Where is here? and other travels through the Canadian psyche

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The Secret Kingdom: Interpretations of the Canadian Character by Dominique Clift

Canadian Identity: Major Forces Shaping the Life of a People by Robin Mathews

All of us, at some moment, have had a vision of our existence as something unique, untransferrable and very precious. This revelation almost always takes place during adolescence ... Despite the often illusory nature of such visions, the psychology of a nation, it seems to me, is something revealing in the insistence with which a people will question itself during certain periods of its growth.

(Otaviano Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude, 1950)

The desire to define a national identity or character is peculiar neither to Canada nor to the rhetoric which has recently informed the debate surrounding free trade with the United States. The latter, however, has generated renewed interest in the nature and survival of the Canadian nation-state, and it is to this market that these two books attempt to appeal — albeit from widely divergent ideological perspectives. The Secret Kingdom, based on Dominique Clift's Le pays bisoupponé: essai (Montréal: Libre Expression, 1987), epitomises a liberal, laissez-faire attitude to politics; indeed, its author acknowledges the financial support of Inesco Ltd., Acan and Steinberg Inc.

Canadian Identity, on the other hand, invokes a conservative Marxist approach to Canadian history and is published by Steel Rail, a press dedicated to socialism and nationalism in culture. However, while The Secret Kingdom is an extensively researched and extremely readable history of national character in Canada — Clift won the Governor's General's Award for Le Feu anglais au Québec in 1978 — Canadian Identity is poorly documented,
riddled with archaic jargon, repetitive, and at times incoherent. This difference can in part be attributed to the rhetorical strategies of each author. Cliff pretends to an objective discourse, thus conveying an image of historical accuracy, reason, reasoned argument, and political neutrality. Robin Mathews employs the rhetoric of the manifesto; in the vein of George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* (1965), Mathews's stance is once angry and despairing, evoking the image of the evangelist rather than the scholar.

For both Mathews and Cliff, national identity exists as a monolith, essentialist concept "out of existence," attempting to cover the aims and ideologies of all Canadians, essentialist because national identity is portrayed as something that is contained within each Canadian, born by the very act of nationalizing the body politic. The exception is the Canadian psyche examined in terms of its existential development rather than its determination by the forces of class, race, gender or regional division. Indeed, multiplicity and diversity, particularly the existence of its non-English communities, are diagnosed by Cliff and Mathews as symptoms of a divided self, a nation torn apart by competing desires. For Cliff, the preoccupation with national identity is merely an avoidance of reality: Canadians simply refuse to accept their nationhood.

If Cliff finds Canadians merely neurasthenic, Mathews believes they suffer a deeper psychosis: Canada is the victim not only of internal forces, but of external forces: the questions of national identity "has to do with our very survival despite the most powerful imperialist nation in history."

It is Mathews's contention, indeed his sole argument throughout the book, that "Canadian identity lives in a process of tension and argument," a dialectic of opposing ideological and historical forces. The "root of the dialectic," for Mathews, is the "conflict between a balanced communitarianism and an unleashed competitive individualism," or, in other words, the opposition between the conservativeness of the founding principles of Confederation, "peace, order and good government," and the liberalization of unhindered capitalism as symbolized by the United States. A large portion of Canadian Identity is devoted to tracing the divergent yet overlapping histories of conservative and liberal ideologies. Conservatism is examined from the reflections of Edmund Burke through to the politics of John A. Macdonald and critical writings of W.L. Morton, Harold Innis and George Grant, whose lament for the impossibility of conservatism in Canada becomes Mathews's own rallying cry.

Canadian Identity is also seen as "a morality play where liberalism is incarnated as the force of evil and manifests itself in the writings of Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith and the "monstrous individuality" to which his thought gave rise." It is an important coincidence for Mathews that Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and Marx's *Capital* were published the same year as the U.S. Declaration of Independence and Canadian Confederation, respectively. In Mathews's view, A.R.M. lower is "the liberal Canadian historian," and Marshall McLuhan "the illegitimate son" of Innis, who, in a question of patricide, denic and -nicated Innis's ideas and "de-natured them" of their moral character.

Mathews argues that Canada could have continued to thrive on its old and new conservative ideologies, as a constitutional monarchy-with many Tory/Conservative institutions existing in a genuinely Liberal Capitalist economy. He became the champion of parliament and conservative traditions not been undermined by Pierre Trudeau. The patination of the constitution marks "the empowering of a small group of legislators (the members of the Supreme Court of Canada) closely tied to continental capitalist power." At the same time, however, the dialectic within each competing ideology has led to a transfer of political philosophy. A revisionist, "new Conservatism" has pushed the Progressive Conservative Party under Brian Mulroney into the liberal, 'conservatism' camp. Whether, Mathews writes, "the communalist side of the dialectical argument has been damaged irreparably is a question of personal and political answer." While Mathews argues for a vibrant, progressive, dialectical vision, the dialectic he embraces is strictly static; the traditional conservative ideology he embraces seems not only to have been doomed from the start but to have completely disappeared from the political sphere.

