

A Seductive Interpretation: Probing Ian McKay's Prospectus

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“But one must not think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow.” – Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (1985), 37

1. FROM THE OUTSET, the interpretation advanced in the prospectus of Ian McKay proves very attractive to me as a historian of political culture. Like other ideas which, when exposed to the light of both argumentative rigour and empirical reality, maintain a strong heuristic potential, this interpretation is highly seductive. Below, without going into any great detail, I highlight the key ideas that are at the source of this seductive power. These ideas are developed in “The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History,” which was first published in 2000 in *The Canadian Historical Review*, as well as in *Rebels, Reds, Radicals*, published in 2005. They are also taken up and discussed in several of the chapters in the collection edited by Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme, titled *Liberalism and Hegemony*.

2. First of all, there is an intellectual ambition which I find pleasing. In a field where narrow case studies are legion, where the spirit of discovery atrophies in the face of the industrial rhythm of publication, and where many find a comfortable and strategic refuge in hyper-specialization, McKay's prospectus is a breath of fresh air. Indeed, his thesis proves ambitious from the

outset, mobilizing a vast conceptual arsenal and significant empirical resources. What is more, it reflects an innovative desire to synthesize historiography, by proposing an interpretative framework – that of the liberal order – whose spatial and temporal scope covers multiple centuries. Whether represented by major studies in “total history” influenced by the Annales approach – such as the synthetic study by Jean Hamelin and Yves Roby, those of Fernand Ouellet, or Gérard Bouchard's *Quelques arpents d'Amérique* – or by other holistic approaches – such as the case studies of Joy Parr or Jean-Marie Fecteau – Canadian historiography, with the exception of noteworthy syntheses of national history, tends to encourage sectorial interpretations, dealing with relatively small fields of enquiry where all of the variables can be controlled, as opposed to all-embracing frameworks covering the long term. All seductions are initiated with a lure of some sort; an intellectually ambitious perspective is particularly effective at drawing me in.

3. The next elements of the seduction are those influences which contribute to the prospectus. Some time ago, Michel de Certeau underscored how the work of appropriation is always a patchwork: an innovation is not an *ex nihilo* revelation which springs forth from the brow of a demigod. Rather, it results from putting together scattered elements which, assembled and arranged in a certain way, give birth to an intelligible framework with heuristic potential. Thus, Ian McKay's prospectus reflects the joining of two explicit influences. First, there is the well-known influence of Antonio Gramsci, whose conceptual tools are productively used to better understand the dynamic of conflict between the elites who seek to establish hegemony and the masses who resist them. Second, Ian McKay builds on ideas developed closer to home, specifically by referring to Fernande Roy's *Progrès, harmonie, liberté* [Montreal, Boréal, 1988]. In her study of Montreal's francophone business community at the turn

of the 20th century, the historian presents liberalism as an all-encompassing philosophy founded on the principles of the supremacy of the individual and the inviolability of certain individual rights, including that of private property. Beyond national and linguistic divisions, this philosophy was shared by a social class, the bourgeoisie, which was triumphant during the Age of Revolution described by Eric Hobsbawm. From the 1840s, the Canadian elites adhered to liberal economic principles as shown by numerous studies on state formation and on liberal social regulation. Furthermore, from within a Canadian historiography fractured along the lines established by the vast paradigm of limited identities, Ian McKay insists on *reconnaissance* – it is one of the key concepts of his thesis – of the contributions of social and cultural history to better understand the Canadian liberal revolution, which is no longer restricted to the world of political or economic ideas. By offering a successful synthesis of works in intellectual history and the history of ideas, as well as in social and cultural history, the patchwork constructed by Ian McKay achieves remarkable results in terms of historical interpretation, all the more remarkable because the resulting patchwork assimilates several tendencies present in Canadian history over the last two centuries.

4. Another appeal of Ian McKay's prospectus rests on his judicious use of conceptualization. Naturally, there is that of the individual, which is inherent to liberalism. According to McKay, by placing that concept at the centre of its ideological system, liberalism reifies the individual. This conceptual reification resembles that of the nation for nationalism, of the social order for conservatism, of the sovereign people for republicanism, of society for socialism, and of abstract forms of the state for certain varieties of fascism. Thus, beginning with this liberal individual conceived of as an abstraction, the liberal order is able to establish distinctions between those who are considered

individuals and those who are not, between those who enjoy rights and those who do not. According to the classic definition of Michael Walzer, liberalism is an art of separation, and the liberal order thus ensures a division of Canadian society into social classes, races and genders. In this way, Ian McKay's thesis provides a global intelligibility and coherence to a collection of socioeconomic phenomena related to politics, an accomplishment which is always pleasing to the historian of political culture. Also, alongside other usages of conceptualization, there is that made of *reconnaissance*, a reconnaissance which infiltrates a whole series of strategies adopted by sociohistorical actors, and one which can also be associated with politics, as presented in the works of scholars like Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka.

