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Résumé de l'article

L'ouvrage de Robert C.H. Sweeny, Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? *(Pourquoi avons-nous opté pour l'industrialisation ?) offre au lecteur des études de cas quantitatives éclairantes de l'histoire socioéconomique de Montréal au XIX*e *siècle, liées à des aperçus autobiographiques intrigants qui jalonnent le parcours intellectuel de l'auteur lui-même. Dans cette critique élogieuse, je cherche à savoir dans quelle mesure il est parvenu à situer de manière convaincante Montréal dans la fameuse matrice des discussions entre marxistes sur la transition de la féodalité au capitalisme, et j'indique que par plusieurs aspects, cet ouvrage, bien qu'il soit convaincant pour nombre de détails, ne parvient pas à répondre à la question générale que pose son titre. Les discussions sur le capitalisme doivent-elles rester prisonnières des problèmes insolubles (et qui le resteront probablement) posés par les débats du XX*e *siècle qui font s'affronter agentivité et structure ?*

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Beyond the Old Dichotomies to a New History of Capitalism: An Appreciative Critique of Robert C.H. Sweeny

IAN MCKAY

Abstract

Robert C.H. Sweeny's Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? *offers readers enlightening quantitative case studies of the socio-economic history of nineteenth-century Montreal, linked by intriguing autobiographical sketches charting the author's own intellectual journey. In this appreciate critique, I raise questions about the extent to which he has convincingly situated Montreal in the famous matrix of debates among Marxists about the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and suggest that in many respects the book, although convincing in many of its particulars, does not succeed in answering the general question posed by its title. Should debates about capitalism remain trapped in the unresolved (and likely unresolvable) twentieth-century debates pitting agency against structure?*

Résumé

L'ouvrage de Robert C.H. Sweeny, Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? *(Pourquoi avons-nous opté pour l'industrialisation ?) offre au lecteur des études de cas quantitatives éclairantes de l'histoire socioéconomique de Montréal au XIX*[e] *siècle, liées à des aperçus autobiographiques intrigants qui jalonnent le parcours intellectuel de l'auteur lui-même. Dans cette critique élogieuse, je cherche à savoir dans quelle mesure il est parvenu à situer de manière convaincante Montréal dans la fameuse matrice des discussions entre marxistes sur la transition de la féodalité au capitalisme, et j'indique que par plusieurs aspects, cet ouvrage, bien qu'il soit convaincant pour nombre de détails, ne parvient pas à répondre à la question générale que pose son titre. Les discussions sur le capitalisme doivent-elles rester prisonnières des problèmes insolubles (et qui le resteront probablement) posés par les débats du XX*[e] *siècle qui font s'affronter agentivité et structure ?*

Let me open up my comments on Robert Sweeny's award-winning and path-breaking *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal, 1819–1849* with a theme raised towards the end of the book, where the author argues that the "profound rethinking of our species' relationship to nature is the most important legacy of our asking why we chose to industrialize." (p. 325) If one were to single out some of the most important aspects of this legacy, one might focus on global climate change, some of which is the consequence of such natural phenomena as orbital variations, volcanism, solar output, and plate tectonics, but a large part of which is the result of the accumulated impact of such human activities as burning fossil fuels and felling forests in the interests of commercial agriculture. Sweeny, in an immensely suggestive comparative study of Québec and Newfoundland, himself notes the accumulative effects of centuries-old practices and policies of resource exploitation.[1] A Marxist — or rather, this Marxist — would say that global climate change emerges, not as a consequence of individual choice, but as a result of the evolving structure of industrial capitalism, as we have known it since the eighteenth century — in particular, the drive of wealth- and power-seekers within any such structured system to accumulate capital.

What makes this a "structure" and a "system" is that its components, both human (capitalist accumulation) and non-human (fossil fuels) are combined in such a way that any change in one affects the others — and the entire pattern — in ways resistant (but not impervious) to human agency. Global climate change, in short, cannot be fully understood without grasping the structural logic of the dominant "mode of production." Drawing upon Marx's *The German Ideology*, Sweeny notes that such modes are comprised of three types of relationships: those between "people as they produce the things they need to live," those "between people as they reproduce themselves and this way of life," and those "between our species and the rest of nature" (p. 270–1). Unless all three of these relationships change significantly — and with them, I would add, the wider patterns of consumption and possessive individualism that are their equally

structured correlates — there can be no equilibrium between humanity and the natural world.

