

Reviews & Debates

CANADIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY IN THE ERA OF BREXIT AND TRUMP

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Author's response to Socialist Studies Symposium on *Escape from the Staple Trap*.¹

The structure of *Escape from the Staple Trap* (Kellogg 2015a) was consciously chosen. In the face of deeply held political economy epistemologies, it was important to first construct a strong empirical foundation – using data extensively, looking at that data from multiple sides, as well as questioning and critiquing certain key hegemonic interpretations of empirical data from earlier eras. This empirical work revealed clearly that Canada must be considered a Global North country at the core of the world system. Only with that empirical foundation constructed, did the book then draw some political conclusions. In this Global North, core country – as in Germany, France, the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan – nationalism cannot be an ideological vehicle for progressive politics.

I will not be able to address all the points made by my friends and colleagues at the two book launches – one at Historical Materialism in Toronto and the other at Socialist Studies in Calgary. The ones that are written up here are interesting and challenging articles which can be read in their own right. But in reflecting on these contributions, it seems to me it might be helpful to reverse the order, and begin rather than end with politics. Specifically – why should we be concerned with the question of progressive politics and nationalism in the context of Global North, core economies? Radhika Desai suggests that here my critique “overshoots its target” and reminds us of the admonition by Marx and Engels that any left program “must in the first instance be national.” James Lawson makes a similar point, suggesting the possibility of a “Global North collective identity” which incorporates “a multi-layered understanding of internal oppression.”

¹ Thanks to William Carroll, Radhika Desai, Jessica Evans, James Lawson, Sandra Rein and Thom Workman for their contributions to the book launches for *Escape from the Staple Trap* at Historical Materialism 2016 (Toronto) and Socialist Studies 2016 (Calgary).

A short article cannot fully address these important points. To help further the discussion, I will restrict myself to illustrative examples. The year 2016 has given us two. Both the June 23 BREXIT referendum in the United Kingdom and the November 9 election of Donald Trump in the United States reveal toxic Global North nationalisms – “the thuggishness of xenophobic nationalisms” in Lawson’s words – riven with anti-immigrant racism. Whether these examples are sufficient to fully categorize Global North nationalism, I will leave to the reader to decide. At the very least, they illustrate some of the problems with which we are going to have to deal.

The Trump phenomenon in the United States is the most straightforward. In the 10 days after Trump’s victory, the Southern Poverty Law Center counted 867 hate incidents “with many targeting immigrants, African Americans and Muslims.” Richard Cohen, president of the Center, called it a “barrage of hate” (Sidahmed 2016). Trump was elected through an explicit mobilization of white nationalist sentiment, an open appeal to anti-Mexican and anti-Muslim racism. Racialized people of colour overwhelmingly supported Clinton (Clinton winning 29 million racialized votes to Trump’s 8 million). But Trump matched this through massive support from non-racialized (white) voters, outpolling Clinton in this category by 20.2 million. It wasn’t enough to win the popular vote (trailing Clinton by almost three million), but it was enough to win the Electoral College.

Trump mixed his racism with populism, in particular campaigning against trade deals. There is a well-developed left critique of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). Literally hundreds of articles and books have been written to document the manner in which these two trade deals institutionalize neoliberal, anti-working class policies. The left for decades has been engaged in a campaign against these deals – as part of the campaign against neoliberalism. In Canada, campaigning against neoliberal trade deals has been one of the defining features of left politics.

