

The New Paradigm in Canadian History

Restoring reason in writing and teaching

Is it more interesting to think of the story of man as that of a rational political animal, gradually developing self-organization on the basis of reason; or as the story of a subterranean economic determinism, compelling humankind towards some kind of ideal collectivity without really trying? Kelebay outlines a change that has taken over the writing and teaching of Canadian history, to the exclusion, he fears, of legitimate interest in the older paradigm that once assumed a progression of "Colony-to-Nation". The newer paradigm assumes "Capitalism to Socialism" in various forms including the French-Canadian. (Each appears to base its activities, in data exploration from the past, on its authors' anxieties concerning the future.) The writer feels that the presumption of reason has the higher claim on the attention of historians, and that it is in some danger.

It has become apparent that the content, shape, and direction of Canadian historical writing has changed drastically over the past two decades. My intention is to articulate precisely the nature of this transformation in the thinking, writing, and teaching about our past, and thereby to invite the relevant community's reflection on the ideological and pedagogical implications of this development, with a view to perhaps amending some of our recent professional practice.

The research, writing, and teaching of Canadian history, like any scholarly discipline, is usually governed by a paradigm; that is, an intellectual scheme or a dominant idea which at a given time gains the assent of the relevant community and informs its work (Kuhn, 1962, pp.43-51). The governing paradigm defines the perimeters of the discipline and maps out what a particular intellectual community considers noteworthy and significant in its field of knowledge. In other words, it is a scheme which expresses the "state of the art".

Classical Canadian history, the kind most of us were brought up on and taught in school, focused in large part on politics, politicians, and storytelling about the court, based on official sources. One of the most venerable themes in this version of Canada's past has been the growth of constitutional and political self-government (Berger, 1976, p.32). As one historian put it, in that scheme Sir John A. MacDonalld and George-Etienne Cartier were the "good guys" because they were the nation-builders and unifiers of Canada, and the "bad guys" like Howe, Papineau, MacKenzie, and Riel were their regional, provincial, local, divisive foes. True historical drama took place only among this small political cast (Careless, 1969, p.1).

The governing paradigm in this classical version of Canadian history was the idea of "Colony-to-Nation". This paradigm dealt with a number of related themes such as empire, colony, constitutional government, reform, self-government, political consensus, evolution, and progress. But the center of attention and the commanding theme was the new Canadian nation, and the story was about the political evolution of a colonial people into a full-fledged independent nation state. Inspired by the Colony-to-Nation paradigm, classical Canadian historians generally avoided themes unrelated to this essentially nationalistic vision of the world; but not completely so.

During the inter-war period when classical Canadian history was being written, our historians were also subject to an intellectual trend called Progressivism. A number of key progressive themes became popular among Canadian intellectuals in the nineteen twenties and thirties, and influenced several significant Canadian historians.

"Writing in the aftermath of the social dislocations accompanying industrialization, the progressives... described political conflict in terms essentially dualistic, often Manichean (or dichotomous). Their quasi-Marxist analysis emphasized economic and class conflict and presented that conflict in the various forms - aristocracy versus democracy, capitalist versus agrarian, business versus labor - in which they saw it manifested. Always the struggle matched Right against Left, and always, at least in the long run, the forces of progress won out". (Nuechterlein, 1980, p.57)

This progressive approach to the writing of history essentially came from the United States and was sired at the turn of the century by scholars such as Frederick Jackson Turner, James Harvey Robinson, and Charles Beard. We can sense the reverberations of this kind of thinking in the writings of several distinguished authors of Canada's history. For instance, Frank Underhill openly acknowledged that Charles Beard's economic interpretation of the Constitution of the United States "burst on his mind like a flash of lightning". (Berger, p.61) As a result, like other progressives, Underhill wrote most of his essays in terms of the dualistic conflict

between the people and the classes, or between democracy and oligarchy (Berger, pp.61-2).

