

Development, Deconstruction and Region: A Personal Memoir

Colin D. Howell

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WHEN BROOK TAYLOR ASKED ME to participate in this “Back to the Future” session, I was somewhat taken aback. Surely I was much too young and good-looking to be asked to join in a forum of old-timers spinning yarns about their past. The impossibility of maintaining this self-deceptive illusion became clear a little while later, however, when I received another message telling me that I had forgotten to sign my conference registration cheque. So I confess. It has been 30 years since I began my teaching career in Atlantic Canada. What a wonderfully rewarding time it has been! I wish to express a deep sense of gratitude to the many marvellous colleagues and students who have been willing over the years to share ideas and work collaboratively in order to make the region’s past more comprehensible.

For most of the last three decades I have taught a graduate seminar for students in history and Atlantic Canada Studies at Saint Mary’s University. Thinking back, it occurs to me that the changing nature of the seminar through the years indicates how the discipline has changed over time, and how notions of the region have altered in turn. At first, the class focused on the question of regional economic development, the coming of the industrial capitalist order in the late 19th century, and the subsequent process of deindustrialization. Associated with this process, of course, were various social and regional protest movements, such as the Repeal agitations of the 1860s and 1880s, the Maritime Rights movement of the 1920s, the resistance of workers to the forces that exploited them, and the choice made by many to pull up stakes and leave the region in search of a better life elsewhere.

These topics reflected the early *Acadiensis* generation’s concern with the reasons for our continuing regional disparity. Our hope was that once Canadians elsewhere became aware of how capitalism worked to the disadvantage of Atlantic Canada, they would be less likely to blame the economic disabilities of the region on regional conservatism, parochialism or a lack of entrepreneurial spirit, and more likely to take action to redress regional grievances and institute a more equitable sharing of national resources. This may have been a naive expectation, but it nonetheless led to an outpouring of scholarly work that enlivened our teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

As historians in the region enlisted in support of this scholarly project during the 1970s and 1980s, they profited from a remarkable camaraderie that transcended political and ideological differences. However, that collective scholarly project was largely complete by the end of the 1980s. It culminated with the publication of E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds., *Atlantic Canada in Confederation* (1993), closely followed by Phillip Buckner and John Reid, eds., *Atlantic Canada Before Confederation: A History* (1994). While these are extremely useful reference works, they have attracted some criticism, particularly with respect to their chronological organizational structures. The Forbes and Muise collection has also been assailed for the seemingly defeatist and sombre tone of many of its chapters, mine included. This pessimism derived in part from the region’s continuing economic woes. It was also related to the failure of mainstream Canadian academics to take the region’s scholarship seriously. Some dismissed the collective effort of the early *Acadiensis*

generation as an Ottawa-bashing and anti-capitalist diatribe. In the history of the region, Ian Drummond observed, “one finds familiar lines of argument — entrepreneurial failure, immobility of capital funds, pumping out of surplus, Ottawa’s ineptitude with respect to tariff-fixing and railway rate setting, foolish or treasonous behaviour by local capitalists and shipowners. Dependency theory in its many variants, and numerous sorts of Marxism-Leninism, are all on offer. In quality and persuasiveness this work is uneven, nor is it innovative methodologically or conceptually”.¹ This cavalier dismissal of a generation of regional scholarship aside, it was clear by the end of the 1980s that the preoccupation with Atlantic Canada’s post-Confederation economic transformation was drawing to a close.

At the very point of culmination and synthesis that ushered in the 1990s, then, came a turning away from older debates about regional economic development and a new preoccupation with how the region was represented, imagined or — if you like — invented. This change was clearly evident in my graduate seminar. While my first generation of graduate students were captivated by debates involving the place of the Maritimes in Canada, the processes of development and underdevelopment and the lost promises of the industrial capitalist nation-state in hinterland regions, students today are more likely to be seeking out another regional cultural icon to analyze and deconstruct, whether it be lighthouses, racing schooners or lobster traps. Students in my recent seminars worked on the following topics: symbols of region and nation in the early Olympic Games; dye-making in the region and representations of gender; rugby, class and masculine identity in turn-of-the-century Cape Breton; the gendered discourses of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union in the Maritimes; the negative representation of the region among contemporary youth who contemplate leaving; conceptions of “otherness” in early Mi’kmaq-English relations; and the contradictory symbolism attached to the Canso Causeway, which was represented both as modern engineering marvel that would help modernize the Cape Breton economy and as a gateway to a quaint, idyllic Scottish isle and a richly textured Highland culture.

