

Visioning a World Without Capitalism

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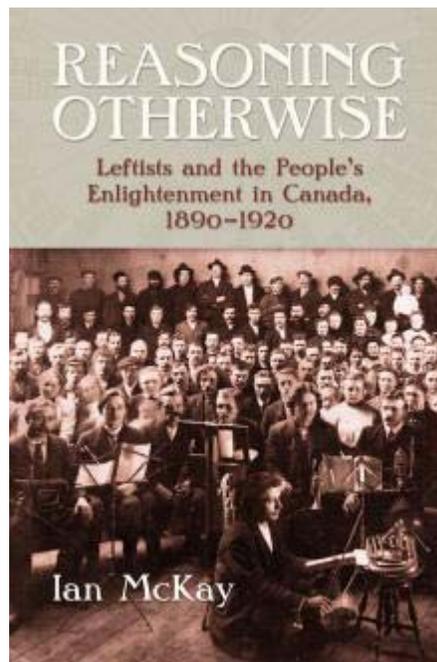
Thanks for the chance to talk to you today in the Workers' Assembly on "Visioning Otherwise: Imagining a World Without Capitalism." As an historian, I've been working for the past ten years on trying to put together a multi-volume history of the Canadian left. The next volume, which will take the story from 1921 to 1956, tentatively titled *Revolution's Iron Gates*, should be making its appearance sometime in 2013). I want to make Canada's left history come alive for new generations of activists hoping to 'vision' an egalitarian world without capitalism. Basically, today, I want to say just three things about this project – telegraphing some of its core ideas rather than going into any one of them exhaustively. First, and most basically, this country has an extraordinarily rich left history. Many people in Canada have been imagining – and working for – a world without capitalism since the 1890s. Second, a lot of their legacy has been forgotten, misrepresented and oversimplified – even by leftists themselves. And third, a new strategy for thinking and writing left history has emerged, drawn from the *Prison Notebooks* of Antonio Gramsci, one that can help us *think ourselves politically* in new and more effective ways. We can "Vision Otherwise," and "Imagine a World Without Capitalism" more realistically, effectively and permanently by learning from the past generations, cohorts, schools, movements and parties that have tried to make left history before us.

So, first and most basically, this country has an extraordinarily rich left history. Of course, the "left" – a term that descends to us from the French Revolution – is not a self-evident category. From its eighteenth-century beginnings, "the left" has been a *relational* and *contextual* term to denote those pushing for a more egalitarian society. And for more than a century leftists in Canada have also called themselves "socialists." What I find fascinating is that over time, what has counted as "socialism" – that is, the ideas and practices thought to be at its very core – have changed. Sure, most of us can probably agree

on a "ball-park definition." We might say "socialism" entails agreement with four propositions: the belief that any society founded on large-scale private ownership of the means of production is unjust; that a more equitable form of society can be established; to achieve that, some form of social revolution is required; and that the preconditions for such a revolution can be found in a set of "objective possibilities" in the world around us. Yet within this general framework, one can discern over times radical shifts in what "socialism" means more specifically.

CANADIAN SOCIALISM

In Canada we have had five major schools of socialism, each brought into being by transformative moments – "matrix-events" – that called the everyday world into question and inspired thousands of people to take up permanent positions critical of capitalism. From the 1890s to 1914, Canada broke world records for economic growth, achieved at the cost of dire suffering on the part of the working people who made it possible: they launched revolt after revolt. In the 1920s and 1930s, many radicals aspired to create a Canadian equivalent of the Russian Revolution of 1917. From the late 1930s to the late 1940s, inspired by Depression and then by War, many also took up the distinct goal of the radical reform of the Canadian state itself. In the 1960 and 1970s, a new generation, inspired by decolonization struggles from Vietnam to Algeria to Latin America, mounted a series of struggles against "Empire" in its many guises. And finally, beginning roughly at the same time, but extending well into the 1990s, many socialist feminists began to rethink the left in the light of their resistance to sexism and patriarchy. In our own time, we are entering, I believe, a sixth transformative period – one in which evidence of capitalism's global dynamism, intrinsic irrationality, and planet-destroying capacities are posed with unmistakable sharpness.