5. Above all, there is a refusal of an essentialism of the type notably cherished by Hegelian philosophers and certain historians of ideas, but deemed ineffective by other practitioners of history. An understanding of history, as the anti-Hegelian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard insists, cannot be reduced to a knowledge of dates, facts, and events. Rather, an understanding of history, that *potential* in the past on which the *future* rests, refers more to the *dynamics* which criss-cross it. Conceived in this way, the Canadian liberal revolution appears more clearly in its completeness, not as an essence or a homogeneous whole but as a *project*. At the heart of Ian McKay's thesis is the processual dimension of the Canadian liberal revolution and the dialectical study of it, allowing him to avoid many conceptual and analytical obstacles. Indeed, when grappling with the essence of the system, historians of ideas and philosophers too often treat the emergence, circulation, and decline of ideas as if they were a set of building blocks, where one piece after another is harmoniously attached to form a structure of ideas across time. The result is a parade of historical concepts, which come into

view like a series of billboards where it is possible to watch the society of the *ancien régime* be replaced by the liberal state, which eventually cedes its place to the welfare state; or watch the colony give way to the nation; or even watch Tory conservatism, liberalism and republicanism fight for historical legitimacy. Faced with these mechanical and systematic approaches, such as the Whig interpretation of Canadian nationalism or the diverse variants on the fragment thesis of Louis Hartz, the historian of political culture regularly expresses his or her dissatisfaction: there is always a pesky little fact which demolishes the grand theory. However, by describing a hegemony which encounters multiple points of resistance, Ian McKay's thesis of the liberal order provides a better description of the variable rhythm of historical battles, of the competing dialogues and alliances, of those rivalries and neutralities and, finally, of the hidden variables which ultimately affect results which are sometimes clearcut, sometimes less so. It goes without saying that this makes the interpretation all the more beguiling.

6. However, in their deliberations, historians are often strong believers in ambiguity and, when faced with attempts at seduction, their hearts are sometimes difficult to conquer. Also, faced with the multiple charms of the interpretation, three points for reflection – each of which engenders its own paradox – come to mind: namely, the conceptual category of the individual, the dialectical tension between the disciplinary society and the subject to be disciplined, and the problem of liberalism as an expression of politics.

7. A first point for reflection: *which abstract individual* does the Canadian liberal order promote? Here, I understand the concept of the *individual* severally as a category which emerges from the

liberal universe, as a performative category in the political sphere, and as a historically situated category.

These three dimensions of categorization are significant. They allow for an understanding of the historical concept of the individual in its full operative range. First of all, it is important to trace the concept's genealogy. Placing itself within a divine economy, in community-based familial networks and in an ordered society, the individual in the Western Middle Ages was a Christian whose individuality was recognized through his or her dual relationship with heaven (the divine), on the one hand, and the community of believers, on the other. This *medieval* category of the individual differs from that of the Age of Revolution, namely that of an individual with individual rights, obligations and responsibilities – although the earlier incarnation exercises a clear influence on the later one. Furthermore, depending on whether the context is the padded comfort of parliamentary benches and boardroom armchairs or the harsh relationships of socioeconomic domination, the category of the individual does not evoke the same sociopolitical dynamics, power relationships, or conceptual reality. Because it is *situated*, the category of the individual varies according to a given actor's position within the social field.

Given these three dimensions, the *modern* category of the individual, which developed in a hegemonic manner beginning in the 1840s, poses two relevant problems: first, with regard to its conceptual content – that is to say, the attributes belonging to this category – and second, with regard to its dissemination – that is to say, the consensus surrounding the definitional norm.

To begin with, does the category of the individual not limit itself only to those attributes derived from the liberal order? By this, I mean rights and liberties which allow that individual to reach his or her potential within this liberal order, rights and liberties which are guaranteed by the justice system established at the

same time, rights and liberties which dovetail with historical conceptions of civic belonging and political participation.