Harold A. Innis, the father of professional Canadian progressive historiography, was heavily indebted to one of the founding fathers of American progressive historiography, Frederick Jackson Turner (Berger, p.91). Innis's "The Fur Trade In Canada", published in 1930, fixed on the interplay of geographical, technological, and economic forces and emphasized the struggle between the St. Lawrence and Hudson rivers; between the "north-south" alignment of Canada's geographic regions which pulled it to the United States, and the "east-west" pull of Canada's waterway system which drew it west, into the interior of the continent. For Innis, the political map of Canada was almost completely the reflection of its territorial water routes and its staple economy (Berger, p.94). In a review of Harold A. Innis's book on the fur trade, W.J. Eccles said that for Innis "economics was all that counted" and that Innis had carried "economic determinism to the extreme". (Eccles, 1979, pp.422, 440)

Donald Creighton, who is often perceived and reputed to be "conservative" was also influenced by the economic interpretations of Turner and Innis (Berger, p.118). Carl Berger says that Innis's study of the fur trade "was the most important single intellectual influence on Creighton's views of Canadian history". (Berger, p.212) Creighton made a geographic feature, the River, the chief protagonist in his history of the "Empire of the St. Lawrence" (1937), and focused on the conflict between commercial and rural interests (Berger, p.212).

Arthur R.M. Lower, the author of the classic "Colony to Nation" (1946), described Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis on the role of the frontier in American history as "the most formative piece of writing in modern history," and similarly dichotomized the various conflicts in Canada as having been between English and French, Catholic and Protestant, commerce and agriculture, or democracy and authority (Berger, p.223). However, when these traditional nationalist historians wrote about political and economic conflict, it was mostly to emphasize the compromises that prevented these conflicts from becoming destructive (Mealing, 1965, p.216). Although they wrote with an eye to progressivist dichotomies, and often in terms of Left and Right, they believed that in the long run the forces of reason, compromise, and progress would win out. Without denying the existence of conflict, they also argued that conflict in Canadian history existed within an essential framework of consensus and agreement. In a word, they were consensus historians and nationalists who believed in, and had affection for, the new evolving Canadian nation-state.

So, although the Colony-to-Nation paradigm clearly focused on political, constitutional, and national evolution, it was not uninfluenced by several major themes of progressive historiography such as economics, environment, and conflict. Although these progressive themes often insinuated themselves

into our classical historical literature, that literature was centrally about the growth of Canada from Colony-to-Nation. With time this changed.

During the 1960s the writing of Canadian history began to undergo a change which eventually amounted to an intellectual revolution. During the late sixties and early seventies the ranks of the "counter-culture" took their intellectual baggage and gradually retreated from the political arena into the colleges and universities of the nation, where they did not become entirely disbanded. Rebels, activists, and adversaries of the status-quo found refuge within academia and kept their radical neo-Marxist and Marcusean views alive on the campuses. To a significant extent, history, social science, and humanities faculties began to serve as custodians of an ideological mood that the rest of the nation either never adopted, or among those who did, started leaving behind (Nuechterlein, p.56).

By the 1970s Canada had produced a new generation of historians who rejected the Colony-to-Nation paradigm because they believed that history was heading in an altogether different direction. The classical liberal or Whig interpretation of Canadian history, and the Whig mode of writing history came to be called the "Whig fallacy" and suddenly fell into disrepute. Regardless of the many progressive themes in the classical liberal and nationalist version of our past, the radical historians found our received Whig history wanting on two big counts. The first was its overemphasis on the nation, or national history and unity, and the second was its failure to analyze class structure, class conflict, and working class history (Berger, pp.262-3). Therefore, many of the younger historians began writing what has today come to be called the "new social history".

"It was the rise of the new social history that dominated professional interest and attention in the 70's. Whatever its ideological implications, the new social history was most notably radical in its manner of defining what history as a field was all about. The new history tuned scholars' attention away from their traditional preoccupations - political, institutional and intellectual developments as determined by the most visible and prominent elements in society - toward a new emphasis on the aggregate everyday experiences of life by ordinary people". (Nuechterlein, p.59)

Methodologically the new social history became more interdisciplinary and the new historians became more familiar with the perspectives of other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, demography, and statistics. In terms of content, it became fashionable to turn away from the nation, national unity, consensus, and reform. Now it was not to be the history of the nation's great men, great ideas, institutions, and events. On the new agenda was the history of Everyperson.

