

Revisiting Canada's Project of Liberal Rule

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I WISH TO recommend ways in which the theoretical paradigm Ian McKay puts forward in *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People's Enlightenment in Canada, 1890-1920* (2008) can be both extended, especially in terms of periodization, and made more focused and specific. In short I would argue that the liberal order framework is important in so far as it provides a theoretical framework which provides coherence to a vast literature in cultural and social history, one that transcends the older nationalist historical syntheses and the supposed fracturing of Canadian history by region, class, ethnicity and gender.

The first issue I wish to address is that of periodization. McKay's original theoretical framework focused on the century between 1840 and 1940 as the period when the liberal order framework was "imposed" and became hegemonic. One of the weaknesses of his proposition about liberalism is that he does not discuss the interplay of republicanism, civic humanism, and Ancien Régime political sensibilities in place before the liberal order fundamentally altered these social and political relations.

There is now a spirited scholarly debate both in Britain and the United States about the timing and emergence of liberal values. T.H Breen and Joyce Appleby have shown that liberal capitalist notions of the market were in place in the United States prior to the Revolution, while other historians such as James Kloppenberg have sought to extend and complicate J.G.A. Pocock's original proposition; still others have now argued that, along with Canada and other parts of the empire, post-revolutionary America experienced a counter-revolutionary

political and social movement. Similarly, historians like Carole Shammas in her work on household government have shown how older models of social and political hierarchy and patriarchy persisted well into the 19th century despite the Revolution. What these new transatlantic historiographies remind Canadian historians is that the transition to liberalism, as Jerry Bannister has argued, must be better theorized. (Here we need to keep in mind that liberal values and a liberal project are not uniquely Canadian, and that we do need to contextualize the Canadian example in an international context – as Louis Hartz did many years ago, nuancing the Canadian example as liberal-conservative). I think we also need to go beyond a focus merely on Loyalists, and focus also on the emergent liberal moments – Simcoe wished to establish a blueprint for gentlemanly capitalism but he also rejected crucial elements of Ancien Régime politics – namely the tithe, the poor law and slavery. We need to remind ourselves of the very slow transition to liberalism.

In another context, Brian Young has demonstrated how persistent the Ancien Régime was in Canada. The work of Michel Ducharme and Louis Harvey clearly demonstrates the persistent resonance of republicanism in Lower Canada, while the work of Michael Gauvreau and Jean-Marie Fecteau has suggested that we need to consider the emergence of a less individualistic and more communal Liberal Toryism (a point made earlier by Hartz) which may have been more hegemonic than McKay's liberal individualism.

My overall questioning of McKay's periodization (which closely resembles the older nationalist paradigm of A.R.M. Lower, J.M.S. Careless, etc.) leads me to the fact that there were overlapping social, political and cultural forms and that at any particular time there were multiple and contested liberalisms. The idea of one hegemonic (imposed and top down) liberalism does not reflect historical reality, for as I have argued in

Engendering the State: Family, Work, and Welfare in Canada (2000), despite a general commitment to the breadwinner ideal, ideas of about the balance between the civic realm and the state remained contested ground up to and beyond 1940 and reflected a wide spectrum of social and political ideas which do not fit comfortably within one “totalizing philosophy.” More importantly, as Elsbeth Heamon so clearly reminds us, rights talk was also part and parcel of conservative thinking, thus calling for an appreciation of a wider political and cultural spectrum not accounted for by McKay’s liberal paradigm. In fact, I think Heamon deftly challenges the very idea that liberalism was ever hegemonic in Canada.

In addition, the liberal order did not emerge in lock step: not everyone was brought under its umbrella at exactly the same time. So we need a perspective that can account for the slippage between various individuals, institutions and social groups which may have shared some of the principles of the liberal order but not others (here the work of John Lutz and Susan Neylan have shown how first nations peoples participated in the liberal order for the purpose of emboldening traditional cultural practices).

