

Towards a Theory of Possible History? Ian McKay's Idea of a "Liberal Order"

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“Every source – more exactly, every remnant that we transform into a source through our questions – refers us to a history which is either more, less, or in any case something other than the remnant itself. History is never identical with the source that provides evidence for this history Historical science is ... required from the first to interrogate sources in order to encounter patterns of events that lie beyond these sources The step beyond immanent exegesis of the sources is made all the more necessary when a historian turns away from the so-called history of events and directs his gaze at long-term processes and structures. In written records, events might still lie directly to hand; but processes, enduring structures do not. And if a historian has to assume that the conditions of possible events are just as interesting as the events themselves, then it becomes necessary to transcend the unique testimony of the past. Every testimonial, whether in writing or as an image, is bound to a particular situation, and the surplus information that it can contain is never sufficient to grasp the historical reality that flows through and across all testimony of the past.” - Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past; On the Semantics of Historical Time* (2004), 150

THIS ARTICLE REPRESENTS a desire to enter into a dialogue with my colleague Ian McKay. Before continuing (and before criticizing him!), I would like to underscore the contribution he has made to a fundamental reflection on historical practise in this country, as much because of the richness of his ideas as because of their level of erudition. McKay's analytical work, notably his article on the liberal order published in 2000, is an open call to debate the general interpretations which underlie Canadian history. This is a very

welcome call, insofar as, in the words of Dummitt and Dawson in a recent collection, “the absence of sustained debate across subfields of Canadian history is increasingly striking.” (Dummitt and Dawson 2008, xi) McKay rightly calls for looking beyond a historiography which is “unselfconsciously regional in range, monographic in strategy, and cautious about generalizing beyond tightly defined localities and 'cases'.” (McKay 2000, 620) This author's project, which involves a re-reading of Canadian history along the lines of a “Liberal Revolution,” is important, if only because it represents a resistance to often ephemeral analytical modes (for example, through references to Gramsci) and to fragmentation, in the form of the anarchic multiplication of objects of research. Up to a certain point (as I will discuss below), McKay's project also represents a rejection of the dogmatic dictates of empiricism and a serious recognition of the fundamental role of theory in the analytical work that needs to be accomplished in Canadian and Quebec history. In fact, it represents an attempt, a major one in my opinion, at reinterpreting the meaning of our history, at identifying those elements which *link* the existences of individuals and groups in a given society, beyond the multiple segmentations generated by that same society. From this perspective, McKay's framework, as described below, seeks not only to highlight what is already known in a new way, but also to gauge the contours of that which is not yet known by problematizing it in advance. McKay's work also involves a systematic integration of the *political* dimension of the historical narrative, a narrative too often expressed in the language of social, economic or ideological history.

Thus I read McKay's work as an impressive accomplishment of historical research and writing. Doing so poses a whole series of challenges and problems that this article cannot hope to fully discuss. Consequently, I must set aside (with great regret) three aspects which nevertheless remain important: the question of the Canada-Quebec context itself and that of its analytical

relevance; the use a Gramscian perspective as an interpretative framework; and, finally, the conception of politics (and of political history) which underlies McKay's thought. At this stage, I prefer to focus on the study of that which could be described as the three fundamental dimensions of McKay's analytical project – namely, the historiographical project, the epistemological project, and the political project.

I The Historiographical Project

McKay's underlying historiographical project is at once simple and extremely ambitious: to place Canada's development during the 19th and 20th centuries into an analytical framework based on the notion of the “liberal order” (expressed as the “liberal order framework” in the title of his article published in 2000):

The core argument is succinct: the category “Canada” should henceforth denote a historically specific project of rule, rather than either an essence we must defend or an empty homogeneous space we must possess. Canada-as-project can be analyzed through the study of the implantation and expansion over a heterogeneous terrain of a certain politico-economic logic – to wit liberalism. A strategy of “reconnaissance” will study those at the core of this project who articulated its values, and those “insiders” or “outsiders” who resisted and, to some extent at least, reshaped it. (McKay 2000, 620-1)

It is a matter of imagining Canada “simultaneously as an *extensive* projection of liberal rule across a large territory and an *intensive* process of subjectification, whereby liberal assumptions are internalized and normalized within the dominion’s subjects.” (McKay 2000, 623)

There is an interesting shift to be observed in McKay's thought.