"Where the old history concerned itself with regimes and administrations, legislation and politics, diplomacy and foreign policy, wars and revolutions; the new focuses on social groups and social problems, factories and farms, cities and villages, work and play, family and sex, birth and death, childhood and old age, crime and insanity. Where the old featured kings... politicians, and distinguished individuals, the new takes as its subjects classes and masses, the anonymous many rather than the identifiable few. The old was 'history from above', 'elitist history', as it is now said; the new is 'history from below', popular (or populist) history". (Himmelfarb, 1984, pp.84-90)

The new direction was generally away from the nation and toward social formations that were either smaller or larger than the nation; that is, toward collectivities which the new social historians foresaw eventually and inevitably joining what one of their gurus, Antonio Gramsci, called an international "new historical bloc" led by intellectuals, students, and workers, which would transcend loyalty to the nation-state (Fejto, 1978, pp.32-40). In terms of Canadian content, it became fashionable to write the history of women and the family, and about radical and ethnic minorities, popular social movements, local community development, social mobility, or preferably of its absence (Nuechterlein, p.59). New journals sprang up with articles on literacy, prisons, strikes, birth control, schooling, labor radicalism, women at work, women at war, grain prices, and poorhouses (Nelles, 1981, p.11).

Instead of politics and politicians, the new social historians wrote about Canadian society with a particular attention to the economy. Instead of the rise of cities, they wrote about the ghetto, the slum, and the "city below the hill". In place of statues and "neat little Acts of Parliament" we were told about Unions, protest groups, radical movements, and strikes. Instead of the mainstream political parties, the new social historians wrote about the peripheral "third parties". Instead of the court and the establishment they wrote about native people, Eskimos, French-Canadians, ethnics, enemy aliens, immigrants, and labor. Instead of central Canada, it was now the history of the West, the East, and, of course, the Canadian North. Often, the emphasis was on people, or rather "real people", on the concept of class, and particularly the working class or proletariat. There is very little room for dispute about the pervasiveness of this disposition among the new articulators of Canadian history. One only needs to look at the recent programs of the Canadian Historical Association, at the titles of articles in historical journals, and at recent and prospective dissertation titles.

This evidence points to the fact that the new social historians abandoned the paradigm in which the political concept of nation had been central, and in the 1970s began to work out of a paradigm in which the concept of "nation" was displaced by the idea of "new social formations" such as "minorities". Furthermore, these new social formations, either larger or

smaller than the nation, were dealt with only in the sense that they could be depicted as having been mistreated, maligned, or exploited in Canada, and thereby linked to the "need for significant social change" in Canada: in other words, hitched to the wagon of a radically new social order. As Professor Carl Berger put it, instead of writing about the rise of liberty and independence, the new social historians wrote about the need for social justice and equality (Berger, pp.32-53).

Describing the state of Canadian history in 1981, "Saturday Review" reported that the new social history had taken root in Canada because Canadian history had to be "demythologized" to serve new movements, and also because its "consciousness needed to be raised". Then it went on to say:

"There is a populist, and in some cases an explicit Marxist thrust to the literature... The... emergence of several varieties of Marxist analysis in Canada and elsewhere (has given) a sharper theoretical edge, a ferocious righteousness, and inevitably a prickly sectarianism to the enterprise". (Nelles, pp.16, 12)

I do not say that there was, or is, no proper place for the topics, interests, and approaches of the new social historians. My concern is not with their propriety, but rather with their prominence and dominance, which has reached almost epidemic proportions. Instead of supplementing classical Canadian history, the new social historians have in fact supplanted it.