Or, to use a language that Sweeny outright rejects, and I would rather modulate and adapt, it is difficult for me to see how we can permanently change our social and cultural realities without changing the material realities upon which they are based. Because I work mainly within the Marxist tradition, much of this structural analysis of our contemporary environmental crisis seems obvious to me, but I am well aware that in such fields as political theory, much of postcolonialism, and vast swaths of Canadian history-writing, what I take to be obvious is highly contentious to others (with the result, I suggest, that today's many and sincere statements of liberal intent to avert planetary disaster are matched only by today's equally numerous indications of the ever growing likelihood of that future). The same might also be said of the other looming global catastrophe, thermonuclear war. Unless we fundamentally change how we make our living, and with that the ideologies that sanction those ways of living, these phenomena cannot be meaningfully addressed, let alone transformed.

Sometimes Sweeny, especially the twentieth-century Sweeny, seems to agree with this kind of analysis. Yet, often the twenty-first-century Sweeny seemingly rejects it outright, even linking it to the enormities perpetrated by Communist dictatorships. For Sweeny, upon whom E.P. Thompson's anti-structuralist manifesto *The Poverty of Theory* plainly made a tremendous impact,[2] the historical geographer David Harvey, who has conceptualized capitalism "as consisting of non-dominating, codependent spheres," can be indicted as an apostle of "a structuralist path" (p. 272), as someone directing historical materialism towards what is "quite literally, a dead end." Often in this book, we seem presented with a stark choice: between a structuralism so intent on revealing inescapable patterns of human relationships unfolding over centuries that any possibility of collective action to change them seems far-fetched or between a voluntaristic emphasis on choice so pronounced that strategies to explain historical patterns at a supra-individual level

seem immoral or impossible. This impasse leads the author to a despairing sense of "the impossibility of any attempt to accurately represent reality" (p. 181).[3] Even to answer the critique of determinist Marxism by invoking Marxian theorists — Luxemburg, Gramsci, Mariátegui, Benjamin, or Williams, all of whom spent much of their lives challenging and changing vulgar determinism — is somehow to deny the "many, many more … who were silenced, jailed, tortured, imprisoned, 'goulag-ed,' or murdered because their understanding of reality or their vision of a better future did not conform to whatever the party line on class struggle was at the time" (p. 271).[4] Structural analysis, it seems, leads to oppression and death — a critique more strident and unpersuasive, it seems to me, than even Thompson's Swiftian satire of Louis Althusser in 1978.

This is a book — stimulating, hard-working, highly original, sometimes inspiring and sometimes exasperating — that often seems at war with itself. For if it is foolhardy or worse to seek the logics of history in archival evidence that documents how people made their living, and to theorize those ways in terms of lasting socio-economic structures, then much of this book, which presses such particular evidence hard to disclose what it might tell us about such patterns, is vulnerable to the author's own searing critique, late in its pages, of his own "structuralism" (p. 142), now rejected as "too simplistic and too rigid" (p. 269). Even to seek the "social and economic changes" that "permitted the industrial revolution" (p. 311) is a conceptual, and by implication, moral error, since it grants "both an autonomy to socio-economic changes and an agency to supra-human processes" (p. 311).[5] From the Gramscian perspective that has influenced much of my own thinking, I can appreciate Sweeny's drive to critique reified and personified abstractions, a practice not wholly absent from his own work.[6] But it seems to me these binary oppositions are leading him into an almost self-destructive conceptual impasse, one that leads him to denounce his own quite sensible and well-research structural insights.

Sweeny himself diagnoses his own proclivity for binaric oppositions.[7] A master binary is implied in the book's very

title — that between choice and constraint, or, more grandly, freedom and necessity. Missing from this book is any considered assessment of the social theorists, on both sides of his “bourgeois history vs. historical materialism” divide, who have conscientiously (and, in my view productively) transcended such disabling dichotomies. It is possible to have a Gramsci-like appreciation of the subtle ways our language, nationality, socio-economic position and geographical location render some things conceivable and others unthinkable, or a Harvey-like appreciation of the depth and durability of inter-related patterns of human relationships, especially those that bear directly upon how humans make their living, without recourse to a coarsely deterministic emphasis upon the suprahuman. How could we imagine an alternative future for humanity without reckoning with the social and natural structures — the chemistry of the atmosphere, the complexly interrelated ecosystems, political economies, world geopolitics — that have, over generations, brought our species to its contemporary crisis?