Here, I can add a little detail by drawing on my own research relating to the categories of the foreigner and the immigrant, whose mysteries I explore in *Tracer les marges de la Cité. Étranger, immigrant et État au Québec, 1627-1981* (2005).

Between 1817 and 1851, the category of the foreigner – a category whose origins lie in the medieval notion of allegiance and which describes a person who is deprived of this link with the sovereign – disappeared with the establishment of a new system of justice. Thereafter, the category gave way to that of the immigrant, a category which describes an individual who is in transition toward the full enjoyment of the rights and liberties of the subject. In the process, the immigrant's investment capital and his or her ability to work allow him or her to integrate more or less harmoniously into the capitalist system of the host society. *Stricto sensu*, the category of the immigrant therefore forms part of the liberal order.

Yet this category is not limited to only those liberal attributes ascribed to it by the justice system. It is also characterized by a web of different logics which help ensure that it corresponds to the present time and realizes its hegemonic potential. For example, the category of the immigrant corresponds to a population policy in a Foucauldian sense. Indeed, the Age of Revolution was also the age of managing the masses: immigrants, in their multitude, were thus submitted to a system of social regulation. This system was based on the attribution of anthropometric and cultural characteristics to migrating individuals. The latter were classified and inventoried according to attributes which were deemed relevant: origin and ethnicity, language and other cultural characteristics, etc. Furthermore, immigrants could also bring disorder, of both ideological and biological varieties.

Thus, the 19th century also saw the worldwide propagation of epidemics and the establishment of measures against the spread of disease, building on quarantine and other public health practises. Even if the establishment of such measures was the subject of numerous debates regarding freedom of movement and of commerce, the principle of medical protection generally won out over the recognition of civil and political rights, all the more so because it drew its legitimacy from the rise of scientific thought. All of these attributes of the category of the immigrant take their meaning through their relationship with the notion of the *common good*, a common good which is presented not in terms of an agglomeration of autonomous atoms, but rather in the form of a *collective body*. Also, beyond the simple description of ontological attributes, understanding the concept of the individual within the liberal order also implies an understanding of its relationship with the collective reference, namely the common good.

Secondly, was there a consensus surrounding the attributes assigned to the category of the individual among those contemporaries who evoked the ideal of liberty? This is far from certain, as evidenced, for example, by the European experience during the Age of Revolution. Thus, in his *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, published in 1932 (in English: *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century* (Allen & Unwin, 1934), Italian historian and philosopher Benedetto Croce underscores an important variation in the concept of the individual, depending on whether it is viewed from the perspective of the liberal or the democrat. For the 19th-century liberal, an individual was a person whose equality was purely a function of his or her humanity, alongside an ideal or rights-based equality and the freedoms of movement and competition. For a democrat living in the same era, “individuals were centres of equal forces to which it was necessary to attribute an equal field or an equality ... in fact.” (p. 31 of the English translation) Thus, democrats understood the individual in terms of his or her *sociality*. Whence the power of

organicist metaphors, which were abundantly used in the 19th century for describing and imagining the political community: take, for example, the various nationalisms of the period.

To better evaluate the hegemonic consensus surrounding the liberal concept of the individual, the study of the liberal order according to Ian McKay's prospectus must move beyond the trionym of social class, race, and gender. It must not dispense with the national dimension of the Canadian context. The development of nations during the Age of Revolution was not a discursive illusion, a reflection of false consciousness, or a vestige of the *Ancien Regime*. Nor can it be explained as a by-product of the modern state. The case of French Canada provides a good example, since after the Union of 1840 it developed in relative opposition to the colonial state. I wish to strongly underscore that the development of nations reflected the rearticulation of the social link around *modern* values and norms. Indeed, as political scientist Karl Deutsch has noted, nations constitute *communities of communication*. They are criss-crossed by networks which promote identitary and cultural reference points which, in turn, cement the feeling of collective belonging. The concept of the individual emerges from these references as they are broadcast within these communities. Of course, the individual as understood within the multiple manifestations of the nation – whether the pre-Revolution French-Canadian nation, British imperialism, or early-20th-century Canadian nationalism – is not necessarily the same as the individual as understood within the liberal order. Nevertheless, the two share numerous attributes, including those of rights and liberties.