A few years before the publication of the article just cited, in a lengthy review of how the story of the Dionne quintuplets has been treated by scholars in the field of cultural studies, McKay spoke in terms of a “*liberal capitalist* order [...] based on possessive individualism, that is, on the systematic frustration of any hope of an ethical community and on the consistent promotion of capitalist accumulation.” (McKay 1994) By contrast, the text published in 2000 draws a *distinction* between capitalism and liberalism as categories: “There was, of course, a lasting and deep mutual penetration of liberalism and capitalism after the mid-nineteenth century, but it is important to keep these categories analytically separate.” (McKay 2000, 629) The same distinction is made in his most recent contribution to the debate: “Liberal order and capitalism cannot be conflated. Yet, after the 1840s, they also could not be easily separated.” (McKay 2009, 385) Even if the author does not elaborate on the differences between these historical realities, such a distinction has two clear advantages: it dissociates McKay's analysis from any mechanical economic determinism and it allows him to centre the analysis on the *political* and on the power relations which underlie the liberal “order.”

That being said, the concept of a “liberal order” is not without a certain vagueness. More specifically, it is the concept of *liberalism*, a term which constitutes, by McKay's own admission, a “slippery word” (McKay 2009, 349), which represents a problem when used as a central category in his approach. Indeed, at various points McKay speaks in terms of an “order” (McKay 2000, 623), a “project” (McKay 2000, 629), a “framework” (McKay 2009, 351), a “rule” (McKay 2000, 623), a “paradigm” (McKay 2000, 621), and a “program” (McKay 2000, 626). But this liberalism, be it well-ordered or not, is also described as a “hierarchical ensemble of ideological principles” (McKay 2000, 624) and a “collection of hierarchical values” (McKay 2009, 386), as a “secular religion” (McKay 2000, 624-5), and, finally, as a “logic” (McKay 2009, 460). It would be unfair to deny McKay

access to the full richness of the semantic register at his disposal when trying to grasp that nebulous reality that is liberalism. But the very *breadth* of this register highlights a fundamental problem: the different terms used to describe liberalism or the liberal order refer to different *levels* of reality, which end up largely being conflated. Thus, liberalism is presented as *both* a set of *values* and a *project*, a universe of meaning and a will to act. As McKay admits in a reply to his critics, insofar as his goal is to arrive at a “workable and sensible definition that can enable useful conversations and shared insights” (McKay 2009, 349), the polysemous concepts he employs clearly constitute an obstacle to achieving that objective. But moreover, his diverse conceptual repertoire poses a whole series of other problems. I will raise three of them.

1. Defining liberalism *severally* as a set of values, as an order, and as a project requires that a link be established between three forms of rationality, three different manifestations of historical actors' conscience, in a linear, unbroken manner. First, there is a constructed and conscious universe of representations which are carefully organized and hierarchized (which might be called an *ideology*); second, there is a practical structure of domination which presents itself as an *order*; and, finally, there is a *context* for action and for practise where policies or other measures for putting a program into action are applied. Granted, McKay is careful to point out that the liberalism he has in mind is “a hierarchical ensemble of ideological principles,” as opposed to “the historical forms it has assumed,” that it ultimately represents “something more than one bounded ideology among other ideologies.” (McKay 2000, 624-5) Yet this liberalism still exhibits all of the traits of a collection of representations which “can also be distinguished from the competing ideological formations alongside which it evolved and which it worked to envelope and 'include'.” (McKay 2000, 624) Moreover, the author, in describing those “values” lying at the heart of the liberal order, evokes the famous conceptual trio of “liberty,

equality, property,” all of which support the key value of individualism, which forms the quintessence of the definition of liberalism *as ideology*, notably in the work of my colleague Fernande Roy (1988). Are we therefore reduced to imagining great piles, or “levels” of ideology, “practical” or particular ideologies which depend on broader sets of values which are called “ideological formations”? Here lie all of the aporia which afflict those conceptual constructions founded on the outdated and ambiguous notion of ideology as a collection of beliefs which structure a more or less transparent causal relationship, a rational action (Chiapello 2003, Capdevila 2008). The problem is that there is no “empirically verifiable” means of recognizing the existence of this “ensemble” of values, reproduced in a relatively stable manner across time and shared within a certain cultural space, aside from limiting the analysis to the first level of the discourse produced by historical actors. Furthermore, the “constituent” values of a given ideology can always inspire a given program or action, but a clear and firm causal link between ideological expression and social practise (especially when that practise, as in the political sphere, is founded on a constant confrontation of interests) can no longer be seriously advanced in the present day, let alone be affirmed. The radical critique of this approach made by Bruce Curtis is very relevant here: “The popular equation, structural location – defines interest – constitutes identity – determines action, simple doesn’t hold” (Curtis 2009, 179). Indeed, such an approach depends on an understanding of ideology as a conceptual universe which is at the source of action and practises, typical of the era of Mannheim (and of Gramsci), a conception which has aged rather badly.

