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Article

CANADA'S NATIONAL QUESTIONS, FREE TRADE AND THE LEFT

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Abstract

It is now more than 30 years since the launch of the bilateral Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (CUFTA), predecessor to the multilateral North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the (now abandoned) Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). For a generation, these "free trade" initiatives provided an important part of the framework in which political movements developed in Canada, engendering debates and controversies which continue to this day. When a new moment of trade politics emerged with Donald Trump's challenge to NAFTA, some veterans from those earlier anti-free trade battles were unable to see the new, white nationalist terrain upon which Trump was operating. This article – organized principally around the author's own engagement with the anti-free trade movements of the 1980s – suggests that this inability to see clearly the new context of anti-free trade politics was rooted in the incomplete and contradictory left-nationalist theory which underpinned most anti-free trade politics of that earlier era. The article suggests that while there are national questions in Canada – in particular those associated with Indigenous peoples and with Quebec – the attempt to articulate a parallel "national question" in Canada as a whole has proven to be impossible.

Keywords

left-nationalism, free trade, CUFTA, NAFTA, national question

When, on the second day of January 1988, the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (CUFTA) was signed by representatives of Canada and the United States, 2,000 gathered in a protest march on the Ambassador Bridge between Windsor and Detroit (Broughner 1988). That march was one

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aspect of the movement against what we called at the time "free trade"[2] – a set of policies pushed by Ronald Reagan in the United States and Brian Mulroney in Canada, a phrase that came to symbolize the employers' offensive in both countries, and, in spite of considerable opposition, a policy which came into effect one year after the Ambassador Bridge demonstration.

"Free trade" polices of the 1980s were a cornerstone of a conservative policy framework designed to strengthen the hands of employers and weaken unions and social movements. The same year as the Ambassador Bridge demonstration, I argued that it was a policy framework supported by "the bulk of the Canadian capitalist class and the right" while "the anti-free trade camp has behind it the principle organizations of the working class" (Kellogg 1988a). A Labor Notes' booklet analyzing the deal, captured the essence of this dichotomy in its very title – *Unions and Free Trade: Solidarity vs. Competition* (Moody and McGinn 1992). At its best, resistance to free trade took the form of cross-border solidarity, uniting unions and social movements in the two countries.

Some thirty years later, opposition to the deals associated with the term free trade, has a completely different character. Since 2015, the most visible opponent of free trade in the United States has been Donald Trump with his MAGA – "Make America Great Again" – nationalism. Elsewhere, I have sketched the racist contours of Trump's attack on free trade – a simmering trade war targeting in particular exports from China, an anti-Chinese trade policy that mirrors his anti-Mexican and anti-Muslim immigration policy (Kellogg 2019; 2020), of a piece with the anti-free trade, anti-immigrant policy of "Brexit" pursued in the United Kingdom by Boris Johnson.

Many however, are operating as if anti-free trade politics in the 21st century can simply adapt the approaches of the 1980s. A key component of Trump's attack on free trade, was his demand for the re-negotiation of CUFTA's successor treaty – the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Welcoming Trump's call to renegotiate NAFTA, Jerry Dias, president of UNIFOR, said that "NAFTA has failed workers and that a major overhaul is required." (*Canada NewsWire* 2017). This echoed the approach of the now scandal-ridden Dennis Williams, president of the United Auto Workers (UAW) who, one day after Trump's election, said he wanted a meeting with the new president "to map a plan to overturn or renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement, blamed for allowing high-wage U.S. manufacturing jobs to go to low-wage Mexico" (Bomey 2016). Long-time critic of free trade, journalist Thomas Walkom, agreed, writing that "getting rid of NAFTA could work for us" (Walkom 2016).