None of this should be surprising. To return once again to the analysis of Benedetto Croce, the liberal order imposes “the rule of its game,” that of “this very liberty.” “Thus with the establishment of the liberal order all ideals,” including those of the nation, “would have freedom of speech and propaganda,

with the sole limitation of not upsetting the liberal order.” (*op. cit.*, p. 83) Thanks to its ideological porousness, by establishing in the public sphere the legitimacy of its categories relating to rights and liberties, liberalism readily absorbed several competing ideologies, and nationalism in particular. From whence the importance of understanding, within the Canadian political context, the specific modalities of spreading concepts such as that of the individual within national communities of communication. The proposition may seem somewhat paradoxical, but it allows for a better understanding of the variable rhythms and especially the potential of the liberal order.

8. The second point for reflection relates to that remarkable conceptual oxymoron, the *liberal order*, which joins two poles which are antinomic to say the least. This oxymoron notably evokes that expressed by Auguste Comte – order and progress, *Ordem e Progresso*, which became the motto of Brasil. How can an *order* be *liberal*? Here, recourse to the dialectic can be of great help. Between the thesis of order and the antithesis of liberty, a synthesis can be achieved: that of modernity. In this context, Ian McKay's interpretation can be seen as being similar to the definition of Western modernity offered by German sociologist Peter Wagner (in *A Sociology of Modernity* (London, Routledge, 1994), that is to say a tension between *liberty* and *discipline*. Thus, it becomes possible to understand the framework of the liberal order from the perspective of modernity or, more precisely, from that of the the dialectic between liberty and discipline in Canada from the 1840s to the 1940s.

By setting aside the transcendence of a divine order which shapes the social order, modernity poses the question of the immanence of the subject or, more precisely, of the subject as self-referential. From the perspective of modernity, the dialectic between liberty and discipline is relevant not only at a *macroscopic*

level of observation and *vertical* movement – that of power exercised from a centre of domination out toward the subaltern levels of the social field – but also at a *microscopic and lateral* level – that of the multiple power relations emanating from individual subjects who, in the process of normative self-constraint, adopt technologies of *discipline* in developing their social relationships. Thus, modernity implies the constitution of a disciplinary society, in the sense given by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. Many of those who have commented on the thesis of Ian McKay – specifically, I refer here to the remarks made in *Liberalism and Hegemony* by Bruce Curtis on the biopolitical, as well as those of Stéphane Castonguay and Darin Kinsey – also establish a link between McKay's liberal order and Foucault's disciplinary society. Thus, the hegemony of the liberal project put in place by Canada's conquering bourgeoisie from the 1840s to the 1940s established a dialectical tension between a disciplinary society and the subject to be disciplined, at both the macro and microscopic levels, developing on both vertical and horizontal planes.

This dialectical tension is evident in the turning points of Canadian history. As understood within Ian McKay's prospectus, these turning points remodelled the hegemony both in the depths of its structures and on the surface of consciousness (*Rebels, Reds, Radicals*, p. 95). From whence the importance for historians to recognize them – be it the Winnipeg General Strike, labour conflict in Cape Breton's coal industry, or the 1934 “Fros” strike in Abitibi – for they modify the order of things and embed themselves in the memory of the resistance. Meanwhile, when seeking to show the deterministic and systematic character of these turning points, is there not a risk of partially underestimating the dialectical tension between the disciplinary society and the subject to be disciplined? Does it not favour the macroscopic level and vertical plane in the exercise of power, at the expense of micro-political observation, within the individual processes of both self-control and

resistance? Is it possible to properly identify the routine processes of capitalism and the liberal order, processes which inspire numerous opponents? In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau effectively shows the importance of everyday microstrategies of resistance to discipline. These individual microstrategies, developed by cobbling together and sometimes poaching ideas, furtively erode the hegemony of different forms of domination, which lose their power of oppression. When the dissolution of these forms corresponds to moments of citizen expression – including turning points which involve mobilization for the purpose of protest and resistance – the everyday work of gradual erosion is already complete. Thus, in order to understand the dialectical tension between the disciplinary society and the subject to be disciplined, the historian cannot focus solely on the study of the overall system at the expense of the micro-political. Between methodological holism and atomism, there should therefore be a constant play between different levels of observation, in an attempt to recognize the multiple battles at the heart of social and individual life.