2. Liberalism as an *order*, or as a collection of values resulting in a politico-ethical project, also raises the problem of the uniqueness of liberalism as a universe of meaning. The liberal project, as understood by McKay, certainly transcends the strict limits of politics and insinuates itself into all spheres of social existence,

but it remains a *project* and it presents itself as such through its uniqueness: a *particular* construction in the midst of a more or less vast array of alternative, perhaps even incompatible conceptions, all of which are gradually displaced by liberalism, up until the *apex* of liberalism is achieved in the 1890s. Such an approach establishes a conceptual space where it becomes essential to define the project's empirical *content* and, moreover, its *limits*. Thus, there begins an endless game of speculation on what is 'inside' or 'outside' of this liberalism-qua-project; on what defines 'a' liberal, and in reference to what? Numerous authors keep themselves occupied by sounding and exploring the contours of this 'exterior' of liberalism as presented by McKay (for example, Perry 2009, Sandwell 2009). Likewise, the 'interior' of this liberalism is vulnerable to any critique which reveals its contradictions, its lack of unity, the multiple forms it can adopt, so that scholars end up speaking not in terms of liberalism but 'liberalisms': "Reduced to so many forms of a single phenomenon, the liberal order framework licences vague talk of liberalism in the singular" (McNairn 2009, 77); "the proposition of a unitary, coherent liberal project is rather dubious, given the multiplicities of liberalisms that exist historically" (Curtis 2009, 184). Regardless of whether one agrees with these pluralist postures (it will have been understood that I am *not* in agreement), it remains true that conceiving of liberalism as ideology (or as an 'ensemble' of ideologies) linked to a project has the effect of orienting the search for meaning toward the most 'precise' definition possible of the limits of this 'project of governance.' The reflex is all the more inevitable given McKay's strong insistence on arriving at an understanding of what he calls "actually existing liberalisms" (McKay 2009; note the plural in the title, which shifts to the singular in the text, p. 353...), and on subjugating the use of 'abstractions' to the primary objective of understanding 'liberty-on-the-ground.' This injunction raises serious questions regarding the unitary dimension of that liberal order which is increasingly difficult to locate.

3. Finally, in opposition to the ethereal abstractions of “grand theorists” (I will come back to them later), McKay analyzes, under the auspices of the liberal order, a *project of power*, which is sometimes described as an “adventure” (McKay 2000, 632) and, ultimately, as a “(passive) revolution” (McKay 2009, 372). Naturally, this project had its vanguard of “true believers” (McKay 2000, 630), and even its own “organic intellectuals” (McKay 2009, 353). The universe of values is thus subsumed into the concrete history of the achievement of hegemony, whereby a not very well-defined group (perhaps tellingly, the word “bourgeois” is completely absent from the article published in 2000) undertakes the work of changing a society’s traditions in order to make room for “new conceptions of the human being and society” (McKay 2000, 630). Once again, both the historical continuity and the rationality of a precise and delimited “project of rule” (McKay 2000, 629) are taken for granted, and the project itself is presented as the foundation of present-day Canada. Thus, the analysis of values is transformed into a study of the historical events surrounding a necessarily personified search for power.

I do not want to criticize an author for his profoundly legitimate desire to understand a given social structure in terms of *power*. Nor do I seek to deny that such programs of governance have existed, have been set in motion, and have influenced our history through the transformations they have produced. But describing the progress of a political project (by definition founded on the intentionality and the will of the actors involved), even a vast one, and understanding a given society's potential for the development of a liberal universe, can turn out to be very different, if not contradictory, enterprises. That is, unless, once again, there is assumed to be an uninterrupted continuity between liberal values and the concrete implantation of a socio-political hegemony. I believe that the two initiatives rely on completely distinct explanatory registers and that mutual interactions are certainly important to explore, but only on the

condition that they are not automatically assumed to exist.

