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**BOOK REVIEW**

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**Ian McKay, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals:*  
Rethinking Canada's Left History. Toronto: **Between  
the Lines Press, 2005, 254 pp., \$19.95 paper.****

Reviewed by **Byron Sheldrick**, University of Winnipeg

*In Rebels, Reds, Radicals*, Ian McKay offers us a reconceptualization of Canada's left history. Those looking for a blow by blow account of the development of socialism in Canada might possibly be disappointed by this book. More historiography than history, it attempts to provide an alternative approach to understanding left history in Canada. Only the final chapter offers a more conventional historical treatment of the subject. However, the remainder of the book is a provocative and engaging look at how the left has thought about itself, and offers an alternative based on the works of Antonio Gramsci. As such, McKay's book not only serves as historiography, but also as an extremely important intervention into current debates about the future of the left and left strategy.

McKay's starting point is an analysis of what we mean by the "left". In this regard he rejects approaches that equate the "left" with "socialism". More particularly, he is critical of what he argues is the dominant approach of left history, namely the search for a "true" or "authentic" version of socialism and the rejection of other efforts at achieving social transformation because they did not meet the test of doctrinal legitimacy. Instead, McKay defines the left and socialism in terms of the imagining of (and working towards) objective possibilities that would move society beyond capitalism. As such, he defines the left broadly to include anyone who understands the injustice of capitalism, the possibility of democratic alternatives, the need for social transformation, and the need for the real-world development of the preconditions of that transformation. Thus, there is no such thing as a "true leftist" or a "true socialist". Indeed, there is no one path to socialism. McKay identifies seven different paths in Canadian history. Some, of course, were more fruitful and more significant than others. McKay's objective is to create the conditions where these various "species" of leftists can talk to each other through history, thereby sharing their insights and contributing to the ongoing debate about what is to be done. This he argues, is far more fruitful than the essentialism that is reflected in squabbling about who has the right to call themselves a Marxist.

To achieve this goal McKay roots his reconceptualization in the work of Antonio Gramsci. In particular, he argues for a historical approach that he terms "reconnaissance". He offers this approach as an alternative to thinking about left history in scorecard terms – trying to assess what was right and wrong about previous efforts to build a left tradition. This, he sees as fundamentally futile and ultimately contributes to pessimism and despondency. Too many studies of left history McKay might argue, are about "what went wrong" rather than about "what should be done".

A reconnaissance of left history would operate in two ways. First, it would provide a preliminary analysis or survey of a territory or topography. This is the traditional understanding of the word. At the same time, it would also operate in the military sense of the word in that it would function to provide information of military value related to the position, strengths, and resources of the enemy. In this sense, reconnaissance fits in nicely with Gramsci's notion of a war of position. A history based on reconnaissance, however, will not provide us with a clear and well-formulated synthesis. It will not answer the question of what is to be done through the generation of an authoritative statement. Instead it will allow us to "generate knowledge outside conventional boundaries, rather than fortifying what we already know" (95). In this way, it allows leftists to speak to each other across the many dialects of leftism that inform our traditions.

McKay's reconceptualization is, in some ways, a restatement of the debate that has raged within the left over the primacy of labour versus new social movements. He recognizes this and states:

*The risks of rethinking Canadian leftisms this way are not negligible. For one thing, we would ultimately change the subject(s) of the history of the Canadian left, to encompass a far greater diversity of people – those of religious and cultural figures, the First Nations and visible minorities, feminists and environmentalists, Quebec nationalists, among others – whose words and deeds can be linked to implicitly or explicitly to a post-liberal democratic future. This is a more complicated business than narrating the history of a party (not that we don't need more of that). (128)*

For myself, this would be a welcome development. The future of the left will have to remain rooted in workers and their experiences. But at the same time the leftism needs to resonate with a range of struggles against exploitation. McKay's work is an important step towards this possibility.

Finally, McKay writes with great empathy and sensitivity for the history of left struggles. In some respects his work is a tribute to those who have struggled for a better world, and

an invitation to all of us to respect those traditions, to integrate them into our own thinking and to carry forward in an effort to make objective the possibility of a post-liberal, post-capitalist democratic reality. He also writes with great humour and in an open and accessible style. This is a book that should be on the bookshelf of anyone who cares both about the history of the left in Canada, but also its future.