Furthermore, this approach has already filtered down from the graduate schools to the undergraduate schools and even the high schools. For example, in a recent analysis of the *histoire nationale* syllabus designed for all Quebec high schools, the authors argue that the syllabus understates Canada's western political heritage, discounts the role of the individual in history, is pro-separatist, deterministic, downplays major Canadian political institutions, is anti-capitalist, and "embraces a Marxist economic interpretation of history to the exclusion of all other perspectives". (Kelebay, 1980, p.33) In other words, it is an *histoire nationale* syllabus not only with the Canadian nation left out, but demonstrably infused with the kind of themes that can help make the Canadian nation-state suspect in the minds of our young generation. This syllabus amounts to a disdain for national history and unmistakably insinuates a preference for a local, regional, provincial, albeit French-speaking, social democracy, if not teaching an outright "yearning for socialism".

This widespread interest in the new social history has diffuse origins. In English Canada it perhaps owes most to John Porter's "The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada" (1965), which dissected the structure of Canada's elite groups and related income, wealth, and influence to our ethnic backgrounds (Berger, pp.263-4). Begun in 1952 as a doctoral dissertation at the London School of Economics, "The

"Vertical Mosaic" took much of its theory from Marx and was "motivated by a socialist consciousness, as well as a sociological imagination". (Heap, 1974, p.9) After "The Vertical Mosaic" was first published in 1965, it quickly became regarded as the magnum opus of Canadian sociology. As a result, the masses of students who entered Canadian universities in the mid-sixties were first introduced to the sociology of Canada through that volume. So by the time these graduates began to write and teach, their version of Canada's new social history became infused with many themes from "The Vertical Mosaic" and it was evident that their work took much of its inspiration from Professor Porter.

In French Canada, this phenomenon was a little more complex. It started later, but then proceeded more rapidly and more intensely. Although Maurice Seguin, Guy Fregault, and Michel Brunet were French-Canadian nationalists, they were also "greatly indebted to the economic history of Innis and Creighton". (Berger, p.186) Unlike Abbe Groulx, their case for Quebec was not made in terms of religion, tradition, and language. It was built on the social and economic decapitation of French-Canadian society at the time of the Conquest, and on the absence of a French-Canadian bourgeoisie. Later, this came to mean that French-Canada, being Canada's most significant oppressed minority, was in desperate need of decolonization and national liberation. In their view Quebec was simply entitled to social and economic justice, or a form of reparation payment.

But the most dramatic scholarly break in French-Canadian historiography occurred with the publication in 1966 of Fernand Ouellet's "Histoire économique et sociale du Québec, 1760-1850". (Nelles, p.14) Following the "Annales" historians in France, who banished individuals and events from the pages of their massive local studies, Ouellet reconstructed prices, and plotted imports and exports, government income and expenditures, demographic schedules of emigration and immigration, birth and death rates, and occupational distributions. On this evidence he concluded that the rise of French-Canadian nationalism was rooted in the economic crisis of subsistence in the countryside, and the frustrated ambitions of an underemployed middle class. Ouellet planted himself at the center of historical scholarship in French Canada, and some people have even come to speak of "la révolution ouelletiste". (Nelles, p.14) For while not all historians agree with Ouellet's conclusions, most now employ his method of studying the socio-economic structural elements of a society almost exclusively.

My point is that with the new social history, English and French-Canadian research, writing and teaching share a similar disposition, and one can detect a harmony in their ideological tones and similarity in their overall design.

In his recent study of the writing of Canadian history, Professor Carl Berger circumspectly argues that the approach of the new social historians and their "criticisms of traditional historiography only imperfectly suggest the outlines of the

synthesis that may or may not arise". (Berger, p.264) Granted, their criticisms may "only imperfectly" suggest the outlines of a new synthesis; but suggest they do, and the outlines of the new synthesis are discernible. A large portion of the writings by Canada's new social historians suggests they intentionally work from new assumptions and from within the framework of a new paradigm. Having rejected traditional political history with its focus on the emergence of the nation, they have intentionally written history with politics and the concept of nation left out.