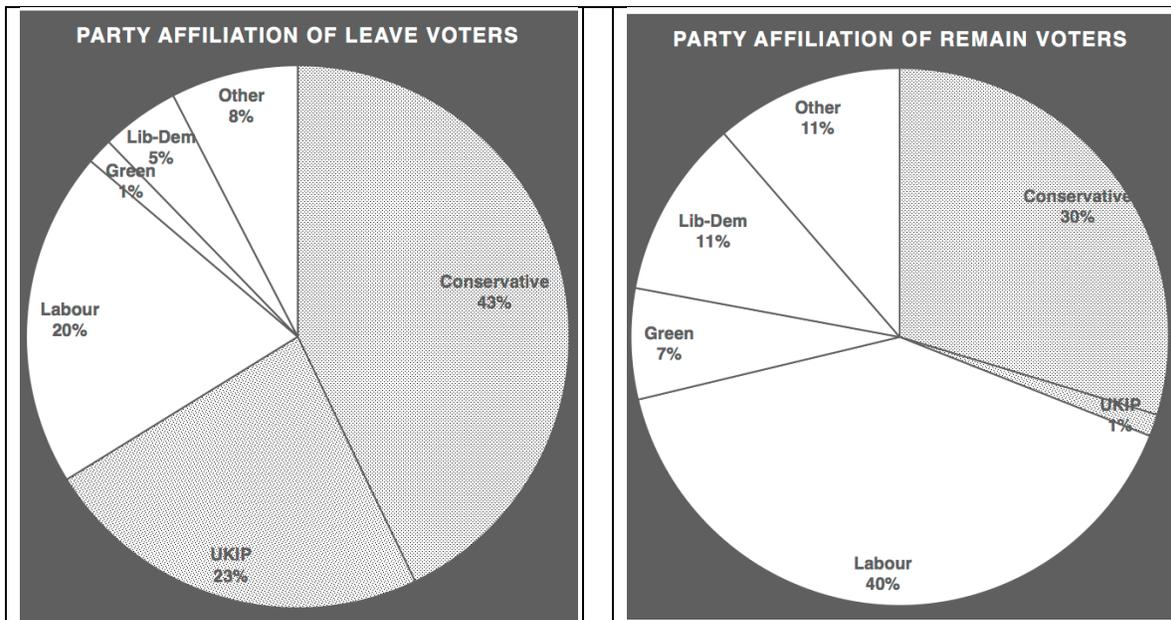
We are now confronted with this white nationalist President being the agent for the demise of the TPP, and quite possibly that of NAFTA. His racist nationalism split the working class. Union households by a small majority supported Clinton. But when unionists of colour are removed from the picture, the grim truth is that Trump won the support of almost 60% of non-racialized (white) union household voters (Election statistics are taken from Kellogg 2017). It should give us no comfort that these white trade unionists supported Trump because of his anti-TPP, anti-NAFTA message. It is actually a disaster that millions of trade unionists were willing to forgive the extreme racism and sexism emanating from Trump’s campaign, in exchange for an end to these trade deals. Racist white nationalism is now the public face of opposition to the TPP and NAFTA, and that is a move to the right.

What about BREXIT? The European Union, along with its predecessors, has been a subject of left critique for years. After the Second World War “the Labour Party

contained strong elements” that were suspicious of “the emerging institutional ideas about European economic integration. When the Treaty of Rome was finally signed in 1957 many believed the EEC to be a bosses’ cartel and wanted nothing to do with it” (Mayall 2015, 224). In the modern era, a very extensive literature emerged situating the institutions of European integration as core components of the framework of neoliberalism (Brenner 1999; Gill 1998; Hermann 2007; Mitchell 2006; Young 2000). The EU’s callous response to the unfolding crisis in Greece certainly provides contemporary evidence of this neoliberal orientation (Kellogg 2012). It was in this spirit that leading figures of the British left and workers’ movement – Tariq Ali, Lindsey German, John Rees, Mick Cash and others – argued that the “EU is irreversibly committed to privatization, welfare cuts, low wages and the erosion of trade union rights ... For these reasons we are committed to pressing for a vote to leave the EU in the forthcoming referendum on UK membership” (Cash, Hodgson, and Ali 2016).

However, when the vote came, these “LEXIT” voices were marginalized. It was the nationalist right, not the internationalist left, which dominated the victory of the “Leave” side. Figure 1 looks at support for both the “Leave” and “Remain” side by party affiliation (based on voting record from the national election in 2015).

Figure 1 – Party affiliation, Leave and Remain voters, ‘BREXIT’ referendum, June 23, 2016



Source: Author’s compilation from data available in YouGov (2016b)

Two-thirds of the Leave side was comprised of supporters of the Conservative Party (43%), and the ultra-nationalist U.K. Independence Party (23%). By contrast, these right-wing forces made up just 31% of the Remain side, whose largest component came from Labour (40%) followed by the Liberal-Democrats and “Other” (11% each) and the

Green Party (7%). Think of it this way: go to a mainstream “Leave” rally and you would be rubbing shoulders with Tories and white nationalists. Go to a mainstream “Remain” rally and you would be rubbing shoulders with Labour Party, Green and Liberal-Democrat supporters.

