

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Ian McKay, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History*. Toronto: Between the Lines Press. 2005, 254 pp.

With a clever knowledge of Canadian socialisms and Marxist theory, and through extremely clear writing, McKay delivers a message of dire importance: future realms of freedom are an objective possibility that must be actively pursued to be realized. I would recommend *Rebels, Reds, Radicals* to young readers and established scholars alike, as the imperative of social justice is all too often lost in the abandon of postmodernist speculation. From the days of the Toronto *Labour Advocate* to the Waffle Manifesto to the contemporary NDP party, McKay illustrates how Canada's left has transformed over time in relation to international currents in socialism, economic depression, war, and the rise and the fall of the welfare state. Innovative and theoretically sound, it is perhaps the book's politicizing implications which are most important. In one line McKay (pg. 48) writes "Leftism cannot be reduced to class; but without a sense of the class dimension of most social and economic issues, it [leftism] is itself much reduced". This is a profound statement for a Canadian scholar to make, and it is an important statement because the often forgotten first element of radical praxis is a consciousness of current material conditions. Similar commentary throughout will make educators who read this book rethink the relationship between their pedagogy and the existing liberal-capitalist order.

What makes the work innovative is the method McKay devises for reconceptualizing Canada's left history – 'the strategy of reconnaissance'. This strategy thinks in terms of 'matrix-events' (contradictory moments in time-space that require new explanatory frameworks), which differs from the traditional 'scorecard approach' (where the successes of the left are defined in all or nothing terms) which many historians of socialism and politics take. The purpose of McKay's method is to bracket the sectarianism and sentimentality which usually hamstring histories of the left.

Drawing from Zygmunt Bauman's earlier work on socialist utopias as 'objective possibilities,' in the introductory chapter McKay outlines seven paths by which social actors come to moments of supersedure and envision socio-political realities beyond capitalism and liberal democracy: injustices regarding class, ethnicity, national status, and gender, in addition to spiritual awakenings, intellectual inquiry, and global awareness. The national question in Quebec, the question of Aboriginal self-determination,

the popularity of the Communist Party of Canada pre-1940s versus the rise of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in the late 1930s, the influence of the Social Gospel, etc., have all contributed to the shape of socialisms in Canada. The author stresses the plurality of socialisms that have existed. Between the years 1890 and 1919 socialism in Canada was influenced strongly by evolutionary theory, with workers as the social category of actors, and small grassroots propaganda organizations as the modality of practice. Conversely, between 1917 and 1939 Lenin's influence was renowned, with revolutionary overthrow as the modality of practice and a vanguard-led proletariat as the social category. From 1935 to 1970, the influence of national management and the rise of the welfare state marked a clearly more parliamentary phase of leftism in Canada. Post-colonialism influenced the 1965 to 1980 period, when the social project of emancipation was opened up to include ethnic minorities, the poor, the young, etc. From 1967 to 1990, a specific focus on the empowerment of women became the goal of the emergent socialist formation. All five of these formations were influenced by international trends in leftism but were equally 'homegrown'.

This book serves as the introduction to McKay's forthcoming multi-volume history of radicalism and socialism in Canada. If *Rebels, Reds, Radicals* is any indication of the quality of scholarship which will follow in the multi-volume work, we should all look forward to an influential contribution which will have implications for sociologists, historians, and political scientists. There are, however, a few faults to be found in *Rebels, Reds, Radicals* which necessitate clarification.

First, there is a conflation of classical liberalism with 'the new liberalism' (pg. 72). Whereas the liberalism upon which the state of Canada was founded might share certain attributes of governing that have not disappeared over time, the liberalism upon which the state of Canada was founded is certainly not classical liberalism. Classical liberalism is a term often used to refer back to the works of Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, James Mill, and John Stuart Mill. There is little continuity in the use of the term (e.g., although 'classical liberalism' is usually taken to mean minimal forms of state intervention, Hobbes is included in the list as a classical liberal thinker). Moreover, those who could be called classical liberals often agree that the state should be minimally involved in everyday life but for completely different reasons. For instance, Wilhelm von Humboldt (influential for Marx) was a classical liberalist in that he believed humans are born free and that the state is an alienating form of political association. On the other hand there is the liberal democratic theory of James and John Stuart Mill's, more oriented towards conceding ethical grounds to propertied relations. However, as C.B. Macpherson points out in *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, even between James and John Stuart Mill there is a shift from 'protective' to 'developmental' liberal democracy. It is only with what Macpherson calls 'equilibrium' democracy that we come to something even remotely similar to what McKay labels 'the new liberalism'. Second there is a glossing over of the difference between counter-hegemony and anti-hegemony. The language of counter-hegemony emerged with Gramsci in the 1917-1939 era when revolutionary overthrow

was the locus of socialist practice. Although a convenient term for referring to subversive action, counter-hegemony is all too easily linked to an appetite for authority. The question then remains, what can be justly done with authority once it is attained – a question the Bolsheviks answered with barbarism. Anti-hegemony imagines political spaces beyond hierarchy, sovereignty, and its linkages to capitalism (see Vahabzadeh, 2003. *Articulated Experiences*. Albany: State University of New York Press for an example). More nuances should be expected in McKay's forthcoming multi-volume series.

Overall, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History* is an excellent contribution which will have a politicizing impact on its readers.

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