This attempt to see "progressive" possibilities from Trump's anti-trade rhetoric, was shocking on its face. It was not very difficult to see that the manner in which Trump attacked NAFTA amounted to (barely) coded anti-Mexican racism, completely consistent with Trump's white nationalist U.S.-first politics. That this was not visible to some veterans of anti-free trade

[2] The "free" component of the phrase "free trade" is actually misleading. Nominally associated with the "freeing" of trade from what some see as intrusive government policies, the extent of "freedom" represented by CUFTA and deals like it depends very much on where that economy sits in the world hierarchy of nations. Be that as it may, "free trade" was the name we gave the policies of Mulroney and Reagan.

movements from the 1980s and 1990s, reflects the partial and incomplete nature of that era's anti-free trade politics.

While there *was* a class content to free trade politics of the 1980s, these politics were simultaneously entangled with a complicated variant of Canadian nationalism, a nationalism which made for unlikely alliances. Of course, fiery auto union leader Bob White was part of the anti-free trade campaign. But we sometimes forget that multi-millionaire and anti-union auto parts magnate, Frank Stronach, was equally anti-free trade, stating in the run-up to the 1988 federal election: "If Brian Mulroney is elected with a majority and this deal goes through, we'll lose Canada" (Quoted in *Toronto Star* 1988).

This nationalism was pervasive. During the demonstration on the Ambassador Bridge, the marchers, when confronted by police, broke out in song – not with "Solidarity Forever"– but rather with "O Canada" (Broughner 1988), a song whose notes would be quite discordant on today's social movement demonstrations. The 1988 document cited above, argued that while it was important to "oppose the 'free trade' arguments of capital and the right and in doing so line up with the anti-free trade forces" it was also important "from this standpoint … [to] carry a sharp opposition to the Canadian nationalism that dominates this camp" (Kellogg 1988a).

Elsewhere (Kellogg 2015, 4–8) I have suggested that the anti-free trade moment in the late 1980s and early 1990s should be considered the second of three left-nationalist moments in Canada, a weaker and less organized version of the first moment, associated with the Waffle – a left-wing group within the New Democratic Party (NDP) in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Within that important political formation, it was taken as given that Canada was an oppressed country – oppressed by U.S. imperialism – and that a nationalist resistance movement within the Canadian state was an indispensable first step in any progressive politics. At its most extreme, this left nationalism imported the term "comprador" from radical literature analyzing imperialism in the Global South, using this evocative adjective to describe Canada's "dependent" capitalist class.

Theory has implications for practice. In countries with actual dependent, comprador elites, beholden to the imperialist power of the day – Vietnam under French, Japanese and then U.S. domination; the Indian sub-continent under the British empire; the Democratic Republic of Congo suffering under Belgian colonialism – the national struggle dominates everything. Until imperialism and settler-colonialism are defeated, and national sovereignty asserted, little progress on other fronts can even begin. Although understanding perfectly well that Canada could not be categorized with these oppressed nations, political economists of the Waffle-era nonetheless over and over again were drawn to terms like "comprador" and "dependency" and attempted to take political practices appropriate for the Global South and adapt them to Canada's Global North conditions. On the one hand, this meant misunderstanding the nature of moves to "Canadianize" the economy. On the other, it meant misreading the nature of the threats contained in deals such as CUFTA and NAFTA.

The first left nationalist moment occurred in the context of the energy policies adopted by Pierre Trudeau's Liberal governments – beginning in 1975 with the creation of Petro-Canada as a Crown Corporation and continuing in 1980 with the launch of the National Energy Program

(NEP). In 1981, former Waffle leader Robert Laxer was a key driver in a group called the "Committee for the Canadianization of the Petroleum Industry". He and 14 other Committee members – including Walter Gordon, Mel Hurtig and former NDP leader Tommy Douglas – met with Trudeau to congratulate him on his policy, and urge him to "accelerate the effort" to Canadianize the petroleum industry (Gray 1981). This was a continuation of work begun the previous year, when former Waffle leader, the late Mel Watkins, closed a three-day symposium on transnational corporations praising the Liberal policy, prompting "a beaming federal Mines Minister Judy Erola" to tell Watkins "that he will like the federal budget being prepared" (Moses 1980).