Focusing on just England (the dynamics in Scotland, and Northern Ireland were quite different), largely white areas voted to leave the EU, areas with concentrations of people of colour voted to stay. The population of London is 40% racialized. London voted overwhelmingly – 59.9% – to remain in the EU. In the North East of England, only 5% of the population is racialized. The North East voted overwhelmingly – 58% – to leave (Coles, Kirk, and Krol 2016; U.K. 2011). That pattern was repeated across the country.

In the last weeks of the campaign, then UKIP leader Nigel Farage unveiled a racist poster, picturing a “queue of mostly non-white migrants and refugees with the slogan ‘Breaking point: the EU has failed us all.’” Union leader Dave Prentis “described the UKIP poster as a ‘blatant attempt to incite racial hatred.’ He said: ‘This is scaremongering in its most extreme and vile form. Leave campaigners have descended into the gutter with their latest attempt to frighten working people into voting to leave the EU’ (Stewart and Mason 2016). But this scare-mongering worked. For “Remain” voters, concerns about immigration barely registered – just one percent saying it was a key to their position. For “Leave” voters, immigration was central – one-quarter saying it was “the most important” issue “in deciding how to vote in the referendum” (YouGov 2016a).

As in the United States, this racism has not remained at the level of scaremongering. July 2016 – the first full month after the referendum – saw a 41% spike in hate crimes, compared to the year previous (Forster 2016).

The U.S. and the U.K. are the two quintessentially Global North powers. In both, an upsurge of nationalism has pulled politics far to the right. That this nationalism has targeted institutions long critiqued by the left – the European Union, the TPP and NAFTA – can give us no comfort. German nationalism in the 1930s led to the dismantling of the Versailles Treaty – a treaty the left at the time clearly opposed. But when ripped up from the standpoint of Global North nationalism, we know with the benefit of hindsight, that this represented reactionary, not progressive politics.

Turn to Canada. The motivation to write *Escape from the Staple Trap* came from a long reluctance by the Canadian left to put ourselves and “our” nationalism in the category of Britain and the United States. Since the 1960s, there has been a constant attempt to a) deny Canada’s membership in the core of the world system; and b) on this basis, hope for a progressive Canadian nationalism. There will be little argument that Donald Trump’s nationalism is reactionary. The LEXIT campaign in Britain was at pains to separate itself from the reactionary nationalism driving the mainstream BREXIT campaign. But in Canada, many still live in the shadow of a left-nationalist movement which saw it as progressive to frame our opposition to capitalism in Canadian nationalist terms.

Thom Workman suggests that the “Escape” part of the book’s title evokes a “craving to move beyond the immuring constraints of an intellectual discourse.” It is a craving, and it is more – a desperate necessity. If we don’t escape the epistemologies of the past, we will be unable to confront capitalism not just in its Canadian, but in its Trump and BREXIT clothes. Thomas Walkom, for one, has not been able to make that escape. In the wake of the Trump victory, Walkom – trapped in the CPE discourse of an earlier era – kept his focus on our old target, NAFTA, refusing to see the problem of it being dismantled from the nationalist right. “We should relax. We should take a deep breath” he advises us. “Depending on how it’s done, getting rid of NAFTA could work for us” (Walkom 2016). We already know how it will be done. If NAFTA is dismantled in the next four years, it will be at the initiative of a white nationalist regime in the United States committed to extending the rule of Trump’s right wing politics for a generation. This article was not a one-off. The next month, he went even further, praising the president-elect for supposedly saving 1,000 jobs by staring down “corporate giant United Technologies” demonstrating apparently “that globalization is not inevitable ... that market forces, while powerful, need not always be supreme ... this big businessman has shown that it is possible to challenge big business” (Walkom 2016b). This is completely wrong. We cannot judge the racist right – whether that be Trump, Mussolini or Berlusconi – by their economic policies. Their agenda is not about aiding the working class as a whole, but aiding one section in order to demonize another. The point is not whether we are for or against NAFTA and globalization. The point is how we organize to oppose the shift right in continental politics represented by the Trump victory.

