

Toward a recovery of social solidarity?

THE SOCIAL PROJECT OF CANADIAN STUDIES

The current state of Canadian Studies certainly needs to be addressed. It is both moribund and fragmented. The most important symptom is that these days one rarely hears anyone talk about *why* Canadian Studies is important, what social project it represents. Unlike many other interdisciplinary innovations, though like Women's Studies and Labour Studies, Canadian Studies began in relation to a public project of social criticism and counter-hegemony. It is questionable whether it has any meaning outside that context.

Canadian Studies was inaugurated by a problematic relationship between Canada and its international situation—a certain configuration between inside and outside. Inside, we were woefully ignorant of ourselves; outside, we were woefully compliant with US hegemony. Canadian Studies was one of a number of initiatives whose strengthening of our self-knowledge was intended to contribute to independence both at home and in international affairs. What independence could afford was perhaps less clear, but it was never too far from a critique of *laissez-faire* capitalism and the recovery of community. That project may still make sense, but the inside-outside configuration that gave rise to it has considerably altered.

About 10 years ago, I suggested that Canadian Studies was a consequence of the left-nationalist discourse that arose in the early 1970s.¹ Particular studies by individual researchers were fitted into a larger public context in relation to a theory of dependent industrialization associated with Harold Innis and a lament for the failure of cultural autonomy associated with George Grant. However, the mainstream of Canadian Studies, and other cultural consequences such as the cultural policy discourse, took off by separating itself from this public context, arguing that Canadian Studies had no necessary relation to “nationalism” or

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any other public project. Thus, the “successes” of Canadian Studies have not been part of the formation of a national-popular will as left-nationalism expected but have occurred within established university structures. This is clearly not a matter of individual failures but a social and economic trend that has not been swayed from its course, despite some important attempts to situate individual studies within a national project.

THE LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT CANADA

Even here, I would be cautious about speaking straightforwardly of “success.” My experience in teaching is that Canadians are still surprised to find that a

serious tradition of social and political thought exists in English Canada. It is still an uphill struggle to get Canadians to pay attention to their own context and history. Moreover, Canadian Studies still remains a poor cousin in most university structures. In the present context, we cannot help but be aware that ignorance of one's own history is a general problem in the world due to the commodification of culture and its centralized production. Our problem has not been resolved but has become a common condition.

The separation from a public project has been exacerbated by further trends. Subsequent economic developments, notably the free trade agreements, but also the concentration of capital and new technological innovations, have undermined the theory of dependent industrialization. Similarly, the successes of Canadian cultural products on the international scene—notably novels written in English and theories of multiculturalism—have undermined the assertion of cultural dependency. Moreover, we cannot underplay the role played by Canadian corporations and political institutions in maintaining economic and cultural dependency elsewhere. As a consequence, most thinkers have simply abandoned the framework that gave meaning to individual studies, and the choice of Canadian themes has once again become simply a matter of individual research programs.

With the disintegration of the national project, there have arisen a number of assertions generally associated with the name of postmodernism: whenever identity is mentioned, it is suggested that identity is always plural and contested; whenever dependency is mentioned, it is pointed out that there are Canadian success stories in the international economy; whenever oppression is mentioned, only the most extreme cases receive attention, thus concealing the multiple layers of domination and their extension throughout society. These as-

sertions work to obscure the important heritage of left-nationalism through a caricature that it was supposedly homogenizing, special pleading, and itself oppressive because of its orientation toward the national state. Neither of these positions is adequate. The task is to continue the critique of dependency and frustrated identity in a more plural context; neither abandon social criticism and a public project on the one hand, nor assert it unchanged on the other.

CANADIAN STUDIES AS COUNTER-HEGEMONY

But how can one do this? What is the public project that can unify individual studies in the present climate? What is first needed is some clarity about the current situation: the combination of neo-liberal political-economic hegemony with the intensification of the national security state. The renewal of public scepticism toward the American agenda is, in this context, important. The international interest in Canada as another paradigm of English-speaking politics and culture is a good sign. Social critics can use these as public entry points into more critical discourses: dependency

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has not disappeared; it is evident in the relations between regions and classes in Canada, as well as internationally. The plurality of nations within the Canadian nation-state requires analysis of internal imperialism, which runs parallel with international inequalities. The critique of empire needs to be turned against the history and pretensions of the British Empire and the Canadian state as well as turned outward toward the United States. Perhaps most important, the defence of community in Canadian thought needs to be radicalized into a political and philosophical inquiry into the grounds of human solidarity—for it is this that the neo-liberal economy and the national security state most threatens.

These issues represent a new emphasis in Canadian Studies. The turn inward toward self-discovery never involved the parochialism that the caricature suggests, but the interplay between domestic and international concerns is now more intense than ever. The hope for community and social solidarity expressed through the creation of Canadian Studies requires renewal. Recovery of social solidarity within Canada can motivate international involvement and steer it away from liberal guilt toward an analysis of the sources of exploitation. Social criticism aware of its tradition in Canada has a certain style and emphasis that can contribute meaningfully to new international debates. For this, we still need to know our history, because human solidarity finds its grounds in particular histories. The turn inward also opens outward. We must now explore the terms of the new configuration that is being set into place.

Note

1. Ian Angus, *A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality and Wilderness* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), pp. 27-40.

A Gen-Xer's perspective continued from page 21

ect of national subject-formation and their negotiations with and resistance to that project. Analogous to Michel de Certeau's description of the difference between experiencing the streets of Manhattan from the top of the (now destroyed) World Trade Center or from the teeming and chaotic sidewalks, the result of the shift in optics that has taken place at Carleton is the discovery of a Canada that is confusing, complex, and conflictual. Ultimately, I would argue, it is also more interesting and more in tune with our experience of Canadian post-modernity.

LINKAGES BETWEEN PROGRAMS

While this shift has rejuvenated Canadian-focused research here at Carleton, it seems to have come with a certain price:

a growing cleavage between the way that Canadian Studies is being reconceptualized in university departments and the way in which the Canadian Studies project has been conceptualized and institutionalized by the Canadian state. As a result, Pauline Rankin of Carleton University, Pierre Anctil of the University of Ottawa, and Jim Struthers of Trent University have been working with the chairs and directors of other domestic Canadian Studies programs to create a university-based scholarly association. This association has tentatively been named the "Canadian Studies Coordinators Network," and it plans to hold a national workshop in Ottawa in November 2007 with the aim of strengthening linkages between Canadian Studies programs and faculty in Canada and to begin the pro-

cess of creating a national organization of Canadianists at the university level. Such an association, I would argue, marks the future of Canadian Studies in Canada: its emergence as an inclusive, mature, and fully autonomous field of study. 🍁

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1. Jill Vickers, "Liberating Theory in Canadian Studies," in *Canada: Theoretical Discourse/discours théoriques*, ed. Terry Goldie et al. (Montreal: Association for Canadian Studies, 1994), p. 364.

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