The problem begins with the ‘closed’ definition of liberalism as an organized ensemble of values which, through the individualization and the subjectivization fundamental to the logic of liberalism, assigns specific places to liberty, equality and property. Yet liberalism, in the classic and bourgeois form which developed in the 19th century, is capable, in its internal diversity, of articulating its founding concepts in a broad variety of ways. The importance given to the *individual* is certainly fundamental, but it supports a wide range of interpretations, even within the dominant form of liberalism, of the *limits* to be imposed on this primacy of the individual, notably with regard to the collective norms which establish its limits and especially the role of the state. It can not be said too often that in liberalism, the ‘individual’ is both a fundamental premise *and* an eminently problematic category, open to an enormous diversity of interpretations. It is, *a fortiori*, the same with those concepts derived from liberty, namely equality and property. Liberty certainly claims a fundamental ontological status, but once again it can support diverse forms of implementation and materialization even within the liberal bourgeois version of liberalism (the liberty of the poor, of the prisoner, of the worker, of women, etc.), a diversity which is the source of ferocious debates. Equality, for its part, is a concept which, within bourgeois liberalism, covers both the implications of competition (equality of opportunity) and the reading of citizens' statuses (equality of rights). Once again, describing it as a “fundamental value” of liberalism is not saying anything specific, unless it is to specify those locations and moments where this value is evoked (or not). Finally, the property claimed by the hegemonic bourgeoisie is, fundamentally, a function of the relationship with things, goods, and ideas which makes it possible to *guarantee*, in the future or as a precondition for attributing ownership to individuals (and groups!), control of the fruits or the conditions of their action, in a society marked by

constant change.

It is also true that liberalism, even in its bourgeois form, does not always compose its 'values' or its 'principles' in the same way, nor is there a stable definition of these concepts. In bourgeois liberalism, the collective occupies a place that is just as important as the individual, *pace* Herbert Spencer. It would therefore be more appropriate to say that, depending on the circumstances, liberal programs, the projects of power of the elites, are founded on very diverse and eminently changing arrangements of principles, and they put into operation specific expressions of the 'fundamental' principles of liberalism. This is exactly why it is difficult (and probably vain) to conceive of the liberal order as a unitary enterprise, founded on stable principles. That is to say: liberty, equality and property are not the constitutive and cumulative 'elements' of a static conceptual universe. Rather, their respective meanings and mutual influences vacillate and readjust according to the prevailing circumstances and the different types representations present in a given society.

In fact, the problem goes much deeper. It is as if, in McKay's representation of liberalism, the individualism-liberty-equality-property configuration were specific to 'this' liberalism, which I have described as bourgeois. However, it is possible to demonstrate or, if that word is considered too strong, at least to present a plausible hypothesis (which I have attempted to do in other texts, notably 1996 and especially 2004) that these values form part of a much larger pool of ethical values, which nourishes the various ideological formations, occupying *the whole of* the ideological spectrum within the liberal mode of regulation.

It is this *underlying* foundation of ideologies, this social logic at the origin not only of the bourgeois victories, but also of the alternatives and forms of opposition which they inspire, which I see as being in urgent need of identification and exploration.

This particular ‘liberalism’ cannot be reduced to a single ideology, as dominant as it might be. It does not refer to simple ‘values’ or to abstract ‘conceptions’ of the world. It institutes a logic which imperatively binds together fundamental mechanisms which regulate social relations, including *liberty* as universal aspiration, the contradictory forces of *competition* and *solidarity*, *will* as a source of social action founded on the conscious personal engagement of the individual (or group), and *progress* as the unavoidable temporal axis and teleological ethics. Together, these elements form an *episteme* which transcends individual ideologies to form the basis and the precondition for social action from the mid-19th century onward. It is not simply a matter of a ‘discursive configuration’ or of a collection of technologies which determine practises, as the emulators of Foucault too often propose. Rather, it is a collection of *institutionalized* social reflexes which infiltrate all of society's pores, even the tiniest ones (society does not have an ‘outside’!) and which coagulate into stable representations and specific institutions. Its fundamental elements are constantly reconstructed and reconfigured, but leave intact a series of dichotomies which structure this logic (let me mention, in passing and for lack of space, only a few of these dichotomies lying at the foundation of social meaning: individual/collective, voluntary/imposed, actor/institution, conscious/unconscious, formal/real, etc.).