If Mathews seeks a need to overthrow traditional, Mathews finds its strength in the current of Canada's identity: nothing has defined national character more clearly than institutions in religion. In his brief discussion of "The Left Vision of Canada," Mathews finds in the Social Gospel movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the roots of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation. Indeed, both the C.C.F. and the N.D.P. "assured the country that the criticism of capitalist power would have a vital Christian content, a content that is purely "social.""

For Mathews, the problem of religion in Canadian politics works as a powerful force in shaping liberal and conservative ideologies, particularly English Protestantism with its "sense of the relation between classes." That religion has not played a significant role south of the border makes Mathews ascribes to a greater religious tolerance in Canada and the more pessimistic influence of capitalism on American society, manifested in such phenomena as television evangelism.

While these are valid arguments, he later undermines them by his portrayal of the Catholic Church, thus showing both a lack of tolerance on his own part and a deference to non-denominational religion, the cornerstone of American politics. At the same time, the Christian Ontario has not been immune from the forces of the dialectic. By placing "individual conscience" over the public good, the churches aided those Americans who resisted the war in Vietnam, thus "actively suppressing the immigration to Canada of people who epitomized U.S. individualism." Mathews's anti-Americanism is surpassed only by his questionable belief in the revolutionary potential of religion. "We have yet to see," he writes, "what the outcome will be if big capital and the Canadian churches meet in head-on conflict." At no point does Mathews discuss the material basis for this extreme dialectical opposition between organised religion and the interests of the free market.

In discussing the nature of the Catholic Church in relation to the public, Mathews writes, "There is reason to believe that the Catholic Church is the most important single public institution in Canadian life."

Both Mathews and Cliff are engaged in a debate over the role of the Catholic Church in Canadian society, with each author taking a different stance.

**Reviews**
Church in Quebec and its relation to English Protestantism, Matthews relies heavily on the theories of Max Weber — as filtered through the writings of George Grant. Not only has Roman Catholicism been "less sympathetic than Protestantism to capital-

ist values," but "entrepreneurship, risk-taking, scientific initiative, and industrial de-

velopment were demonstrably in the hands of the Protestant English Canadians in league with U.S. interests, whereas French-Catholics remained for the most part de-

vout, communitarian, even corporatist, simple, and un-modern." While he discuss-

css "corporist" politics in Quebec in terms of German Nationalism and fascin in general, Matthews, following Grant, sees Catholi-

cism in Quebec as preserving the traditional, "community" forces of the Canadi-

an dialectic. It is the peculiar flavour of Matthew's Marxism that the "reactionary Conservatism" of Quebec Catholicism is necessarily preferable to the forces of the capitalist market which sought to oppose it.

Matthews argues that English-Canadian dependence on Britain "stood for an ideolo-

gical position of independence... because it permitted Canadians to claim a distinct otherness from the U.S." For Quebec, deference to the Church, agricul-

ture and lack of entrepreneurial activity were similar safeguards to continental pressures. Strange as Matthews fails to see in Quebec's experiences an indication of dialectical materialism at work. Rather, separatism appears as an aberration, an ideology thrust upon the Quebecois by outside forces. "Nothing," he argues, "could have warned the Quebecois of the stresses that would culminate in the Quiet Revolution, stresses that both mirrored and manifested larger forces at work in the world." The election of the Parti Quebecois is, for Matthews, as destructive to the Cana-

dian and to Canadian independence as the patriation of the constitution is to English Canada. Quebec is now "the most Liberal of Liberal communities in Canada." With both English and French Canada "absorbed into the other side of the dialectic," Matthews doubts "whether Canada can survive the two defences" (any emphasis).

Cliff agrees that "religion spoke most effectively... for the collective unconsci-

ous of Canadians," but that it did so "with terrible impact" for Canadian identi-

fication and independence. In Quebec, the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s "introduced state capitalism as a way of attaining collective goals," at the same time as separating church and state and bringing to ward the "inwardness" of Quebec society, where politics was "the expression of powerlessness, or resentment, and of an unfilled yearning for continuity." Cliff contends that Confederation confirmed Canada's conservative ideology, entrenching provin-
cial over federal rights and those of the community over the power of the state. It was ultimately the defeat of the 1980 refer-

endum, along with the patriation of the constitution and the entrenchment of bilingualism, that brought Quebec into the modern, postindustrial world. Whereas Pierre Trudeau plays the villain in Math-

ew's narrative, Trudeau's political views inform the theme of Cliff's story.