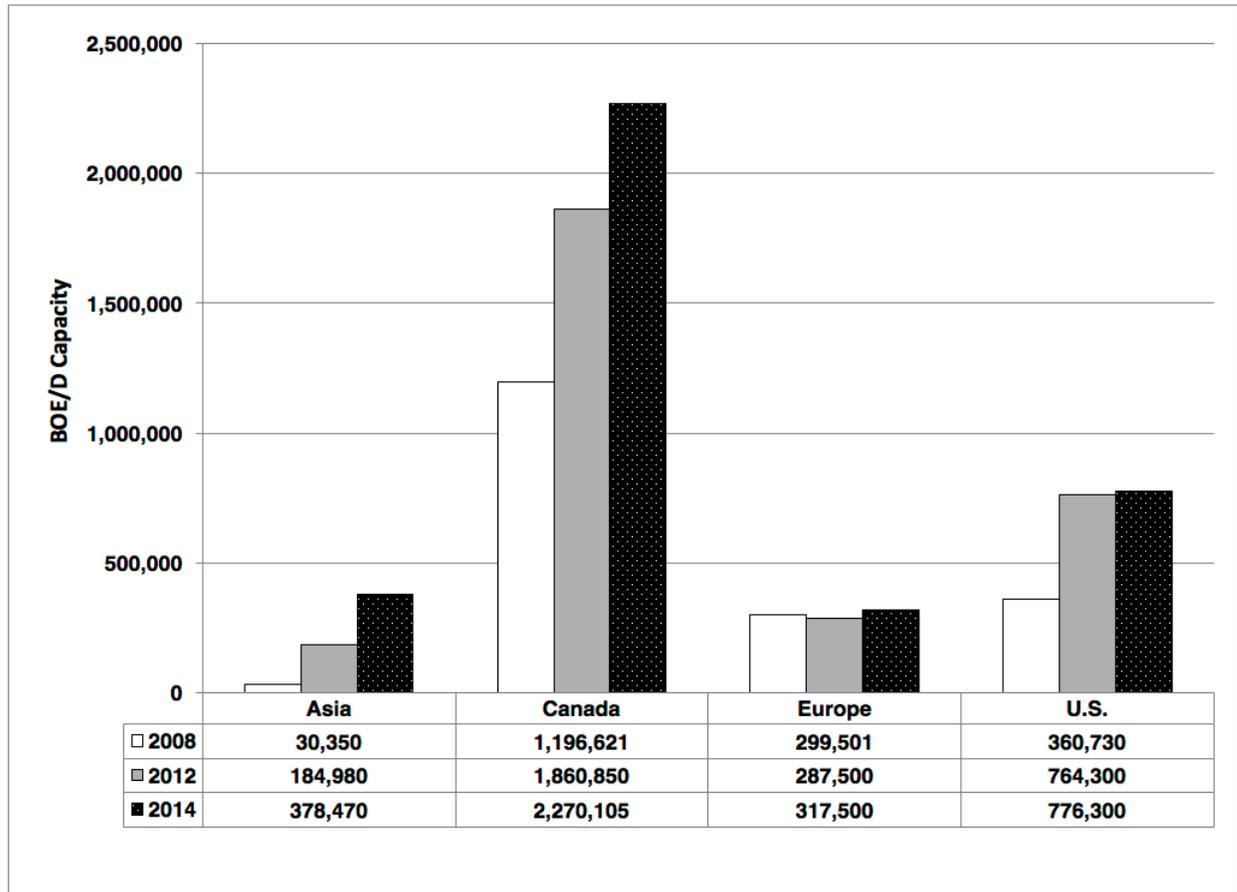
That is not to say that nationalism *per se* is reactionary. Lawson correctly remarks that I make “left-nationalist exceptions” for the nationally oppressed (although I prefer to think of this as acknowledging the right to resistance of the oppressed, whatever form that resistance takes). And Lawson is correct, key figures in the left-nationalist political economy tradition made exactly this point. Mel Watkins, of course, comes to mind. If this was not emphasized enough in the book, that should be corrected. Watkins and I will agree, that for indigenous peoples, for the countries of the former colonies in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Africa, nationalism is very often the political vehicle for progressive politics. But that is only because these peoples experience the oppression of imperialism. In economic terms, that means oppression carried out by the Global North, core countries – of which Canada is a fully paid-up member. Nationalism is often the ideological frame within which resistance to imperialism takes place. Canada cannot claim membership in the category of “oppressed country” and therefore cannot embrace nationalism as a vehicle for progressive change.