Then, notably, from a student trained in political science, there was a paper that conformed more to that first generation of scholarship interested in region and nation. This paper investigated the regional cabinet minister tradition in Canadian political life, and its erosion in recent years as more and more power is centralized in the Prime Minister’s Office. What was particularly interesting, however, was that this student found it necessary to defend himself for having undertaken a study that could be conceived of as “narrowly political” and traditional. What a few years ago would have been understood as important to our understanding of the political economy of regionalism, was now measured against a new orthodoxy that placed discourses about gender, race, ethnicity and class identity above the politics of regional development.²

For me, our tendency to label topics as “vogueish” or “traditional” raises an important question. How willing have historians been in the past, and how willing are they now, to subject the dominant trends within our historiography to serious critical

1 Ian Drummond, “Writing about Economics”, in John Schultz, ed., *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History* (Scarborough, Ont., 1990), pp. 37-8.

2 The students referred to here include Shawn Gregory, Karen Diadick-Casselman, Daniel Macdonald, Kristy Gehue, Rachel Browne, Marlene Willigar, Meaghan Beaton and Christopher MacInnes.

questioning? What follows is an attempt to address this issue by focusing upon my own changing scholarly interests over the years and how they related to the dominant paradigms of the moment.

I began my academic career in 1970 as a wet-behind-the-ears 26-year-old, taking up a tenure-track appointment at Saint Mary's University despite not yet having completed my doctoral dissertation or having published anything beyond a book review or two. Things were much different then than now! Prior to that appointment, I had spent three years of study in the United States, where I had been intrigued by debates about the American populist and progressive reform impulse, by the new left counter-culture and its attacks on the "establishment", and by the widespread opposition to the war in Vietnam. My experience in the United States during those turbulent years of the late 1960s left me with a gut-level fear of the arbitrary power of the state and a suspicion of mindless nationalism. Ironically, when I returned home to Canada I found nationalism in the ascendency. My years away had been marked in Canada by Expo 67 and Trudeauania, and by the musical testimonies to Canadian nationhood offered up by Bobby Gimby, The Travellers, Ian and Sylvia and others. Within academia, an old-style nationalist history, conservative and often celebratory in character, faced an emerging left-nationalist school that urged the closure of the 49th parallel. Indeed, in English Canada, the nation was clearly at centre stage, heralded by the persuasive voices and pens of the dominant cultural producers across the country.

At the same time, however, there was an emerging sense that Canada was a land of regions, and there was a growing recognition that much of our historical writing had failed to give hinterland regions the attention they deserved. The attempt to shift Canadian history away from the old Montreal-Ottawa-Toronto axis during the 1970s led to various collaborative publications by scholars from east and west, which assaulted the citadels of Central Canadian nationalism. Notable by their absence from this enterprise were scholars from the province of Quebec. Two of the more significant collections of this sort were *Canada and the Burden of Unity* and *Eastern and Western Perspectives*.³ These attempts to write Canadian history from the perspective of the regions, however, often did little more than invert the categories "nation" and "region" or expose the most egregious stereotypes that others applied to the Maritimes.⁴ Not surprisingly, this new regional scholarship also raised the ire of Central Canadian historians, even those who had earlier called for an understanding of the country's "limited identities", and who now attempted to "unmask" scholarly regionalism as destructive provincialism.⁵ As Ian McKay has pointed out recently, the problem with this attempt to deconstruct Maritime regionalism or "region" was that it exempted the concept of Canada or "nation" from critical investigation.⁶

3 David Jay Bercuson, ed., *Canada and the Burden of Unity* (Toronto, 1977) and D.J. Bercuson and P.A. Buckner, eds., *Eastern and Western Perspectives* (Toronto, 1981).

4 I do not mean to deny the importance of the attempt to address the destructive implications of regional stereotypes. In this regard see E.R. Forbes, *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton, 1989).

