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The Land of Cain: Class and Nationalism in English Canada, 1945-1975

Philip Resnick

Vancouver: New Star Books, 1977, pp. viii, 297

There is a good deal that is worthwhile in Resnick's study of class and nationalism in English Canada. To start with, the analytical approach is refreshingly different. After struggling through the endless pontifications concerning the nature of Canadianism which have flooded bookshelves in recent years, it is reassuring to find our feet on the solid ground of an analysis which focusses on the class structure of Canadian society as the basis for understanding Canadian nationalism. Resnick's work is situated in the emergent school of a Canadian political economy which is based on the Marxian model. His objective is to carry this approach into the murky waters of nationalism.

Nationalism has been a tricky and complex problem for social scientists. The difficulty arises because nationalist sentiments are generally couched in the lofty phrases of patriotic idealism. Actually, though, nationalism has very little concrete content. This is why nationalism can be and is appended to ideologies of the left, right, and centre with equal facility. Resnick has obviously understood this and his definition of nationalism recognizes that the only common feature of the various expressions of nationalism is "the concern that the political, economic, and cultural affairs of a territorially-defined polity can be controlled by individuals and/or corporations that are members of that polity, rather than by forces outside it" (18). Seen in this light, nationalism is merely instrumental, a means to an end. It will be adopted by those classes dissatisfied with the power they hold, particularly when they compare it with the power of outsiders.

Resnick's book looks at recent changes in the Canadian class structure and the effects that these changes have had on the support for nationalism. The most important of these changes, according to this analysis, is the rapid growth of the state sector and the consequent expansion of the "new petty bourgeoisie" in that sector. After twenty years of relatively little reaction to the post-war growth of foreign investment and domination, Resnick argues that the new petty bourgeoisie arose to play "the decisive role in the eruption of English Canadian nationalism after 1965" (167). The "eruption" was precipitated by the key

exogenous variable in Resnick's study: the decline of American imperialism in the late 1960's and early 1970's. This is the central thesis of the book and some questions and difficulties are to be found here.

It is one thing to show that the rise of nationalism in English Canada was coincident with the difficulties of the United States in its international economic relations. It is quite another to show that the two are causally related. Resnick does not clearly demonstrate the link between the two. In fact, recent events seem to challenge this hypothesis. As the Canadian economy tilted into the perils of stagflation, and as it continues to fail to regain an even keel, the nationalism of the early 1970's has receded. Concern about generating increased inflows of capital to offset balance of payments difficulties and slow growth has dulled the senses of all classes to the long-term consequences of increased foreign control. If the decline of American hegemony in the global economy were to lead to a substantial and on-going nationalism among certain classes in Canada, as Resnick appears to believe, this could only be based upon a fundamental change in the matrix of class interests. This in turn would require a modification of Canada's position as a dependent economy vis-à-vis the US. The American decline has not reduced Canadian dependency, it has likely increased it! Contrary to Resnick's claim that a weakening American empire unleashes the potential of a stronger Canada, the decline illustrates the weakness and vulnerability of the Canadian economy. If strong nationalism is to develop in Canada, it will not come from a Canadian sense of superiority, but from the realization of domination.

This does not rule out a resurgent nationalist movement. Another scenario is possible. The general western recession, with the particularly devastating effects which are coming to be felt in Canada could depress the living standards of the working class in Canada to the point that its political consciousness would increase to a high level. As a part of the strengthened socialist sentiment which would result, with its inevitable attack on the multinational giants of capitalism, nationalism could find its root. At the moment, however, this remains somewhat idle speculation.

We should never judge an analysis on its predictions alone. As a survey of the contemporary history of nationalism in Canada, *The Land of Cain* is an important source. The procedure used by Resnick involves tracing the nature and level of nationalist sentiment which characterizes the various components of the class structure. This takes nationalism out of the fuzzy world of symbols and generalities, and identifies it directly with the economic interests of the various elements of Canadian society. There is no single "Canadian identity." Indeed there is no single Canadian nationalism. There are *many*: each appended to the economic objectives of this or that class, or of this or that group within a class.

What about the future? Is there any hope for a viable Canadian nationalism? Resnick believes so. He argues that hope rests on three grounds: First, a claim that "there may now be a greater potential for socialist consciousness in English Canada than has been true at any time since the end of the second world war" (213). Second, he imagines a process where the growing state intervention in the economy, which he has documented, shifts from a quantitative change to a qualitative transformation—a basis for a "leap into socialism." And finally, Resnick sees a growing demand for democratization of society, a demand which he says is common to the working class and the new petty bourgeoisie. Democratization could become, he argues, the basis for a class alliance on which a new conception of a nation could be based. All of these arguments are controversial and, in my view, questionable. And the author, unfortunately,

unveils them only briefly in the last pages of the book. They remain, nonetheless, crucial matters for our critical consideration.

On balance, this study has made a stimulating contribution to our understanding of our many nationalisms. In so doing it has, perhaps unintentionally, shown that there is some considerable distance between present circumstances and a future independent, socialist Canada.

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