In the same way that Octavio Paz sees a questioning of national character as a part of a nation's "adolescence," Cliff sees the development of a strong national consciousness as part of the psychological maturity of both nation and citizen. The debate over free trade with the United States is, for Cliff, the public manifestation of an individual antagonism between ethics and practicality. This antagonism is "experienced by countless persons as an inner dilemma in the face of two contradictory courses of action." To Frey's question, "Where is here?" Cliff would respond that "here" is the individual psyche of each Canadian, a "garrison mentality" of the mind. There is something distinctly Freudian in the way in which he treats the struggle for national indepen-
dence. Canadians, it would seem, are in search of a father, an authority figure. It is for this reason, Cliff argues, that Canadians prolonged their dependence on England and France. At the same time, rather than being the victims of American imperialism, Canadians themselves have transferred authority to the United States. Whatever constraints exist to liberation, "they are mostly internal and self-imposed." At no point does Cliff suggest that if authority was willingly transferred to the U.S. it was done in the interest of a particular class of Canadians over and against the interests of many more.

"It becomes possible to cast off the colo-

nial mentality," Cliff contends, "only if there is a Canadian identity to take its place." If Canadians have failed to develop a distinct identity, it is a failure of "collective vision," a failure of Canadian culture to embrace the modern age. Nonetheless, Cliff believes Canada is finally approaching matura-
ty as a nation-state. He attributes this new-found modernity to the creation of the postwar baby boom and the patriation of the constitution and entitlement of federal over provincial rights. "The national ego," Cliff writes, "has become immeasurably stronger." In the end, it is largely a psychological transformation, an acceptance of the reality of the modern world, to which he attributes the emergence of a modern national state. Nowadays does he explicate the complex material and cultural forces that compel a nation's politics.

Where Cliff states confidently that the "solidation of national identity will indelibly impress Canadians to distance themselves from the United States," Robin Matthews is less optimistic. For Matthews, the suicide of the Quebecois novelist and radical Hubert Aquin stands as a metaphor for the collective suicide of Canadians. "The elec-

tion of the Parti Quebecois made him re-

alize that Quebec was deepening, not solv-

ing, its problem culturally." In the meantime, Canada seems to exist in stasis, awaiting a shift in the forces that have de-
termined the national dialectic. On the one hand, Matthews claims that "Canadian

history awaits the militant Marxist formul-

ation that is also truly attuned to Canadi-

an history and problems as well as to the character, style, and sensibility of average Canadians." On the other hand, he largely ignores the possibilities of Marxist or social democratic intervention in Canadian politi-

cal life, favouring instead the conserva-

tions and lamentations of George Grant. While Matthews sees some hope in forms of non-institutional culture, he gives no ex-

amples. Instead, he suggests that foreign control of Canadian publishing and film industries "subverts people working in cul-


cure from militant struggle for the Canadi-

an community, and prevents Canadians from being informed about Canada." In the final analysis, ""[t]he nature of our identity requires constant vigilance and constant activity on the part of commun-

ication to prevent the enormous power of individualistic motivation." When it comes to the form this activity should take, Math-

ews is uncharacteristically mute.

While Canadians as a whole might strive for national unity, identity is a social construct peculiar not only to geographical, but social regions but to class, gender and ethnic-

ity. Both Cliff and Matthews find regionalism divisive of national purpose, and thus neither examines the particularities of social discourse outside of Ontar-


dio and Quebec. Canada's aboriginal peoples are similarly ignored. Intent on pursuing their individ-

ual theses, neither Cliff nor Matthews explore the way in which nationalism as an ideology is used by both left and right to achieve rhetorical and partisan goals.

It is the use and abuse of the ideology of nationalism which ultimately renders both Canadian Identity and The Secret Kingdom similar in their attempts to define a nation-

al identity. While Robin Matthews preaches the social gospel of a dialectical vision, and Dominique Clift charts the maturation of the Canadian people, both writers end with a static concept of Canadian identity. However, the question of a people's identi-

ity must necessarily be assessed in multi-

plicity and difference. At the same time, the construction of a collective consciousness is ultimately grounded in the material and cultural relations that inform society, a process rather than a fixed entity. Progress is shaped by the changing inter-

ational division of labour of a global economy. As we are reminded by Paz, "[i]f
does not matter, then, if the answers that we
give to our questions must be corrected by
time."