5 Ramsay Cook, "Regionalism Unmasked", *Acadiensis*, XIII, 1 (Autumn 1983), pp. 137-42.

6 Ian McKay, "A Note on 'Region' in Writing the History of Atlantic Canada", *Acadiensis*, XXIX, 2 (Spring 2000), p. 93.

Although the new regionalism had its limitations, what rescued Maritime historiography from a descent into regional chauvinism was the attention that scholars in the 1970s gave to the coming of industrial capitalism and the subsequent process of deindustrialization. A number of useful studies focused on this history of economic transformation. Regional scholars turned their attention to shipping, the fishery, banking, the merger movement, under-capitalization, resource extraction, occupational pluralism, out-migration, discriminatory government policies and the consolidation of ownership in fewer hands and fewer places. We also debated issues relating to entrepreneurial failure, locational disadvantage, metropolitan weakness, political conservatism and resource deficiency. Then there were the working-class historians, taking inspiration from E.P. Thompson, Herbert Gutman and others, and focusing on instances of labour radicalism and militancy throughout the region, most particularly in the coal fields, but elsewhere as well.

Yet the very preoccupation with questions of economic development and working-class history in these early years deflected attention from other significant issues. The history of the countryside remained a neglected field of study; the experiences of women did not receive the attention they deserved; and processes of cultural and intellectual production were largely ignored. Furthermore, given the emphasis on industrialization and deindustrialization, few scholars gave serious attention to the post-Second World War era. David Alexander, who had been at the forefront of the study of regional economic development, had come to appreciate — before his untimely death — that the very accomplishment of the early *Acadiensis* generation in rendering the story of the region's economic history had stood in the way of a broader and more holistic understanding of Atlantic Canada's past. David's last scholarly paper, delivered posthumously as the W.S. MacNutt Memorial Lecture at the University of New Brunswick, called for "an intellectual portrait" of Newfoundland. He suggested that such a work would provide more of the answers to "the problems of its economic history than its economic historians are ever likely to supply".⁷

I had also been chafing against these confining tendencies and, in a contribution to *Teaching Maritime Studies* in 1986, I warned against the "economism" that permeated the writing of Atlantic Canadian history.⁸ At the time, I continued to follow my interest in the North American progressive reform tradition, attracted by the growing scholarly literature about the place of the professions in the rehabilitation of turn-of-the-century capitalism. It seemed to me that if an international literature offered insights into the making of the working class in the Maritimes, surely it could help us fashion a more subtle and textured interpretation of bourgeois authority. I don't use the term "hegemony" here because, at the time, Antonio Gramsci's influence was not yet as widespread as it would become. In fact, as my curiosity about the professionalization process developed and I began to scrutinize institutions such as the hospital and asylum, it was not Gramsci but Michel Foucault who sparked my interest. Discourses involving the body and the mind and how they were employed in

7 David Alexander, "Literacy and Economic Development in Nineteenth-Century Newfoundland", *Acadiensis*, X, 1 (Autumn 1980), pp. 3-34.

8 Colin Howell, "Economism, Ideology and the Teaching of Maritime History", in P.A. Buckner, ed., *Teaching Maritime Studies* (Fredericton, 1986), pp. 17-23.

different historical contexts intrigued me greatly, and I began working on a book provisionally entitled “Body Natural and Body Politic: The Reform Impulse in Atlantic Canada, 1867-1914”. My objective was to demonstrate that the Maritimes were very much influenced by international assumptions about individual and social degeneracy and the need for social “regeneration” that permeated the turn-of-the-century reform impulse in North America and Great Britain. It was clear to me from this research that the Maritimes were by no means some anachronistic backwater place, but were very familiar with the larger intellectual discourses of the time. Fate intervened, however, when my home was completely destroyed in a fire. I lost much of my research data and that book remains unwritten. Unable to summon the energy to return to this project, I thus set out on a new course, looking at sport as an important ingredient in the making of the modern Maritimes.