Since liberalism was a response to the statist elements of republicanism, with its conflation of the common good (virtue) and a non-corrupt parliament, I am somewhat perplexed by the great emphasis McKay places on the state (with his political economy model) as the primary site for his liberal project. Here I think we need to be alert to Bruce Curtis’s important point that what McKay is really describing is governmentality, a theoretical proposition which has the advantage of being much more precise and nuanced. I think that one of the important ways in which the liberal order framework can be fruitfully extended is to focus on voluntary societies as core sites for the articulation of the liberal project. After all, John Locke spent a great deal of time talking about a civil society (as did Habermas at a later date) which included the family, church and other voluntary

organizations as fundamental to the emergence of individualism. Given that the Canadian state was relatively weak and remained a “limited state” well into the 20th century, I think if we wish to explore the ways in which liberal principles emerged, we need to focus – as has Darren Ferry – upon temperance societies, mechanics institutes and other forms of associational life, where both working class and middle-class people (in some cases just men and in others men and women) *chose* to join in civil society and were exposed to liberal (middle class?) values. I emphasize “chose” because the notion of agency needs more attention in McKay’s framework: liberalism was not simply imposed, a view that merely echoes older social control theories now severely challenged.

Probably the most important site for the elaboration of liberal values well into the 20th century, both in English and French Canada, was the church. In McKay’s formulation the church is defined as a conservative institution, but no one who is acquainted with the work of Jean-Marie Fecteau, Ollivier Hubert, Michael Gauvreau, and indeed myself on the connections between the Protestant churches and New Liberalism, can ignore religion as a powerful vehicle in the creation of the liberal order. The work of Fecteau and Gauvreau and Elsbeth Heamon on the Catholic church has clearly demonstrated that it could sometimes be conservative but that it was also a major player in articulating modern liberal values of individualism, self-control, moral discipline and the value of work and labor in a commercial society. I think that a renewed emphasis on associational life or “civil society,” if we wish to use Habermas and McNairn’s phraseology, in turn raises questions about the gendered aspects of McKay’s original formulation. In many respects McKay’s definition of individualism based on property ownership is a tautology which automatically excludes women. I think that if a greater focus was placed upon civil society, including religion, charitable organizations, and the family, we would find that women are clearly players in creating

the liberal order. No one who has read Myra Rutherdale's work on female missionaries or the now extensive international work on charities can ignore the fact that while some women were marginalized by the liberal order an even greater proportion were active participants in it.

Finally, I think that as part of a broader exploration of those interstices between the individual and the state we need to include the family as a site – and arguably the most important site – by which to trace the emergence of the liberal order. Historians have conventionally thought of the institution of the family as a vessel of traditional values and an institution which does not produce culture; but recent historians of the family – Kon Dirks in the United States, Lawrence Klein and J.C.D. Clark in Britain, and Susan Desan for France – have seen the family as the quintessential site for the production of individualism. If, as McKay has argued, individualism is one of the principal markers of modern liberalism, then the family is the fundamental institution in which the notion of the modern self was elaborated. As Michael McKeon, author of *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge* (2005), has argued, the family is the quintessential locus of authority in modern society: “the most powerful rebuke to royal absolutism was the radically devolutionary conviction that only the individual has absolute authority.” If this is so, domesticity both sustains and socializes liberalism by legitimating the authority of the individual – which justifies gender inequality under the guise of affective equality. Moreover, what a rich new literature on the emergence of modern political and social values demonstrates (and here I am building on the work of Nicole Eustace, Sarah Knott, Sarah Pearsall, and Kon Deirks who have complicated Habermas' definitions of public and private) is that to the rationalism of Lockean liberalism must be added the idea of sentiment and the emotions. And as Jeff McNairn has shown in his article in *Transatlantic Subjects: Ideas, Institutions, and Social Experience in Post-Revolutionary British America* (2009), historians

have to use a wider range of sources, including travel writing and literature, to uncover liberal values. I would add to this such private documents as letter-writing and diaries. The liberal project functions both within the structures of governmentality and without.

NOTE:

I would like to thank the editors of *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution* for inviting me to comment on this important project, which seeks to update and critique Ian McKay's path-breaking article on the liberal order in Canada between 1840 and 1940.

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