A socialist, then, is a person who struggles to achieve an “otherwise,” a new “kind of reality,” wherein growing numbers of people can know and use *objective possibilities* for *living otherwise* – *otherwise* than in the often cruel confines of capitalism and liberal order. And in this country, we have before us the extraordinarily rich and intricate history of five major cohorts of rebels, reds and radicals who have gone before us. Today’s left in Canada inherits a vast, complicated history, one that can serve as a source of guidance, of warning, of inspiration.

I might just expand on just two moments of particular interest to an audience in Toronto – one that might imagine itself to be a small group indeed in a city of millions. Yet both examples show, I think, how small groups can ultimately help move mountains. The first comes from Toronto, November 1901 – a small, inconspicuous gathering of the Canadian Socialist League, uniting the quite moderate Toronto socialists with their more radical comrades in Montreal. A tiny spark – but this first interprovincial gathering of Canadian socialists intent on founding a Canada-wide movement ultimately worked to ignite a fair-sized socialist conflagration, stretching from British Columbia to Nova Scotia.

Here in Toronto, an alliance of radical Finns, Jews, trade unionists, socialist feminists *and* Marxists started to throw its weight around – struggling at considerable risk to critique the South African War and then the First World War, forming reading circles, winning school board elections, even representation on the city council. And in the west, this cohort gave us the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919 – still one of the most extraordinary moments in left and working class history in the entire world, during which Canada’s third-largest city was transformed for six weeks into a liberated zone, a permanent teach-in, a vast experiment in living and thinking otherwise.

Fast-forward to a second moment, to interwar Canada of the 1920s and 1930s. These were years in which the left of the entire world was transfixed by the Bolshevik Revolution. Here I think of an even smaller meeting, not in Toronto but in nearby Guelph, but drawing upon a good number of Toronto activists. Only 22 people showed up on 23 May 1920: “They had considerable trouble getting there, as the roads were in bad condition,” writes the RCMP spy. As the presence of the spy suggests, this was a harsh time to be a leftist – a time in which the government deported radicals back to regimes known to torture and execute political dissidents, when labour camps here in Canada used torture and shootings against working class prisoners, when the use of entire languages was outlawed in the public sphere.

Small wonder that the spy’s report mentions that, at this founding meeting of the Communist Party, two of the activists came with automatic pistols, and served as armed guards while the assembly took place in the loft of a barn. And it was a heavy, heavy meeting – taken up with what stance communists should take up with respect to the some of the radical labour institutions founded by the first cohort, how they should understand and respond to the Russian situation, how they could survive in this profoundly hostile political climate.

REMEMBERING LEFT HISTORY

Why revisit moments like these? Partly, as I’ve suggested, for inspiration – from small groups, such as your assembly today, mighty movements can emerge. And it’s fascinating to engage with the ideals of these first two versions of socialism in Canada – with their distinctive cultural politics (extending from theatre to child-care), their summer camps, their struggles to understand Canadian history. Yet, with these two moments in mind, let’s also engage with my second major point: a lot of our left history has been forgotten, misrepresented, and oversimplified, often by leftists themselves. When it comes to engaging with their own history, many leftists engage in a kind of ahistorical thinking – it’s as if we imagine ourselves as judges in an timeless court-room, with the hapless activists of the past before us, to be weighed on our timeless scales of revolutionary justice.

