of it. If we remember that we are governed in many different ways, in many different forms, and that we govern ourselves and we are governed by external authorities of one sort or another, be it teachers, parents or governance in the narrow sense, [then] government is something that we confront all the time and in which, at least to a limited extent, we participate through practices of self-government. And to me, the question of politics arises in the first instance at that point: our encounter with these practices of government, our participation in these practices of government and our, as it were, our debates with ourselves about how we situate ourselves in relation to those practices and how we situate ourselves in relation to other people. And I guess I would say that all of us are necessarily engaged in politics whether we like it or not because of that intersection between us and ubiquitous and proliferating practices of government and self-government.

But there is another sense of the term politics that I find interesting, and that is that there is this long standing thought that we can trace back to the Greeks that if we become self-conscious about these matters, if we come together in some way and think through the possibilities for what we can be, that we can engage individually and collectively in processes that enable us to realize our objectives or, even more interestingly, to become otherwise different than what we were before. And that aspect of politics I think is particularly interesting.

Now I would add, as a third thing, that there's a conventionalized way of thinking about all of these things that's bound up with the heritage of the Greek polis. The Greek polis provides us with a model of what it is to be political and we in the West have always looked back to it in various ways, and in Aristotelian terms [the polis] is a community in which we govern and are governed in turn, where there's a kind of reciprocity, that it's a relationship between equals that is marked by deliberation and debate. That idea of the polis has come down to us through the idea of the re-
public, or ... these days people talk about civic republicanism or the civic order, or civil society, that notion of a particular kind of political order. It entrances us. It continues to entrances us. But it comes with certain assumptions about what the boundaries and limits are, about what is required of us to have that kind of political community. And all of that is now contested in a way that, or much more intensely than it was, even thirty years ago.

Zicker

*I was going to add that it seems that, that sort of heritage that we have, has from its inception been very exclusive, and had a very particular view of who can be citizen and who can participate in politics. Is it now just as simple as adding people in? Or do we have to do away with that project and imagine something else?*

Magnusson

Well, certainly not the first. The second is a big question mark and certainly the project has to be transformed. But the difficulty is that there is a certain kind of logic that is implicit in the ideal of the polis that is rather difficult for us to escape—for instance, the idea that political relationships are non-violent, so this is a way of getting beyond violence and acting peacefully with others. That's a fairly appealing kind of ideal.

It's also implicit in it that it's an egalitarian relationship, and so it becomes a very powerful rationale for including people, saying, "Well no, the exclusions that the ancient Greeks and Romans made were not justifiable." And that what we moderns, gradually, with difficulty, have come to understand is that in principle, everyone should be included. So again, that's a very powerful idea, that we include everybody, we overcome the kind of limitations, which you're right, were always in there. But that's again, along with the ideal of non-violence, a very powerful kind of ideal.

Thirdly, there's an idea of freedom in there because there's this notion that for politics to work, people have to freely express their ideas, they have to say what they actually think and feel, there has to be an exchange, there has to be a deliberation, there has to be some mutual recognition involved for these processes to work. Boy, that's a pretty appealing ideal as well, so when you begin to put all these ideas together, it's rather difficult to kind of step away from
that tradition and say well no, we need something totally different.

The problem, I would say with this, is that there’s always the hidden violence in this, that we can’t imagine this domain where we relate to one another as we should. But there’s always an implicit assumption there that there’s some folks outside there who refuse to abide by the rules or aren’t suited for this community that we are creating, and there’s an edge of violence there, how are we going to keep them down? How are we going to keep them out? And, if you look at the line, if you look at how folks at that line are treated, like this recent case about [the RCMP tasering Robert] Dziekanski at the [Vancouver] airport. Many people look at that and say, holy smokes, this is how we treat people that are behaving a little bit oddly. That’s absolutely terrible. And, it’s a sign of something that is very, very badly wrong with this particular polis if a, clearly, a harmless middle-aged man like that can’t be included in the community.

There are harder cases, of course, and one of the difficulties with the Western tradition of political thought is that there tends always to be this move to forget about the hard cases, to deal with the easier cases, and then draw a line around and say, oh we are not going to talk about that, this stuff at the margins. And of course, it’s the stuff at the margins that’s arguably the most important stuff to think about.

Nicholles  How do you think that methodologies and ways of studying political science have played into ignoring the margins?