9. The final point for reflection is a bit more polemical since it refers to an apparent contradiction in McKay's prospectus. Specifically, does the framework of the liberal order allow for the study of politics from a historical perspective? I understand *politics* as having four dimensions, beginning with the intention of building a common life – from whence the capital importance of representations of the common good when thinking about politics. This intention is all-encompassing and, as with the concept of the individual, it is historically situated. It possesses, for its part, two constitutive elements. The first relates to *polemicos*, to the polemical or, more precisely, of the management of difference, that of the self and of the other – which implies a prior and mutual recognition. The second relates to *utopos*, to the

utopia or, more precisely, to the conception of a conceivable future. Finally, the desire for a common life must constantly take into account its fundamental negation: that of violence, be it intra or intercommunity. As the French philosopher Alain (Émile Chartier) reminds us, the *cité* is military first, and economic second: the need to sleep and, in doing so, to defend against possible aggression trumps the need to eat. Whence the central importance of politics for understanding the social link.

Here, a specific aspect of McKay's prospectus grabs my attention. The point in question quite rightly contests the liberal pretensions regarding the nature of the construction of Canada. From the outset, he calls on historians to study the violence used in the promotion of the liberal project. Moving forward, while still studying the liberal order, his prospectus promotes a greater understanding of politics, in the sense given to the term above.

However, the very notion of liberalism implies the establishment of political exclusion, since it takes refuge within ideology. In my opinion, there is a contradiction in Ian McKay's prospectus: a complete liberal order cannot be political since it aims for the complete eradication of violence.

To help get around this contradiction, I will use the smokescreen of Carl Schmitt – the Carl Schmitt of before the Nazi atrocity and Nuremberg. The C. Schmitt I refer to is that of the Weimar Republic, that is to say, of those Germans who lost the First World War and who strongly criticized the triumphant liberalism of the Roaring Twenties. In his *Der Begriff des Politischen*, published in 1927 (in English: *The Concept of the Political*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007), the German philosopher and legal scholar defines politics as being the place where friends are distinguished from enemies. For him, the management of otherness is profoundly agonistic: in order to ensure its collective unity and its existence, the world of politics carries on an incessant battle against the enemy. Here, C.

Schmitt evokes the old axiom of Carl von Clausewitz, for whom war was the continuation of politics by other means. In this way, politics is not to be confused with the state, which constitutes a transitional historical form. When it is conceived of as a political entity, the state must essentially take care of existential questions dealing with the political community: defence against external enemies, policing against threats to internal order.

Thus, Carl Schmitt distinguishes the world of politics from that of liberalism. Founded on individualism, liberalism according to C. Schmitt rests on a nodal point drawn from John Locke and his theory of individual rights: private property. The primacy of private property modifies the perspective, by placing the economy, rather than the friend/enemy distinction, at the centre of the public sphere. Henceforth, liberalism according to C. Schmitt thereby discredits politics by understanding it as nothing more than a sphere of violence, a violence to be eradicated thanks to various processes initiated by liberal organizations and by promoting of the concept of humanity. Thereafter dedicated to shouldering the great responsibility of securing private property, the liberal state submits itself to the dictate of the individual in two different ways. First, there is the ideology of rights – including human rights – which neutralize social tensions. Next, by encouraging a public life at the service of the values of private morality and the economy, the liberal state, under the yoke of the rule of law, dissolves politics within ethics and economics. Ultimately, according to Carl Schmitt, globalization would ultimately be an evolution toward the de-politicization of the world.

Here, the philosophical contradiction becomes evident. If Schmidt's definition of politics as the exercise of violence is adopted, as well as that of liberalism as the promotion of private property, how can a liberal order be *political* since its primary goal *seeks to evacuate politics itself*? How can the promoters of liberalism partake of violence – and violence is *effectively* present in its

history – without betraying their own ideals whose hegemony they seek to establish? The answer must therefore come from the historian, more sensitive than philosophy to the incompleteness and bastardizations of life: this liberal order is not “pure,” and its lack of purity notably relates to pre-existing relationships of domination within the public sphere. Paradoxically, studying the violence employed in the promotion of the liberal project from a historical perspective might require leaving the framework of the liberal order, to better *recognize* the power relations and socio-historic relationships of power which transcend it. From all indications, Ian McKay appears to be conscious of this paradox, notably in the pages of *Rebels, Reds, Radicals*, where he recommends that historians employ epistemological and ethical strategies founded on reconnaissance (p. 94-95 and *passim*).

10. In countless ways, the interpretation of the Canadian liberal order proposed by Ian McKay's prospectus is paradoxical. Nevertheless, it is exciting because it inspires numerous reflections. But is this not the very nature of a paradox, the passion of thought, as another seducer once suggested?

TRANSLATION BY STEVEN WATT