Moreover, this social logic is *instituted* insofar as it is not a matter of simple ‘representations,’ nor of a given collection of practises, but a *dialectic* wherein a social logic materializes within a collection of institutions which themselves deepen, complexify and, ultimately, transform that same social logic. This process, through which the social whole ‘holds together,’ organizes itself into a hierarchical universe of common sense, where a collection of relationships is instituted which is both conflictual and endowed with its own coherence, is what I call “social regulation.”

II The Epistemological Project

McKay's work also has an *epistemological* objective. It expresses his desire to “arouse historians from their dogmatic slumbers, petty debates, and narrow horizons.” (McKay 2000, 645) McKay's relationship to and conceptualization of ‘theory’ is certainly noteworthy and, in my view, characteristic of historians' relationship with theory. “Theory” is considered acceptable only if it guides the progress of the historian in exploring empirical reality, like a travel companion able to better describe that which ‘actually exists.’ Other manifestations of theory are treated as nothing more than ungrounded speculation which risk leading to all sorts of aberrations.

Nevertheless, the evolution of McKay's thought remains interesting. His long review published in 1994 is a stinging critique, from an ethical perspective, of the deconstructionism so prevalent in cultural studies: “If one really takes seriously the professed rhetoric of cultural studies – that these strategies of destabilization will prepare the groundwork for an authentically emancipatory politics, providing subaltern groups with new critical tools they can struggle with, etc., etc. – on its own the game looks pretty dodgy Once every belief system, narrative, sexual orientation, nationalist tradition, binary opposition and gendered identity is unveiled as an artificial and recent social construction – emerging from the interplay of contingent, ever-shifting, and largely arbitrary discursive strategies within an infinitely extended grid of power and knowledge – ‘our’ people (whoever they might happen to be: as liberal individuals, we are blissfully 'free to choose,' as Milton Friedman used to say) will be liberated.” This ironic description is that of an ethical and theoretical impotence whose principal effect is “to encourage a generalized social agnosia, a condition in which nothing seems familiar and the individual is lost in a world of lifeless, depthless

abstractions, turned loose to wander the malls in perfect openness and fluidity, free at last of those oppressive master narratives that used to burden people with the weight of meaning and history and a future” (McKay 1994).

This “weight” of meaning, of history, and of the future is therefore *also* a theoretical challenge that history must face. But the texts published by McKay in more recent years are more ambiguous on this point (if not on the ethical imperative, which will be addressed in the third section of this article). Thus, in his article published in 2000, McKay condemns certain theoretical approaches which demand adherence at the expense of “historians’ primary loyalties”: “Why even have a field called history if it lacks internal coherence, if its distracted practitioners are too busy to attend seriously to each others’ work, if many of their primary loyalties lie with other (sometimes ahistorical) theoretical and methodological traditions?” (McKay 2000, 617) Perhaps in reaction to certain criticisms, by 2009 McKay’s position implied a middle ground between “grand theories” and empirical fragmentation, while expressing a clear distrust of ungrounded “abstractions.” In fact, this position implies a radical denunciation, covering both the escape offered by “grand” theories and the recourse to master narratives.

Actually existing liberalism (...) should not be evaded by flights into high theory. What the liberal order framework demands is not generic and perpetually unresolvable debates about “liberalism-in-general” and ‘potential-if-undocumentable-intellectual influences,’ but determinate (and inherently “testable” abstractions about “liberty-on-the-ground,” that is, a political framework put to work in the specific historical context of Canada as a political project of rule in North America. (McKay 2009, 353)

Thus, those “master narratives” which seek to explain the history of an entire era are explicitly set aside. In the place of such master narratives and theoretical experiments in “abstraction,” McKay proposes a method capable of creating *linkages* between the various realities:

The liberal order framework, far from representing any sort of new “master narrative,” merely seeks to provide helpful reminders that many seemingly unrelated events from the 1840s to the 1940s, across a wide spectrum of people and places, can be connected to each other if we remember that they all took place within a liberal dominion organically linked to the British Empire. The framework provides productive ways of bringing these and other topics together, without making any claim that they can all be comprehensively explained by this context. (McKay 2009, 351)