Take the two generations of socialists I’ve just described. We have vast vocabularies of dismissal to apply to them. The first group was often described, not least by their left-wing successors, as bourgeois dreamers, abstract ‘impossibilists,’ undisciplined syndicalists – so many people chasing utopian bubbles when they should have been building vanguard parties. The revolution cohort of the 1920s and 1930s has come in for even rougher treatment. For most liberal historians, they are simply “totalitarians”; for New Leftists of the 1960s, this was the “Old Left,” Soviet-dominated, obtuse, authoritarian; socialist feminists of the 1970s and 1980s tended to see in these people the ancestors of the sexists they were battling in everyday life and activism. And today, in the long long reign of neoliberalism, this whole cohort is often denounced as promulgators of an illusory and now completely dated politics. Whereas I think that, from both groups, we have invaluable things to learn. We can pick up interesting specific methods and tips. And we can learn a vast amount, in a more general sense, about what it means to try to transform a country like Canada.

POLITICAL RECONNAISSANCE

It will not be easy to think beyond these polemical patterns and stock responses. It has to be done because they are hubristic, ahistorical and ultimately – and here is my third and final point – politically disabling. Reconnaissance – Gramsci’s term from the *Prison Notebooks* – implies that leftists over the generations, engaged in counter-capitalist struggles similar to ours, have important things to say to each other. Our ancestors have models – of determined activism, personal politics, intellectual research, popular education, and party-building – that call out, not for sentimental celebration nor sectarian denunciation, but for sober reconstruction and evaluation. Each of the past formations of the Canadian left was trying to interpret and to change the dynamics of a capitalist system that endures into our own time. In other words, they are not *objects* awaiting our dissection, or miscreants awaiting our judicial findings, but our fellow socialist explorers, our co-investigators, our comrades, engaged as we are in a generations-long mission to create out of the capitalism realm of necessary a world of socialist freedom. Instead of summoning them to our ahistorical court-room, we could invite them into our

historical imaginations – as people who might teach us some important lessons about how to do socialism in northern North America. Of course, we have to argue with them to – we should put aside reverence for the ‘Great Men’ and ‘Great Women’ of socialist history, which does the dead no honour and us no good, and really *talk back* – whether this means talking back to Jimmie Simpson and Alice Chown of the first formation, Tim Buck and Beckie Buhay of the Communists, to J.S. Woodsworth and Agnes Macphail of the CCFers – and those who followed them. But we should also remember that, years from now, if we are lucky, leftists will in turn be *talking back* to us.

This strategy of reconnaissance also means arguing with the seemingly self-evident terms we inherit from our socialist past, and which we often tend to eternalize. On closer inspection, we note that each socialist cohort, defined by its context in time and space, uses important terms in its own way. Many of the labels and assumptions that are brought to the writing of our history – even such hallowed ones as “revolutionary,” “social-democratic,” “communist,” and “anarchist” – have to be rigorously scrutinized and put in their context. While useful in some ways, their unexamined, often highly polemical deployment has become a fetter on the further development of left history – and left activism. Perhaps the most basic of all the categories we must interrogate are “revolution” and “socialism” – not to demolish them, but to put them, like leftists did before us, to active and creative work in our own time.

One of the greatest reasons to know your left history is to begin to work out how to transform it by incorporating a deep sense of ourselves as historical beings into the conflicts and developments of our own day – to become active terms in the historical contradictions of our time. Coming out of the near-death experience of the effective left in the 1980s and 1990s, at the hands of the neoliberal order ascendant almost everywhere we look, we have to learn some hard lessons about how we talk about both ourselves and about those who came before us. We need to approach our present as we should approach our past – with com-

passionate understanding and critical empathy for all who challenge and who have challenged capitalism and the liberal order.

“Socialism,” Antonio Gramsci wrote so wisely, “is not established on a particular day – it is a continuous process, a never-ending development toward a realm of freedom that is organized and controlled by the majority of the citizens.” If we truly learn that lesson, if we approach our ancestors as well as our contemporary comrades as those engaged in a generations-long process, we may well find that as leftists we have something infinitely more precious to win from our rich history than sentimentality and sectarianism, as we struggle to renovate the revolutionary tradition in the twenty-first century. **R**

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