We have had three waves of left nationalism in Canada which have made the attempt to frame our opposition to capitalism in nationalist terms. The original Waffle moment was by far the strongest. The Free Trade nationalist moment was significant, if less powerful than its predecessor. The anti-globalization, semi-periphery nationalism of

the 21st century was an echo of the two earlier moments, a nationalist moment which stayed at the level of theory, having no associated political movement– except for a brief attempt by *Canadian Dimension* to launch what they called a nationalist resistance movement against corporate capitalism (Kellogg 2015a, 8 and 142).

But the habits of a nationalist epistemology have proven persistent. Since writing *Escape from the Escape from the Staple Trap*, I published in the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, an article on the tar sands, which makes the simple point that the tar sands problem is a made in Canada problem. Calgary-based corporations are at the centre of tar sands exploitation. But the nationalist habit of offshoring problems in Canada, means that in much of the literature surrounding the tar sands, there is a concerted effort to prove that the tar sands are not actually Canadian, that in fact the tar sands are majority-controlled by non-Canadians. In its most unfortunate guise, this predilection has taken the form of an anti-Chinese discourse, proclaiming the risk of Canada becoming a “resource colony” of China. There is no basis for such a claim. Figure 2 shows the increase in tar sands exploitation capacity by country or region of control. There has been a significant increase in Asian corporate control, from 30,000 barrels a day capacity to almost 400,000. European tar sands production has stagnated at around 300,000 barrels a day, and U.S. capacity has more than doubled from around 360,000 BOE/D to almost 780,000. But all of this is in the shadow of the massive and steady increase of Canadian corporate tar sands exploitation capacity, from 1.2 million BOE/D in 2008 to 1.9 million in 2012 and 2.3 million in 2014.

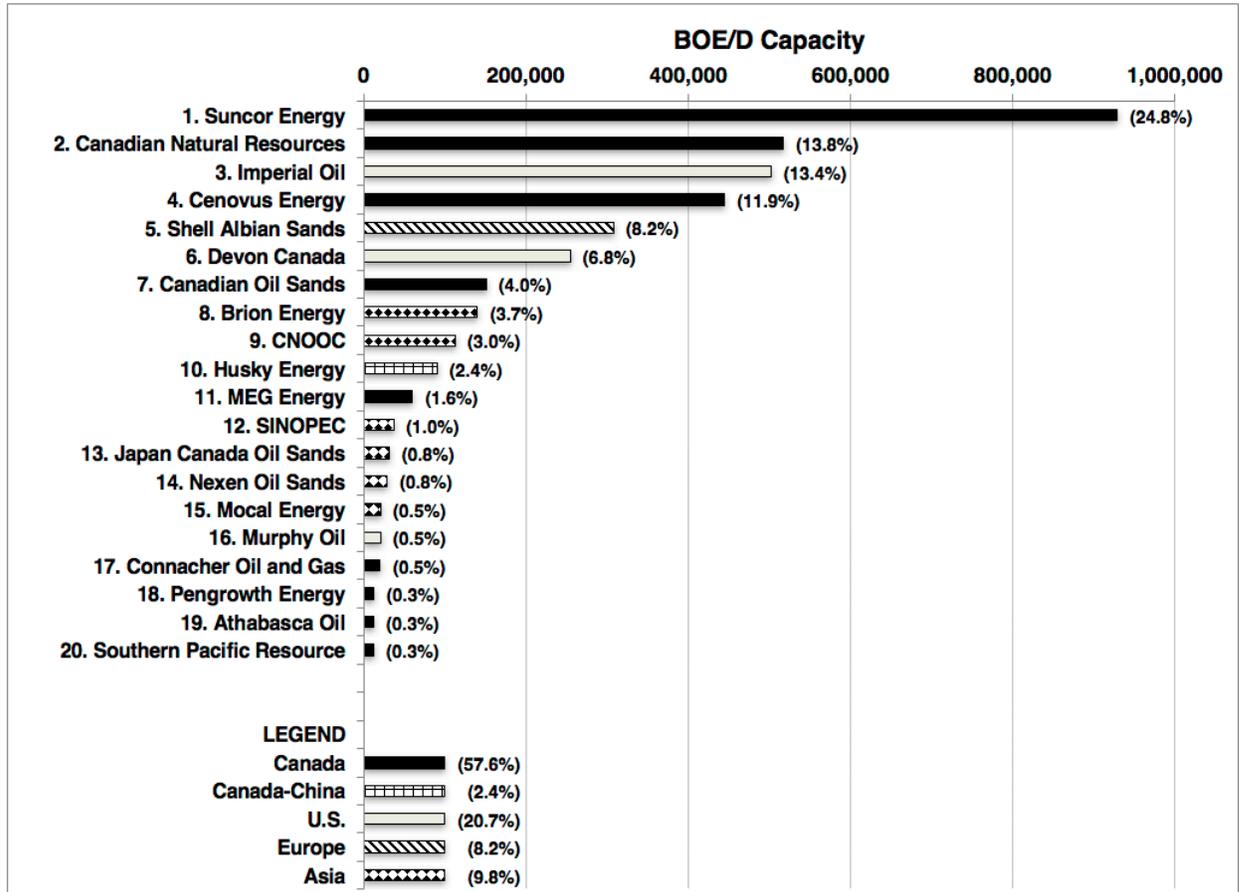
Figure 2 – Country or region of control: Alberta bitumen sands, BOE/D (Operating or Under Construction), 2008, 2012 and 2014