The concepts applied in this operation are “bridging” concepts which link different “realities”: “Hegemony,' 'historical bloc,' and 'passive revolution' do not sustain all-encompassing theories of history. They function best as bridging concepts, which make visible connections between seemingly disparate phenomena – connections the working historian must then test against archival and other evidence.” (McKay 2009, 375)

This “spatial” approach to explanation, whereby an idea is presented as an explanatory thread which ties together disparate phenomena, which establishes “connections” between them, strikes me as a major step backward in the search for meaning which underlies McKay's mission. It is based on a rejection of the “master narratives,” described as closed chains of causality which pretend to directly explain reality. The preferred method, according to McKay, is that of “reconnaissance,” whereby the historian, like a trailblazer, explores (alone?) a space full of human beings, places, and phenomena, and identifies the few common elements among them in order to lay the foundations for future research.

In this context, the explicative potential of concepts like that of ‘liberalism’ is radically devalued, insofar as this ‘entity’ appears much more like a series of common traits than as an underlying reality, at a higher (or deeper?) level of reality. This is what Durkheim called going “deeper into reality” (“It is necessary to go much deeper into reality in order to be able to understand it.”

(Durkheim [1908] 1975). But for McKay, the “narrowness” of a concept or a notion becomes the condition of its “profitability” or its effectiveness: “The narrowness of the concept of liberal order – in terms of period, spatial impact, and its definitional core- may well be the key to the future breadth of its application across many now-separated fields of historical enquiry and subaltern struggle.” (McKay 2009, 409)

From this perspective, the concept must therefore prove its ability to reflect reality, by putting forward hypotheses which will only be considered if they are “verifiable.” This evokes the aporia of analytical philosophy (notably that of Popper) and of empiricism, which supposes that all concepts much reflect, more or less directly, reality, this link being the condition on which the validity (or lack thereof) of the concept is judged.

This represents a singular abdication and a depressingly defensive withdrawal in the face of a search for deeper meaning which, by assimilating the search for fundamental meaning to the explanatory tyranny of the master narrative, echoes the glory days of postmodernism: “Reconnaissance is not synthesis, a scout is not a guru, and, under conditions of postmodernity, totalizing claims to the completeness and closure associated with “master narratives” ... are not credible.” (McKay 2009, 404)

By making liberalism a (closed and, if possible, narrowly-defined) collection of characteristic traits and values, values which merely have to be identified in different spheres of society, McKay rids this concept of its global explanatory relevance insofar as – and this has been pointed out by some of his critics (McNairn 2009 and Bannister 2009) – it becomes vulnerable to all of the debates on its ‘content’ or its ‘limits’ insofar as the reality of the ‘facts’ is in no way capable of guaranteeing the concept's empirical relevance. A concept which ‘unites’ diverse realities by highlighting their common trait, the more or less invisible thread which ties them together, risks, in

pursuing this spatial metaphor, remaining on the surface of reality, grouping sets of phenomena for the purpose of establishing a category of analysis. This intellectual process lies at the source of the (essential) production of median concepts like 'hegemony,' 'historical bloc,' and 'revolution' (passive or not). These are concepts which are bound to describe a specific relationship, be it ideological, social or political. But reflecting on the liberal 'order' requires, in my opinion, another level of conceptualization which I will call, at the risk of attracting the cynical contempt of 'anti-foundationalists' of all stripes, a higher level. This epistemological choice holds that concepts, such as reality, cannot be confined to the surface of society; that the understanding of reality involves several levels or dimensions of existence; and that notions which try to give them a name are not necessarily – the horror! - capable of being verified empirically, because their form of materialization changes across time and space. This choice implies the existence of profound causal dimensions which cannot be equated with the closed structure of 'grand narratives,' whether these narratives impose a mechanical or teleological causality. It also implies that the validity of, or the historical value added by, a theoretical approach, by a hypothesis, in no way necessarily rests on its empirical verifiability, which is but one form of validating the truth of an assertion (and not necessarily even the most important one). As Reinhart Koselleck has said: "The decision of which factors count and which do not rests primarily at the level of theory, and this establishes the condition of possible history Sources protect us from error, but they never tell us what we should say. That which makes a history into the historical cannot be derived from the sources alone: a theory of possible history is required so that sources might be brought to speak at all." (Koselleck 2004, 151)