Of course, no new project is totally new, but rather must build upon what we have learned and are unable to forget. Actually my work on the history of baseball really began in the mid-1980s. As this work developed into a monograph, I found it impossible to forget what I had learned about the history of the body, or about the economic and social transformation of the Maritimes in the post-Confederation period. Sport history seemed to provide a wonderful opportunity to bring together these interests, and to probe the relationship between cultural formation, intellectual life and economic development in a Maritime setting. By that time, historians were becoming more attentive to the ideas of scholars such as Raymond Williams, who identified culture as contested terrain and urged us to think of the residual and emergent forms of cultural activity. Many were also beginning to regard Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony as a useful analytical construct. Working within the emerging tradition of “cultural studies”, I threw myself into a study of baseball in the Maritimes. In the introduction to *Northern Sandlots*, I wrote of my preoccupation with the relationship between cultural formation and capitalist development and of the exercise of power: “Baseball developed at a time of significant social and economic transformation when class and gender relations were in flux, when new ways of organizing work and play were being put into place, and when new assumptions about individual and social well-being and healthiness were being articulated [B]aseball was implicated in broader discourses involving respectable behaviour, masculinity and femininity, regionalism and nationalism, and class, ethnicity, and race”.⁹ *Northern Sandlots* was an attempt to unravel those discourses and to analyze their connection to the constantly shifting patterns of production, consumption and commercialization that accompanied the transformation of capitalism, and of sport, in the years between Confederation and the Second World War.

For me, analyses of the processes of cultural production can never be fully convincing if they are not firmly grounded in a materialist context. Unfortunately, the recent preoccupation with representation has led many to turn away from an analysis of capitalist development and to eschew interest in the process of class formation in favour of a new liberal pluralism that speaks primarily to issues of identity and multiple meaning. Two examples should suffice to make my concerns apparent. At a recent conference of the North American Society for Sport History I had the occasion

9 Colin D. Howell, *Northern Sandlots: A Social History of Maritime Baseball* (Toronto, 1995), p. xiv.

to listen to a fascinating paper which compared the innovative and improvisational skills of African American jazz musicians to the flair and stylishness of contemporary basketball players such as Michael Jordan. After listening to the author's provocative 20-minute gig and following the "Sweet Georgia Brown" pathways of his imagination, I sought him out to talk about the essentialist quality of his argument, of the necessity to ground his observations in an historical and materialist context and how I had waited in vain for careful analysis of the social and economic context that helped shape the cultural phenomenon he was attempting to delineate. His response, though not meant to be dismissive of my concerns, has haunted me ever since. While granting that a materialist approach might be useful, he observed that "most people here consider materialist analysis passé".

A second illustration of the contemporary retreat from materialist concerns comes from a conversation at the recent "New England and Atlantic Canada: Connections and Comparisons" Conference at the University of Maine in April 2000. The conference was successful in many ways, and the papers were of high quality. There were useful sessions on pre-European cultures in the northeast and the contemporary politics of ethnohistory; power relations and economic activity in the early modern northeast and perceptions of the colonial landscape; resource use in the northeastern borderlands; urban development with special reference to Portland, Saint John and Halifax; and cultural connections between the Maritimes and New England, including instances of collective violence, folk songs of the lumber woods, sport and recreational activities and patterns of migration. At the end of the day, however, I asked Bill Wicken of York University what he had learned from the conference. His comment reiterated my concern. "I learned", he said, with tongue firmly in cheek, "that class doesn't matter any more".

In these days of "virtual reality", where everything is invented, reinvented, imagined and represented, and where historians attentively listen to a multitude of subject "voices", it seems that the intellectual canons of historical materialism are easily ignored. Yet I cannot help but feel uneasy about this rush to jettison earlier traditions of historical inquiry, and to reduce class to just one more expression of identity construction or discourse. Just as I worried about the economistic nature of the first generation of Maritime scholarship, I am equally worried today about the preoccupation with semiotic or discursive representation that has emerged over the past decade. And so I preach to my students about the need to ground their concerns about representation in a materialist context. Seeking out ways of synthesizing post-modernist concerns about representation and traditional materialist approaches to history — not to create new grand narratives of development, but to encourage a more holistic understanding of the world around us — remains a fundamental intellectual challenge for historians.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony continues to provide an intellectual counterweight to the idealist inventions that post-modernist preoccupations with representation can engender, and it underscores the importance of the process of class formation in the making of civil society. Yet, if I have reservations about the indulgent subjectivism that accompanies "po mo" and the "descent into discourse", I have some concerns as well about the current preoccupation with Gramsci's hegemonic theory. As a guide to understanding the continuing conflict that accompanies the making of civil society, Gramsci's theory of hegemony is a most useful construct. The tendency to focus upon

how resistance is absorbed into the dominant order, however, can have decidedly conservative implications. The result often is the reification of hegemonic authority.

