

Reviews & Debates

**CASTING OFF THE CANADIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY
TRADITION: COMMENTS ON PAUL KELLOGG'S ESCAPE FROM
THE STAPLE TRAP: CANADIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY AFTER
LEFT NATIONALISM**

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As the suggestive title of the book indicates, this is a story of “escape” – responding on the one side to a sort of craving to move beyond the immuring constraints of an intellectual discourse and seeking, on the other side, a newer, more enriching program of analysis and commentary. *Escape from the Staples Trap* responds to the immuring intellectual discourse in the Canadian Political Economy (CPE) tradition. Since so much ancient and modern philosophy has been premised upon this idea of casting off the smothering or suffocating intellectual paradigms of the past it is appropriate to linger on this notion of “escape” for a moment. For Plato it was the epistemological and ethical relativism of the sophists, for the 17th century philosophers the challenge was to “throw off” the Aristotelean-inspired schools, for Enlightenment thinkers the game was on to sweep away tradition as it was manifested in the authority of the church and the privilege of the aristocracy, and for Marx it was Hegelian-inspired “idealism” in its various forms. Perhaps nowhere was this notion of escape more forcefully pressed than in the American pragmatic tradition of the last 150 years – beginning with John Dewey’s attack on the “philosophical fallacy” at the center of the Western philosophical tradition, an attack which later manifested itself in the wholesale postmodern repudiation of the appearance/reality distinction and its corresponding celebration of life’s patently evident vistas.

Although its horizons are more modest, *Escape from the Staples Trap* conforms in significant respects to such noble intellectual endeavours. The book unfolds simultaneously on two dimensions – an empirical argument about the maturation of

Canada as a capitalist social formation, and an analysis of the evolving theoretical discourse of CPE among scholars and commentators, especially as this discourse has been affected by “left nationalism.” In a truly critical spirit, *Escape from the Staples Trap* advises that we should not assume that the CPE tradition is self-explanatory. It gently implores scholars to account for the rise of the field itself and, therewith, to give the Nietzschean aphorism that “good theory knows bad theory” its full due. Perhaps most importantly, *Escape from the Staples Trap* suggests that the commonplace CPE assumption that Canada is somehow unique, exceptional, or distinguished — as opposed to being a mainstream capitalist social formation, a bit pedestrian or even a tad nondescript — is fundamentally flawed. It implicitly invites a new generation of critical scholars to retire the “Canadian” part of CPE – reducing it to a largely inconsequential adjective – and leaving only the notion of a capitalist social formation to be explored in a less arrogating manner.

The conclusion of *Escape from the Staples Trap* is telling: “We need a clear understanding that Canada is an *advanced capitalist country* whose *government* protects the wealth and power of dominant corporations through public policy at home and imperialism abroad” (my emphasis). Here we have two crucial analytical invitations. The first underscores the invitation that Canada — once it matured as a capitalist social formation in the latter half of the 19th century — should be seen as having ordinary trajectories, standard crisis tendencies, run-of-the-mill unemployment and everyday poverty. The second invitation underscores that fact that the Canadian federal state is a rather ordinary state that preserves the social relations of capitalist coercion at any and all costs. This is the state understood as an array of institutions which seek to optimize the conditions of capitalist accumulation, and a state which accordingly plays a significant role in helping the community of imperialists shore up their global ambitions. These analytical invitations demand that scholars in the political economy tradition shed the oft-implicit narrative of a benevolent Canada by bluntly confronting both the country’s genocidal past and its oppressive imperialist present.

And with this decisive intellectual enticement we are transported necessarily to the question of the heretofore circumscribed relationship between the CPE and the varying Marxist tradition. The old encrusted CPE tradition was wedded to paradigms that tended to avoid Marxist analytical categories altogether, while the new CPE tradition tends to reduce class and class struggle to variables in an overarching eclectic paradigm of liberal political economy complete with naturalized concepts, fetishized categories, leading and largely inconsequential statistical homilies, and nomothetic explanations of causality largely bereft of an adequate sensitivity to the stratified ontology of capitalist social formations. *Escape from the Staples Trap* has the feel of giving a new generation of scholars the permission to embark on an analytical journey that explicitly engages Marxian political economy. It will be a rewarding journey if it ever gets off the ground—

broadly framed by the historical materialist tradition and its sensitivity to the social relations of gender, racial and class power, especially as each are affected and contoured by the “dull compulsion” of capital’s inner logics and its hegemonic institutional configurations. It will be inevitably drawn into the various attempts within the Marxist tradition to account for capitalism’s immanent tendencies toward crises, engaging the three leading Marxist theories of crisis including *i)* the falling rate of profit thesis as labour-saving technologies introduced in the context of destructive competition drags down the rate of profit and therewith corporate investment *ii)* the various underconsumptionist traditions centering monopolization, the lack of effective demand and the inevitable drift towards stagnation and *iii)* the profit-squeeze theories emphasizing the consequences of rising real wages on corporate profitability. A new periodization of Canada’s past will emerge as the global economic crises of the late 1890s, the early 1930s, the early 1970s and the late 2000s are centered. A more suspecting view of the Canadian state is bound to emerge as its singular determination to preserve and advance optimal conditions of capital accumulation is brought into focus. And a more profitable paradigm for measuring the historical evolution and trajectory of Canada’s left in all of its guises will be forged, especially the left’s ambivalence on the basic question of capitalism.

Escape from the Staples trap is an important turning point in the CPE tradition. This is one of the more important scholarly contributions to the CPE field to have come along over the decades. It deserves to be read and debated as widely as possible.