It was important to take a stand in defence of NEP. The Trudeau Liberals were challenging the right of private oil interests to extract profits from the exploitation of petroleum resources, relatively untaxed and relatively unregulated. But to mix this up with a call for "Canadianization" was to muddy the waters. In 1979, Douglas had vigorously supported PetroCanada's bid to acquire the Husky from its then U.S. owners. In the end PetroCanada lost out, and Husky was purchased by a Canadian corporation, Alberta Gas Trunk Line Co. Ltd. While disappointed that the Crown Corporation had failed and a private corporation succeeded, Douglas, nonetheless, joined the board of Husky in May 1980, saying "at least the firm is now in Canadian hands and that is a good thing" (Quoted in J. Fraser 1980).

I argued at the time that Douglas and the "Canadianization" left did not understand that these Liberal policies were not "left", but represented rather "the continued growth of the state capitalist section of the Canadian economy" (Kellogg 1981). A clear understanding of what was at stake came from Marc Lalonde, a senior cabinet minister in the Liberal government at the time. The *Financial Post* quoted him as saying: "The National Energy Program, which some of our critics have described as socialist, will turn out to be one of the most powerful spurs to Canadian capitalist endeavours in the history of this country" (Quoted in Kellogg 1981).

This focus on a supposed "national" question in Canada – led some to very problematic positions during the second moment of left nationalism. In the campaign which preceded the 21 November 1988 federal election, the pro-free trade Mulroney Conservatives were up against two anti-free trade parties – John Turner's Liberals and Ed Broadbent's NDP. Canada's most important left magazine, *Canadian Dimension* called free trade "a disaster" and that "therefore, the goal is clear: to elect a government which will not implement this Trade Agreement". *Dimension* had historically supported the NDP, understanding clearly the pro-corporate nature of the Liberal Party. In 1988 however, while disavowing any blanket support for the Liberal Party, *Dimension's* editors nonetheless argued that "[t]here may be ridings where it makes tactical sense to vote for a Liberal, when the Liberal candidate is a particularly strong and effective opponent" of free trade (*Canadian Dimension* 1988). I argued at the time that this bending towards the Liberal Party was based on a misreading of the nature of the attacks represented by free trade. "The attacks on social welfare, economic restructuring and job layoffs that *Dimension* fears will result from the Free Trade Agreement … did not begin with that piece of paper, and they will not end with its being

ripped in two" (Kellogg 1988b). At the time, the anti-working class politics of Liberal governments prior to 1988 could be offered into evidence. Today, we can add to the dossier the fact that the anti-free trade Liberal party, when in office in 1994, was the party to implement NAFTA.

A far more serious problem emerged following Mulroney's victory in that 1988 election. John Conway noted that "[m]any in English Canada … irrationally blamed the Québécois for Mulroney's victory and his securing of free trade" (2004, 134). Prominent nationalist Mel Hurtig "was very disappointed. I thought it would be very close. What I did not expect was the total collapse of the Liberals and NDP in the province of Quebec despite signs of big opposition to the trade deal elsewhere. It was really Quebec that swung the tide in this election" (Quoted in Dawe and Hutchison 1988). Others in the anti-free trade camp expressed more than disappointment. Long-time *Socialist Register* editor and then York University professor, Reg Whitaker, called the vote in Quebec "the single most dispiriting aspect" of the election. "If the election had been held only in English Canada, the Tories would have fallen 8 seats short of a majority, and free trade would have been blocked. To be blunt, free trade was imposed upon English Canada on the backs of Quebec voters … Quebec domination of Canadian politics has never been more obvious, nor more abrasive" (Whitaker 1989, 12). Besides being offensive, Whitaker's comments were based on a misunderstanding of the political dynamics within Quebec. Hurtig, Whitaker and others were fixated on the U.S. as the principal enemy. In Quebec, however, the main political issue for generations had been an English-dominated Canadian state based in Ottawa.