Magnusson  That’s a big question. The discipline as it was constituted was always about what came to be called the advanced modern state; the discipline has its origins in the U.S. in the late 19th century. It has European origins as well; it’s a bit of a complicated story. But it’s quite a recent discipline, just over 100 years old. It was always about how we constitute our place in the world: “us” being Americans or Europeans, whites, and at that time, at the beginning, basically men, and men who were reasonably well educated and so forth.
So, I think that the discipline continues to bear the marks of its origins, so there is implicit in it a norm of what a standard kind of political order is. So there’s an assumption that a country like Canada is “normal” and a country like Chad or Burma or Thailand is “abnormal,” even though if we use that kind of measure the normal countries are in a minority in the world, so that kind of skews the whole discipline. There’s always the assumption that politics is separate from economics, it’s separate from sociology; that narrows the focus. So it becomes a study of the state, a study of public policy and it presupposes a certain relationship between state and society, between state and state.

And connected to my first point, it presupposes that a “normal” state has a kind of political system that we associate with liberal democracy. Which actually, how shall I put it ... the liberal democracy is in some sense the condition of possibility for political science, that it’s only in that kind of political order that you actually have the freedom to ask certain kinds of questions. So, Sylvia, going and talking to a cop, this is not, in many countries, this would not be something you would want to do, unless you had a bribe with you or something.

So you might argue that the relationship between the discipline and this particular kind of political order is symbiotic, and not surprisingly, it’s a discipline that constantly reaffirms the value of that particular type of political order, says, well this is nice or, at least its nice for the people at the centre, that are within these walls. That’s too bad for the folks that are outside and in a way, the discipline is always giving itself the mission of extending those walls outward, including replicating the liberal democratic form in other parts of the world, including more and more people under the tent and so on.

Zicker  Do you think de-centreing our focus from the state shows promise for transforming the way we think about politics within the discipline?

Magnusson  Potentially, but it has to be done in the right way. You might argue that, if you think about the social sciences in general, that in a way they already have been de-centred. That is,
there already is this discipline called sociology that looks at various things that are not directly related to the state, and anthropologists do their own thing in relation to the economists. So, many people would say, well you want to look at these things, well a kazillion social scientists are already looking at these things and they are attentive to relations of power, dominance, authority, the kinds of things that are interesting to political scientists, so, quite a few political scientists would say, well shouldn’t somebody be paying attention to the state? And that’s our job isn’t it?

So I would say that the de-centreing move is productive only insofar as it disrupts not only political science but also sociology and economics and all of these other disciplines, by problematizing what it is that we are looking at, and why we are looking at it. What do I mean by that? Well let’s go back to the example of policing, that if you think about policing as a set of practices that vary significantly around the world but nonetheless share in a common kind of logic, and you think of those practices as political practices of a certain sort, that they are practices of government that are contested in various ways, practices in which many ordinary people participate in some degree, then you open up a field of investigation that is not confined to sociology, that poses policing as a political practice that is not exclusively centred on the state. So, you have to talk about security guards, you have to talk about surveillance systems more generally, you have to talk about security practices more generally that we engage in as individuals, in our daily lives. You suddenly open up a field of investigation that isn’t necessarily centred on the state.

Well, the question of how the state regulates or organizes the field, or if it does, remains there. It’s an interesting question but that’s not the first question that you ask, the first question you ask is what’s the nature of policing? What’s the nature of surveillance? How does all this kind of stuff work? And more specifically, how does it work politically? This is that we are talking about practices of government and self-government here, we are talking about political interactions focused on those practices, we have a lot of questions to ask about that, and so far, political scientists and other social scientists have been very good at asking the
right kind of questions and investigating those sorts of practices. So, I think it opens up the field marvelously but it’s not just a matter of forgetting about the state and focusing somewhere else.

Nicholles  I was just thinking about how methods in social sciences enact a certain idea of the social and I guess, with your research background and your focus on cities, do you think that through certain methods and practices you can enact a certain social reality into being?

Magnusson  I think, yes, we are always conjuring a certain social reality into existence through our research projects; that in order to get going, you have to imagine your object of study. You delimit it in your mind in a certain way, and there’s a sense in which through your research you make it real. You bring it into being as an analytical object. And if enough people do that in similar ways, then the consequence is that’s how people think about their own reality. So, for instance, the idea of ‘a society’ or of ‘the social’ is a particular way of thinking about how we are, that you can track its emergence at a certain period in European history and you can see how it remains persistent. You can see, in some of the contemporary literature, the claim about a ‘death of the social’ in favour of the death of the social and the rise of the community, for instance. And, I’m not sure if that’s such a dramatic change as some people think, but at least it draws attention to the fact that you can have these shifts in the object of study that can have huge effects. So, I don’t think its so much the death of the social, but it certainly is the rise of community. Community becomes a term that’s mobilized in many, many different contexts and, in a sense, communities have to be invented in order to justify the research that we do about communities and then that changes things, that changes the way people think about things, the way they act politically.

Zicker  What about larger projects like neo-liberal economics? It seems like some of these intellectual projects – I’m not sure what came first, the intellectual project or the actual practice. It seems that they have huge effects if you are taking them up as a sort of grandiose
theory. Is that a problem when you are trying to make universalist claims and trying to apply it globally; is that something that the social sciences need to, at least, not claim innocence to what they are doing?