Source: Kellogg (2015b, 238)

Figure 3 takes a snapshot of corporate control of the tar sands in Alberta for the year 2014. The list is dominated by Calgary-based corporations – Suncor Energy and Canadian Natural Resources taking the first two spots, Cenovus Energy the fourth, Canadian Oil Sands the seventh. The U.S. has the most non-Canadian presence at over 20%, followed by Asian and European based corporations at just under 10 percent. There is a small “Canada-China” category at under three percent. That is a one corporation category for Husky Oil, because of controversy over whether it should be called a Canadian or a Chinese corporation. However, even without Husky Oil, Canada dominates the Alberta tar sands picture with 57.6% of BOE/D capacity.

Figure 3 – Top 20 Bitumen Extracting Corporations (Operating and Under Construction), BOE/D – Alberta 2014



Source: Kellogg (2015b, 239)

The tar sands economy in Alberta is the clearest example of what I refer to in the book as Canada’s addiction to extractivism. Lawson suggests that I should “show more clearly how a staples “addiction” differs from a staples ‘trap.’” This is a good point, and anticipates an argument that will be developed at length in *Arms and the Nation* (Kellogg In progress). In brief – the claim of the staple trap framework is that staple addiction would hold back industrial development in other areas. *Escape from the Staple Trap* tried to show that while that was the experience for many ex-colonies, it was not for Canada. Desai summarizes the point well, saying that the book demonstrates “Canada’s normality as a capitalist nation with a home market which provides the basis of the formation and expansion of capitalism.” An addiction to extractivism is something different. It is exactly parallel to the addiction to military production in the United States. A prejudice towards extractivism – just as with a prejudice towards industrial militarism – does not hold back the development of industrial capitalism. Both Canada and the United States are firm members of the advanced capitalist club. But – it massively distorts the *kind of*

development that takes place, and unnecessarily diverts huge amounts of society's surplus towards activities that are, in the end, completely wasteful.

"Ideology is no mere error" as Desai rightly says, and her question is a good one – why should such a wrong paradigm have proven so tenacious? The political economy evidence is relentless. There is overwhelming evidence to demonstrate that Canada needs to be conceived as an advanced capitalist economy at the core of the world system. Epistemologies seem, however, to be more powerful than political economy.

- Canada has experienced manufacturing decline relative to the U.S. – if you exclude the auto sector. Why? It exists. Oshawa exists. Windsor exists. St. Catharines exists. Excluding them makes no sense.
- Canada has a weak manufacturing sector if you make a hard distinction between a factory which produces needles (an end-product) and one which produces nails (an input, not an end-product). Why? Isn't the key question labour, capital and exchange value, not the use-value of the product created?
- Canada processes bitumen sands for export. Venezuela processes bitumen sands for export. But contrast the mild slowdown in Canada associated with the 2014 crash in the price of oil, with the catastrophic situation in Venezuela. Canada's is a core economy with high-productivity and a high and rising organic composition of capital. It is not a petro state, unless we make that phrase meaningless. It cannot in any way be put in any category alongside Venezuela (Chase-Dunn 1998; McNally 1981; Kellogg 2015c).