The reasons for this are twofold. First, our new social historians have largely assented to the Marxist notion of the "five epochs of history" which teaches us to anticipate the "fusion of nations" and the subsequent arrival of "international socialism". Secondly, they have acceded to the Marxist view of politics as the epiphenomena of history, or the "superstructure" and veil for the underlying hidden economic and social "substructure" which inevitably determines the course of history.

The Canadian historians who wrote between the two world wars were only partially informed by selected aspects of Marxist, Fabian, and progressive thought, but by the 1970s the new social historians turned to these aspects and brought them to their philosophic source. Therefore, in a sense, the new social history is a continuity with traditional Canadian historical writing, because it pursues some of the themes present in classical Canadian history. But the extent to which the new social history ignores politics, government, law, foreign policy, political conduct, and the centrality of the nation-state, it represents a discontinuity, or a paradigmatic revolution in the discipline. The new social historians of Canada, and their hostility toward the elevated themes of national history and contempt for what Macaulay called "the dignity of history", have abandoned the bourgeois Colony-to-Nation house and moved to the proletarian Capitalism-to-Socialism commune; which is a classic example of intellectual downward mobility.

The work of the new social historians represents a reconstruction of Canadian history on different fundamentals; a reconstruction that has changed the field's most elementary theoretical generalizations as well as many of its methods and applications. As a result Canadian history is being written from a radically different perspective.

What is most disconcerting about the time, labor, and energy of the new social historians has been best expressed by Professor Gertrude Himmelfarb when she wrote,

"The truly radical effect of the new enterprise is to devalue not only political history but reason itself, reason in history and politics - the idea that political institutions are, at least in part, the product of a rational, deliberate attempt to organize public life so as to promote the public good and the good life". (Himmelfarb, p.87)

Aristotle said that man is by nature a political animal. It

is not in the household, village, or street, but in the **polis**, that man is truly human and qualitatively different from other gregarious animals. The difference is in what other gregarious animals do not have - a polity, a government of laws, and institutions by means of which man voluntarily, consciously, and rationally fulfills his distinctively human purpose; the "good life". (Himmelfarb, p.90)

Since history not only describes the noteworthy past, but also serves as a guide for the future, the dominance and prominence (not existence) of the new social history ought to be a cause for serious concern in the historical community. Traditional political history stood on the assumption that man was a reasoning and deliberating political animal. At the center of the Colony-to-Nation scheme was the nation-state as an intelligible historical field, and the story was about liberty, consensus, compromise, and the deliberate evolution of a people from colonial status. There was no predetermined end in sight. But in the new orthodoxy of Capitalism-to-Socialism, the central concern is about collectivities, subterranean economic determinism, and the story is about our inevitable and irresistible march toward equality, social justice, and socialism; therefore, we might as well all just have another drink because it's happy hour.

The most pressing issue before the relevant community should be a thorough intellectual examination of its own disdain for things which have traditionally underpinned our exceptional political culture. As Professor Himmelfarb has written,

"A great deal is at stake in this simple task, nothing less than the restoration of reason to history - not Hegel's reason, a transcendental spirit or idea infusing history, but a more mundane, pragmatic reason: the rational ordering and organization of society by means of constitutions, political institutions, and laws; and the rational activity of the historian seeking to discover and transmit the truth about that society so that later generations may be instructed about the past". (Himmelfarb, p.88)

Because socialism has discarded the belief in man as a reasoning political animal capable of independent conduct, it is as Jean-Francois Revel has argued "an inherently tyrannical (or totalitarian) doctrine". Therefore, when writers and teachers permit this doctrine to take hold of their minds, they yield to the "totalitarian temptation". (Revel, p.137) If as intellectuals they succumb to a disdain for reason, they commit what Julien Benda called *la trahison des clercs*, or "the treason of the intellectuals". (Benda)

Understood this way, the shift in paradigms from Colony-to-Nation to Capitalism-to-Socialism in the writing and teaching of Canada's new social history, represents a disturbing development. Since paradigms tend to be tenacious it will require both courage and work to effect change. However, the

challenge is worthwhile, for it is about nothing less than the restoration of reason to both the writing and teaching of Canadian history.

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