McKay himself admits it, as least implicitly, when, drawing inspiration from the work of William Sewell Jr., he approaches liberalism as a *logic*: "A liberal logic can be deciphered in the

activities of the state, the interpretation of the law, the orchestration of popular opinion, and the structures of everyday life.” (McKay 2009, 410). Here, the term ‘logic’ shows that liberalism is more than a “bridging concept.” Here, the wavering between a narrow definition and a broad conception of liberalism in McKay's thought becomes evident. The problem is due (in part) to the already-mentioned conflation of ‘grand narratives,’ which imply a strict causality, with the refinement of broad and comprehensive concepts which allow for the understanding of the logic of a particular era. The theorizing which produces general hypotheses is thus equated with the search for an a-temporal and ‘total’ explanatory framework. This confusion, at the heart of post-modernist excesses, is clear in the following passage: “Rather than attempting to discover and apply ‘general’ causal laws, laws implicitly or explicitly assumed to be independent of time and place” - in this case, the supposedly invariant, universal, and transcendental rules of liberal order – the framework assumes “that the social logics governing past social worlds varied fundamentally, and therefore that their logics must be discovered and puzzled out by the researcher.” (McKay 2009, 352, citing Sewell Jr. 2005, 9-10)

The supposed promoters of these grand ‘all-encompassing’ narratives play the role of straw men, the denunciation of whom justifies the abdication, the refusal to approach reality as a logical whole. Like many others, I dream of the day when scholars in the humanities and social sciences will cease uselessly confessing their guilt, playing the Pontius Pilate of scholarly thought by loudly setting themselves apart, using spectacular rhetorical effects, from those reactionary villains of totalitarian thought who, we are meant to understand, under the pretext of comprehension, commit the sins of essentialism, foundationalism, even abusive reification. This act of self-flagellation is rendered even more pointless by the fact that no one continues to argue that enclosing reality within a universal mechanical causality constitutes a relevant approach, whether in

history or in the social sciences. But it is nevertheless important not to throw out the theoretical baby along with the bathwater of so many dogmatic generalizations! The *general* remains the means by which knowledge generates *meaning*, as McKay stated in 1994. Generalization is not the prison of thought, but rather its primary precondition.

Once again, the major issue behind concepts like capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, class struggle is *not*, and has never been, their empirical validation. They refer to a level of social reality in a given place or at a given time which transcends the multiple forms of their materialization. They do not 'link' disparate realities; rather, they give them a common foundation, which gives them a *new* meaning, which goes beyond the primary evidence of their empirical existence. They are not 'bridging' concepts, but rather hypotheses which illuminate the logic of a particular era. They do not generate their own determinism, they do not hail a closed future, they evoke no mechanical necessity. But they offer, in the absence of anything better, a way of giving meaning not so much to individual phenomena but to an era, perhaps even to the march of women and men through time. They will be denounced as being 'totalitarian,' but to remain silent on the realities which they describe is a renunciation and an abdication which I, and others, refuse to make. It is more a matter of reestablishing history as a field of inquiry which encompasses everything, a whole which is not closed but is meant to be filled with meaning.

III The Political Project

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of McKay's work is the ethico-political tension which he clearly feels in spite of all the ambient cynicism. It attests to the fact that the historian's work is not the cold pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake, that it

ultimately reflects a desire to change the world using what we think we know about the past. I deeply share this ethical choice, even if it appears to me that McKay and I do not agree on the way that the historian's work must be political.

His 2005 study on the history of Canadian radicalism (McKay 2005) puts into perspective the objective, both scholarly and political, which underlies the notion of “liberal order.” This text demonstrates why it is important for McKay to show how the liberal order achieved hegemony yet failed to do away with those “radical” alternative discourses which would challenge both its classical and neo-liberal incarnations. “Rethinking” liberalism thus becomes a prerequisite for rethinking the Left, from whence also comes the necessity of approaching this liberalism not only as an ideology, a relatively coherent conception of the world, but also as a political *project*.