Magnusson: Yeah, I think in relation to something like neo-liberalism, one necessarily has a very complex relationship to it. If you are going to make any sense of the large-scale changes that have happened in the world in the last fifty years, let’s say, the concept of liberalism, many of us find, is quite helpful in drawing a distinction between an earlier era and the present era. So it becomes this sort of general term to refer to various kinds of changes that you can track from say, the early seventies through to the present: the rejection of the welfare state model, and the rejection of Keynesian economic management in favour of a different way of doing things. So, it’s a helpful concept in that way.

On the other hand, you can fixate it on the idea in such a way that you end up doing two things: you end up obscuring other things that are happening in the world in the last forty years that you are fixated on neo-liberalism, that it becomes, well you end up using it to explain everything. You only have to notice events like 9-11 or current upheavals in Pakistan, or something like that and ask yourself well, can that be explained by neo-liberalism? Well, it’s a rather round-about explanation. It doesn’t get you very far in your explanation if that’s the only concept you have to work with. So that’s a problem.

But, there’s also the sense that critics of neo-liberalism become invested in neo-liberalism in a lot of ways. If you make your career studying neo-liberalism, the last thing you want to have happen is for it to disappear, even if you are critical of it, if you make your career knocking it. And then, you may miss the kinds of shifts that mark the emergence of something new.

When I think back to the shift towards neo-liberalism from the Keynesian welfare state, and remembering how some of the writing I was doing in the early eighties, how it still wasn’t clear then which way things were going, it seemed like what we kind of call the neo-liberal agenda was on the table, as it were, the people were promot-
ing it, but, many of us thought, well, these people are basically political extremists and it's not going to go in that direction, it can't work. It may not go in the direction that I want, but these people aren't going to get their way. I was wrong! They did! But at the time, it didn't seem like this was necessarily going to happen and I still say things might have panned out differently. But, I can remember at the time looking back to the post-war era and kind of assuming that it's bound to be something like that indefinitely into the immediate future. Same thing happened but with people that were studying the Cold War, they got so used to this bipolar structure that they sort of assumed it would continue.

Well in both instances you had a transformation, which we can see in retrospect, an epochal shift, and people didn't really understand what was going on. So a lot of what political scientists were writing at the time was just wrong and they just didn't get what was happening.

Now, it may be, for instance, that we are at the moment of the death of neo-liberalism, people have been writing about it now for twenty-five years and now everybody's invested in the idea that there's this neo-liberal project and its expansion throughout the world. Maybe, maybe it's going to go on in that direction, but maybe we are actually in the midst of a shift that spells the crisis of neo-liberalism. And if it's like what it was thirty years ago most of us are going to miss it. But it happened and then you are going to have to pretend that you saw it all along. Rather difficult.

Nicholles  So, if this declines, where can you see the political order shifting?

Zicker  Are we still in the mindset that we are shifting to big projects? Or is there something to be taken up in, well let's just deal with the local now? Is that a form of resistance against the imposition of ideas?

Magnusson  I think there is something in that, in [that] both the Keynesian projects of the welfare state and the project of neoliberalism are premised on imperialism, premised on Western domination and the capacity of the West to generalize its ways of doing things throughout the world. And clearly the West's capacity to do that has declined, has been declining
year by year since the 1940s, and particularly as India and China become more and more powerful economically. One has to assume that the West’s capacity to impose itself on the rest of the world twenty years from now [will be less] than it is now.

A question that then arises is to what extent have these non-Western countries assimilated practices that we have considered Western, domesticated these practices, made them their own to an extent that the variations in the world order—will they be on the order of the variation between Germany and France? Or Germany and the United States? Or will they be more dramatic? It’s hard to tell.

The other thing is that, to the extent that the neo-liberal agenda itself results in a hollowing out of the state and the establishment of global economic and cultural, and to some extent, political relationships on a different scale, relationships that are only weakly mediated by states, one can imagine the increasing importance of arms of politics that are not state-centric. They are not necessarily local, they may be “glocal” more than local — both global and local simultaneously.

I think there’s already evidence and there has been evidence for some time, again going back to the ’70s, of the emergence of these forms of politics that have significant effects. For instance they have significant effects on the conduct of states; it's interesting following debates over climate change and to what extent, particularly Western states, are susceptible to globalized public opinion on the questions of climate change. What Stephen Harper has to worry about in this regard is not Stéphane Dion, it’s those shifts in global public opinion which run through Canada in ways that could be very dangerous for him politically if he is perceived to be ‘not on board’ with a global agenda to do something about climate change. So, the patterns keep shifting.

Thanks to Warren Magnusson for giving his time for not just one, but two interviews.