My suspicion that the formulaic application of Gramsci's concept of hegemony may represent simply a more sophisticated and attractively packaged rendering of the old social control model, has led me — not to jettison Gramsci's insights — but to turn instead to the idea of "borderlands" as a way of inquiring into questions of power, conflict, identity and cultural formation. Although the concept of borderlands has been receiving a great deal of attention over the past couple of years, especially given the assault upon and apparent fragility of national experiments everywhere from Mexico to the old Yugoslavia and to Canada itself, not all observers are comfortable with borderlands scholarship.¹⁰ Some Canadian nationalists would argue that the new fascination with borderlands and transnational interaction, reveals a growing intellectual continentalism that has its roots in the end of the Vietnam War, the winding down of the Cold War and more recently the Free Trade Agreement (1988) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (1993). This was the argument put forth forcefully by Phil Buckner in his essay "How Canadian Historians Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Americans". Buckner is critical of much of the recent published work in the field of Canadian-American relations, which he argues is dominated by the "benign interpretation of continentalism", a position which harkens back to the days of the Second World War when Canada and the United States were close allies in the war against fascism and Japanese militarism. Buckner is even more acutely disturbed by proponents of a borderlands model that suggests that North America's natural geographic boundaries run in a north-south rather than an east-west direction. Concerned that those who promote the borderlands idea presume that Canada cannot survive as an independent nation-state, Buckner points out that there are no such things as "natural boundaries for nations. All nations are artificially constructed and so are their boundaries". According to Buckner, and I think he is right, the language of natural boundaries is usually the language of imperialists concerned about justifying the expansion of their territorial influence.¹¹

But borderlands studies need not be approached in ways that serve either a continentalist or a global capitalist agenda, or contribute to the dissolution of the nation. My present research project, a comparative study of baseball along both the Canadian and Mexican borders of the United States, provides a way of understanding

10 The *American Historical Review* and the *Journal of American History* have recently carried special issues dealing with the borderlands idea, the resurgence of regionalism, and the erosion of the nation-state. See articles by David Thelen, Bruno Ramirez, Ian Tyrell, Robin G. Kelley and Mauricio Tenorio Trillo in "The Nation and Beyond: International Perspectives on United States History", *Journal of American History*, 86, 3 (December 1999), pp. 965-1187 and articles by Celia Applegate, Karin Wigen, Michael O'Brien and Vincent Rafael in "American Historical Review Forum: Bringing Regionalism Back to History", *American Historical Review*, 104, 4 (October 1999), pp. 1156-1220. See also the article by Jeremy Adelman and Steve Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation States, and the Peoples in Between in North America", *American Historical Review*, 104, 3 (June 1999), pp. 814-41. This article continues to elicit responses to the journal and rejoinders from the authors themselves. For a treatment of the borderlands idea in Canada see William New, *Borderlands: How We Talk About Canada* (Vancouver, 1998).

11 Phillip Buckner, "How Canadian Historians Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Americans!", *Acadiensis*, XXV, 2 (Spring 1996), pp. 117-40.

the process of cultural construction in the shadow of, or on, the borderland margins of the United States. Employing a borderlands model as a way of explaining the sporting past, it seems to me, by no means requires a predisposition towards continental economic, social or political integration. In fact, the borderlands model was first developed by Herbert Bolton in the 1920s as a way to distinguish the experience of the Spanish borderlands from that of the United States, at least as it had been offered up by Frederick Jackson Turner in his frontier thesis.¹² Likewise, my project (still in the research stage) is intended as an alternative to traditional accounts of Canadian and Mexican American relations, by focusing on the connections between popular culture, geography, regional identity, nation-building, capitalist development and class formation over the past century. It seems to me that a borderlands focus provides a chance for historians to employ the best of those older traditions of historical inquiry, as well as the insights of contemporary post-structuralism, and in ways that transcend the old nationalist/continentalist dichotomy.

Obviously, this blending of old and new ways of seeing will require constant nurturing, but I end with one final caveat. As regional historians rush to embrace the more fashionable post-modernist and pluralistic explanations of the world around us, or even to adopt ideas from the borderlands school, we must be careful not to dispense with those historical insights about Maritime capitalist development and class formation that emerged from the work of the early *Acadiensis* generation. They still remain essential to understanding the regional experience.

COLIN D. HOWELL

¹² See Herbert Bolton, *The Spanish Borderlands: A Chronicle of Old Florida and the Southwest* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1921).