However, for McKay, this hegemonic project seems to have created a contradictory tradition. In fact, this tradition can be found in the conservative discourses and actions of present-day neo-liberals. Liberalism, a project of power and domination, also seems to reveal a hidden beauty, if not a conscientious side, by reconnecting with its radical roots: “Liberated from mystifying their own past in the interests of Canadian nationalism, liberals can re-engage with what is authentically radical in their own tradition.” (McKay 2009, 419)

It is therefore understood that the sought-after political alternative lies not in overthrowing a hegemony, but in the establishment of a “popular front against planetary environmental devastation [where] liberals, Marxists, anarchists, and indigenous activists can draw upon the respective analytical and political strengths of the tradition to create a revolutionary post-capitalist historical bloc, integrating science and social justice in a new transcendence of ‘merely corporative interests.’” (McKay 2009, 419)

These pragmatic tendencies are increasingly present in McKay's writings and, along with appeals to “grounded” theory and calls for expedient alliances among radicals, allow for theory to be put at the service of “real life”: “More of the Marxist framework survives in this way of reasoning than might at first be thought conventional or prudent in a neo-liberal epoch – but it is a Marxism of a specific type, a non-orthodox, non-teleological, problem-centred, and realist Marxism.” (McKay 2009, 375)

Clearly, all of this is relevant and the final objective is commendable. But I also see the relevance of analyzing bourgeois liberalism using categories which transcend it. This involves searching out the constitutive logic which, without any mechanical determination, underlies liberalism, looking beyond the form bourgeois elites have given it, a form which is narrow, incomplete, stitched-through with exploitation, and quite exclusive. It is therefore necessary to take very seriously the term ‘liberty’ and what it means in terms of the past as well as the future. It is also necessary to properly evaluate the dual and contradictory openness it expresses, openness to motivation, to the individual *and* the collective will as a source of life; openness to time, to adventure and the future. This search for foundations, for that which structures and underlies both the liberal bourgeois discourse *and* the alternatives which its contradictions engender, is important from a *heuristic* perspective to understand not only the hegemony of bourgeois liberalism and its neo-liberal avatars, but also the contradictions which are at the source of their degeneration. The analysis of bourgeois liberalism implies not only its deconstruction, but also its *critique*, namely the analysis of its foundations, of the (fragile) base on which it rests.

This work also addresses an *ethical* consideration, because such a critique is always, and perhaps above all, political. Criticism is a source of meaning, and undertaking a historical critique of contemporary liberalism, including its present-day “neo”

incarnation, involves showing how the liberating dimensions on which it was partially constructed are those which dupe it and destroy it from the inside.

In other words, the liberal order which McKay wants to analyze does not, I hope, form part of the historical forces which will change our lives. This need to discover the foundations, to *think* liberalism in the vastness of its control and in all its coherence and logic, points to a target greater than an institution (or an order) to be overthrown, than a process of domination to be undone: it is a matter of recognizing a social logic which has, throughout modernity, allowed the idea of human emancipation to mutate into countless new forms of oppression, in order to break this logic down (while preserving those values and objectives likely to form the building blocks of a new one, corresponding to our objectives as well as the challenges of a planet to be saved through its reinvention). If it remains so difficult to fight against neo-liberalism and conservatism in all of their diverse and colourful forms, it is because, fundamentally, they flow from a relationship with the world (and from institutions) which still form part, to our great misfortune, of our common heritage.

Is liberalism, as just described, not just another name for 'modernity,' that cream pie of a concept with which intellectuals short on ideas plaster their faces? No, not if modernity is understood as a conscious and evolving linear process capable of transforming the world. Yes, if it refers to that which was born at the end of the 18th century, was deployed in the 19th century, underwent profound change in the 20th, and which is still with us today: a social logic which still limits our capacity to rethink the world. We are starting to be able to liberate ourselves from it. But only so long as we do not prematurely declare ourselves 'post-modern,' and we are willing to dedicate ourselves to a theoretical labour which does not need to be ashamed of itself.

NOTE:

This article is an expanded and modified version of a paper presented during a round table organized to mark the publication of a collection of texts written by Ian McKay on the subject of the liberal order (Ducharme, Michel and Jean-François Constant (eds.), *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2009). The round table was entitled *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian- Liberal Revolution* and took place during the 88th Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, held at Carleton University on 25 May 2009. I would like to thank my colleague Brian McKillop, the Carleton University Department of History, and the Centre de recherche sur les Innovations sociales (CRISES) for making this translation possible. I would also like to thank Steven Watt, the translator whom I enjoy tormenting with my sometimes murky prose, for his work.

TRANSLATION BY STEVEN WATT

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