In the face of overwhelming evidence, a paradigm's epistemological hold proves sticky. In part that is bound up with a key corollary to Canadian left nationalism, rightly emphasized by Desai – an exaggeration of the power of U.S. imperialism. Never more clearly outlined than in the path-breaking analysis of Kari Levitt (1970), the two were always seen together – a declining Canadian capitalism subordinate to an ever-more powerful U.S. capitalism – in spite of the fact that the evidence for secular U.S. decline in the world system is overwhelming (Kellogg 2015d). So – I will address the question on ideology by asking another one – why is there such a predilection to exaggerating the role of the U.S. in the world system? I think if we answer that one, the answers about Canada will follow rather quickly.

Why does this matter? Because false theories can lead to dead-end strategies. In the 1980s, the left identified the main enemy as U.S. imperialism, and in Canada the key was to combat CUFTA (the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement) and then NAFTA. Fair enough. But, with a perspective that sees Canada as oppressed, sections of the left had no trouble seeking alliances on a nationalist basis to prosecute that campaign – specifically with the Liberal Party of Canada – the party which in 1994, implemented NAFTA.

Today we have a critique of the TPP. But we can't just oppose it in any fashion. Donald Trump is its most vocal opponent, and a TPP death at his hands will not benefit the progressive movements. We have a critique of the European Union. But we can't just oppose it in any fashion. George Galloway created confusion and disgust when he appeared on a platform with Nigel Farage to oppose the EU (Kaide Wolf 2016). We combat the tar sands, but understand that this puts us up not principally against the U.S. or China, but rather against Calgary, Canada and our own corporate capitalism. We cannot offshore the specific problem of the tar sands, nor the more general problem of capitalism.

One side of the politics flowing from this is restrictive, just as it was for the anti-war movement in Karl Liebknecht's time when he argued that "the main enemy is at home" (Liebknecht 1915). This restricts those to whom we can look to for alliances. Justin Trudeau has just taught us again the bitter lesson that the Liberal Party of Canada will not be one of those allies when it comes to combatting the tar sands.

But the other side of the politics flowing from this is expansive. Once we stop looking to false friends such as the Liberals, we might be better able to see true friends with whom we can link arms across all borders, including the one between Canada and the U.S. We won't get climate justice from Trudeau and the Liberals. But we might just take a step towards it with the Standing Rock Sioux in their just struggle against the Dakota Access pipeline.

Economics dictates that we will need these allies. Desai reminds us of the trenchant political economy of Rosa Luxemburg, who insisted on a sober examination of the real dynamics of capitalism and its recurring "gluts of capital and commodities and crises." We can usefully study the writings of this great political economist to get a sense of the crises to come in the BREXIT / Trump era (Luxemburg 1910). We can also usefully study Nikolai Bukharin (1915), who more than any other political economist sketched a framework which explains the drive towards phenomena like the TPP and NAFTA – the tendency of capitalism to transcend its national boundaries, to cartelize production relations, part of which takes the form of regional trade and investment blocs – NAFTA, TPP etc. We do need to combat these, not on a nationalist basis, but with an eye to regional solidarity, political and economic.

Politics also dictates that we will need these allies. Lawson provocatively raises the figure of Gramsci and his concept of a counter-hegemonic national-popular bloc (Gramsci 1971). Without getting into a long discussion, let me just say that this is a very helpful framework, and one which does not in any way contradict a critique of Global North nationalism. We can also usefully study Leon Trotsky's concept of the United States of Europe (Trotsky 1923) – ridiculed in its time by Lenin, but helpful I think in a) recognizing the material pressures determining regionalization, but b) insisting that this be organized on the basis of solidarity, democracy, openness and accountability. We can also usefully study the noble experiment of ALBA, in difficulty today, but from its

announcement in 2004, putting on the table the possibility of a solidaristic, not neoliberal, regional alliance (Kellogg 2007).

But that is getting ahead of ourselves. We will debate over time the manner in which to develop left policies to counter neoliberalism and capitalist cartelization. A preliminary step is to develop a coherent explanation of the contours of our system – and Canada’s place in it. *Escape from the Staple Trap* is one attempt to advance this discussion.

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