I might bring this critique more down-to-earth by exploring what I find a bit mystifying about the book’s title: *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal, 1819–1849*. Let’s move through its key components: “Why,” “We,” “Chose,” “to Industrialize,” “Montreal,” and “1819–1849.”

Who is this “We” and “Why” did they choose to industrialize? A straightforward answer might be, nineteenth-century Montrealers keen to accumulate capital, make money, and develop political and social forms consolidating their rule (as so admirably explored by Jean-Marie Fecteau, among legions of other Québécois historians).[8] But although much of the book is devoted to the micro-historical reconstruction of past Montréal realities, the “we’ of the title is really “humanity as a whole” and the “why” — or the “root cause” — is “the systematic use of unfree labour for the production of basic commodities in the early modern world” (p. 332).

Now, this rendition of the capitalism and slavery thesis, associated with such names as Eric Williams, Sven Beckert, Robin Blackburn, Thomas Holt, Walter Johnson, Sidney Mintz,

Jason Opal, and Seth Rockman, shows how keenly and laudably Sweeny wants to position his study in a world-historic context. So does his emphasis on differentiation among the *censitaires*, influenced (I would guess) by Robert Brenner's plausible argument that capitalist social relations can be found in sixteenth-century English agriculture.[9] Both explanatory frameworks have generated large bodies of literature, and I am definitely not the right person to claim an in-depth knowledge of the debates they have aroused. But what I think I *can* point out is that in either case, one could leave out the Montrealers from the "we" altogether. Or, to put it more baldly, the link between the empirical evidence adduced in the book and the "transition debates" it is keen to address is often difficult to discern. Nor do we have much exposition of a point insistently raised but rarely developed — which is the contrast raised by Marx in an opaque and question-begging passage in *Capital* about the master craftsman's "revolutionary path" and the merchant's "non-revolutionary" path to capitalism, into which Sweeny reads what are (to me) historically unlikely intimations of the democratic revolution.[10] In short, the "we" who invested in the factories whose proudly belching smokestacks adorn this book's cover are never really described, let alone analyzed. The paradox of his explanation of the overall rise of industrialism is that it is never explored or justified in detail, nor related in a convincing way to the fascinating Montréal evidence his readers have spent much time pondering. This book is far stronger as a series of highly focused and often superbly realized particular studies, into the byzantine workings of credit and banking, the first and unexpected crisis of capitalism in 1825/6, or the ways this crisis affected craft workers, rather than as a Montréal-based contribution to the "transition debate." The author's own position — that the transition was occasioned by global patterns of coerced labour and their impact upon the relationship of immovable to moveable property — is stated briefly and bears little apparent relationship to his Montréal evidence.

I have already suggested some of my misgivings about "Chose," but let me just add that, once the verb is applied to pro-

cesses unfolding over centuries — as is the case with his answer to his own question — the actual degree of agency involved in choice becomes more and more tenuous. Why did you *choose* your present income level? Why did we *choose* global climate change? Or, for that matter, why did Cape Bretoners and Hamiltonians choose to *de-industrialize*? One might say that yesterday's choices — say, North Americans' opting *en masse* for the automobile in the first quarter of the twentieth century — quickly solidify into today's structures — a highway system, for example, upon which many working people rely for their survival, offering us "choices" that are so delimited and predetermined, so *structured*, that they may not seem to be choices at all. The coming of industrial capitalism on a world scale and over centuries — a process still underway — would seem to my eye an inhospitable terrain for the inherently somewhat individualistic discourse of choice. As Sweeny himself emphasizes, past generations could little grasp the implications of the "choices" they made — which means, on my interpretation, that they cannot in any realistic way be described as "choosing" the long-term patterns that now seem so apparent to us, but worked themselves out over centuries (p. 332; see also p. 330). Why are "we" choosing global climate change?

But moving on "to Industrialize" — a term which surely has a generally accepted connotations — i.e., the coming of large workplaces wherein waged workers, often in contact with modern fossil-fuel-powered machinery, generated economic surpluses for their employers and owners — I find similar problems. The term, so far as I can see, is never defined. The "transition debate" as it unfolded in Marxist historiography, which is encapsulated in this book, was not mainly about "industrialization" in the technological sense, but about the rise of capitalism — about the possible impact of long-distance trades or domestic transformations in creating capitalist class relations. (To my eye, some of the most important names are missing from this discussion, such as Christopher Hill, though kudos to Sweeny for remembering Hill's great mentor, R.H. Tawney.) In this book, the transition comes to be reified as "it," and we ask, "Where Did It Happen?"

(p. 331). He responds, injudiciously in my opinion, with a "short list" of these places prior to 1850: England, Scotland, Belgium, the north-eastern United States, the Canadas, and France.[11] Yet, if "it" means the coming of masses of workers relying primarily on their wages to survive, which is one handy way of thinking about the big difference between, say, 1200 and 1900, "it" surely must extend to the steam- and railway-assisted coal mines of Nova Scotia from the 1820s, not to speak of Richard Rice's shipbuilding manufactories in Saint John and, on Sweeny's own reckoning, the fisheries of Newfoundland, which after the 1610s drew tens of thousands of waged workers (as many as 12,000 during 1763/4, perhaps as many as a million over a longer time period), in what was "the first capitalist society" ("Modes," p. 294). If "it" is capitalism as a mode of production — in which the "dominant social relation of production is the direct appropriation, within the sphere of production itself, of surplus value created by wage labor" ("Modes," pp. 281–2) — then the answer to this question must be different than if "it" means the application of steam power to the workplace (an unexplored terrain in this book) or if "it" means the "bourgeois revolution" in all the world-historic significance Marxists have conventionally assigned it, which encompasses the extraction of surplus value from unwaged, coerced labour as well.

And finally, to "Montreal, 1819–1849": as the author himself points out, the crucial decade for industrialization — as in the coming of steam-powered factories — was the 1840s, when "a rebuilding of the locks of the Lachine Canal in 1847/8 permitted the exploitation of hydraulic lots for industrial purposes, and within a few years, large flour mills, foundries, rolling mills, windows and sash manufactories, shipyards, and a sugar refinery lined the shores of the canal," not to mention the colony's largest manufacturing facility, the Grand Trunk Railway shops in Pointe St-Charles (p. 286). A most puzzling feature of this book, if it is read straightforwardly as a book about why some Montrealers decided to build such steam-powered industrial establishments, is that this pivotal development receives almost no attention. Sweeny devotes a great deal of energy to demolishing the staples

thesis and the "Empire of the St. Lawrence," yet almost none to exploring who invested in these factories and why they did so. Yet, at least some of these people were the old "river barons" studied by the late Gerald Tulchinsky — a study mentioned in the bibliography, but whose findings are never brought into the main discussion.[12] Even the demolition of the fabled mercantile Montréal delivers less heresy than it promises — since it is conceded that Montréal mercantile community found its "principal source of profits" in the fur trade (down, perhaps, to the early 1820s?) and Montréal merchants thereafter exerted an "increasingly important" role in the rural world of Québec (p. 96).

Perhaps the ultimate paradox of this book is that, although warmly and fervently endorsing agency over structure, choice over constraint, and complexity over reductionism, it gives us almost nothing directly from the people to whom "it" was happening. I do not think there is one working-class man or working-class woman to be heard putting forth his or her own view of the world from beginning to end, even though we generalize freely and often about what such people may well have been thinking as they generated their notarial documents (or as their social bettors drew up maps and directories). Such generalizations are often based on the aggressive interrogation of quantitative and cartographic evidence. Some of Sweeny's interrogations are imaginative and bold — and certainly no future historian should embark upon a discussion of such documents without first reading this book. Yet, the author's austere source-based historicism, which invests so heavily in "phenomenal evidence" (i.e. those that exist "independently of the historian" and thus have "the requisite ontological autonomy … to provide the basis for an independent test of a historian's hypothesis," (p. 22) which means in practice the city's abundant notarial archives), seemingly disallows the investigation of other sources more directly bearing on how people conceptualized and debated the socio-economic changes happening all around them. It is telling that, in his brief portrait of the 1880s, Sweeny turns instead to the routinely generated data of the census — in contrast to his own methodological marginalization of such a source earlier in the study. Yet, both these

"phenomenal" and "epiphenomenal" sources testify but indirectly to issues of class, nation, gender, and religion about which, nonetheless, Sweeny makes important claims.

Thus, although crafts are interestingly illuminated via the notarial records, we never learn how many craftsmen and labourers there were in Montréal from 1819 to 1849, let alone how they organized themselves — whether, for example, they did in fact do the things we would expect them to do if they were defending a "Moral Economy" against an emergent "Liberal Order" (another Big Dichotomy dependent upon the inflation of specific heuristic tools into an all-encompassing explanatory binary). The eviction of nation and nationalism, along with religion, as serious markers of identity — for all roads here lead first to class and then to gender — proceeds, it seems, from the author's *a priori* rejection of anything that smacks of "essentialism,"[13] yet this means he can respond but partially to the *nationaliste* reading of Montréal except to hint at, with more than a hint of essentialism on his own part, its seemingly inevitable links to clerical nationalist historiography. If in the end religious and ethnic identities are considered to have "profound implications for how people understood their relationship to nature" (p. 324), then they surely called out for more nuanced and detailed treatment. In contrast to class and gender, which are at least formally admitted into the explanatory core of the book, ethnicity and race — notably, the racialization of the French-Canadian minority in a city in which Imperialism was not only an *idea* (as Sweeny has it) but an *economically and politically significant practice* — receive relatively little attention. And the Indigenous peoples whose labour created Montréal's first fur trade empire are conspicuous by their almost complete absence.

One would be remiss not to remark upon one of the most original qualities of this book — which disarmingly presents itself as a journal of a "journey of discovery" (p. 6) rather than as a polished, finished monograph about a specific issue. The book is punctuated with lively impressions of Sweeny's discoveries in the notarial archives, combative exchanges with belligerent historians at the Canadian Historical Association, life-changing

conversations that set him on a new intellectual path, *film noir*-like descriptions of encounters with priceless manuscripts in the "bleak industrial landscape in the north end of Montreal" (p. 172), violent assaults upon him at a meeting in Le Havre, and so on. Sometimes the historiographical assessments of this "angry young man" (p. xv) undertaking a "solitary intellectual journey" (p. 204) are open to debate. Throughout, a sympathetic reader wanted to know more about the perspective from which the author's evaluations proceed, for the protagonist of this voyage through the storms and shoals of Canadian academia is not always a clearly-developed or complicated character. Certainly as someone sharing at least some of his intellectual itinerary and a good many of his political values, I was struck by the dissimilarity between my own formative experiences and his own. [14]

And because the "Sweeny" of this text is constantly evolving, this book will pose a particular challenge to many readers, who may find themselves struggling to distinguish the views of Sweeny 1.0 from those of Sweeny 2.0 (post-1990s) or Sweeny 3.0 (post-2006?). A problem of this book for such readers lies in the protagonist's violent denunciation of his past "structuralism," which he came after the mid-1990s to view as a belief in "supra-human explanations of causality" (p. 269). He now believes his earlier work to have been riven with "serious conceptual flaws" (p. 183) and now affirms the centrality of "an ethical stance with important implications for historical praxis" (p. 314). I think he does his past work a considerable injustice in these concluding assessments, for I find throughout it — and notwithstanding the reservations I have lodged — a consistent, pugnacious, and original contribution to the historical materialist tradition, one whose critical realism and finely-honed structural analyses should not be so lightly relinquished. It is difficult to envisage a "profound rethinking of our species' relationship to nature" (p. 325) without close attention to the enduring structures — economic, cultural, and political — which make such a rethinking imperative. May we hope for a Sweeny 4.0, who has transcended the dialectic of structure and agency in a way that,

rather than merely repeating the now-dated postmodern clichés about determinism and master narratives, conserves as he transcends the insights of his important earlier work?

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