This should have been clear from any even cursory study of history. Quebec's contemporary nationalist movement emerged in the 1960s in response to the long-shadow of English-domination – a domination so pronounced that many union contracts, governing the lives of a largely francophone workforce, were written in English. It was a movement which endured martial law in the "October Crisis" of 1970 and engendered the magnificent general strike of 1972. As I wrote at the time: "It is English-Canada which has oppressed Quebec for 200 years. It is English-Canadian capital which has benefitted from the cheap labour pool in Quebec. It is English-Canadian chauvinism which makes the going rough for the youngsters from Sherbrooke who look for employment elsewhere in Canada" (Kellogg 1988c).

It should also have been clear from any even cursory study of electoral dynamics within Quebec. A 1980 referendum called by the governing Parti Québécois (PQ) had been supported by 40% of the population but rejected by 60%. This was followed by the humiliating constitutional agreement of 1981 leading to the 1982 repatriation of the Canadian constitution, an agreement and repatriation happening against the explicit opposition of one province – Quebec. It was this – the national question wrapped in the language of constitutions – not disputes over free trade, which dominated politics in Quebec. One person who understood this very well was new Conservative leader Brian Mulroney. In 1984, Mulroney's first election campaign as Conservative leader pitted him against Liberal Prime Minister John Turner. As late as 30 July 1984, the Liberals were 10 points ahead of the Conservatives nationally, in large part because of an enormous lead in Quebec, where the Conservatives could register the support of just 27% of the population (Adams, Dasko, and Corbeil 1984). But one week later, Mulroney, accepting his party's nomination as candidate in

Sept-Iles, delivered a speech "aimed at those who voted for the PQ in 1981, and who were angry at the way Quebec was left out of the constitutional settlement the same year" (G. Fraser 1984). Support for the Conservatives in Quebec soared. It was this emphasis on Quebec's national rights which won Mulroney his surprise majority in 1984. In response, René Levesque – founder and leader of the PQ and Premier of Quebec until 1985 – mooted a new approach: the "*beau risque*". Sovereignty might for a time be out of reach, but greater provincial powers and a full place within the Constitution (from which Quebec to this day remains excluded) might well be possible. Levesque thought it to be far more likely for these to be won from the Progressive-Conservatives than from the Liberals (Conway 2004, 119–21; Gagnon and Montcalm 1990, 159–64). This emphasis on Quebec's national rights was again the basis for Mulroney's majority in 1988 and his domination of the vote in Quebec – but it was a story little studied in left circles in English-Canada.

While Waffle-influenced left nationalism remained hegemonic through the 1980s, there were always other currents of thought, taking left politics in a different direction. In a 1986 review article (Kellogg 1986), I highlighted an early essay by William Carroll, in which he said that it "should give pause for thought" that left nationalist political economy could predict only relative decline for Canadian capitalism, and could not account for what Jorge Niosi had called a *renaissance* of Canadian capitalism in the 1970s and 1980s, "the relative resurgence of Canadian capital in the face of declining U.S. hegemony" (Carroll 1985, 22). Abbie Bakan (1987) developed a critique of the limits of left nationalism, also leaning on the important work of Niosi, who in a 1985 book had sketched an impressive picture of the very developed nature of Canadian capitalism.

Canadian multinationals … include the world's second largest aluminum producer (Alcan), the world's largest shoe manufacturer (Bata Shoes), the world's largest and third largest distilleries (Seagram and Hiram Walker), North America's second largest telecommunications equipment manufacturer (Northern Telecom), the world's largest producer of business forms (Moore Corp.), the world's fourth largest producer of farm machinery (Massey-Ferguson), a corporation that produces 10% of the world's synthetic rubber (Polysar), the world's largest and second largest nickel producers (Inco and Falconbridge), and the world's largest lead-zinc producer (Cominco). (Niosi 1985, 58)

Many of the corporations named here are long gone, and the contours of contemporary capitalism are quite different two generations later than they were in the 1980s. That said, the list is nonetheless impressive, and a sign of the way in which Canada was even in that decade, entrenched at the top of the world capitalist system.

Phil Resnick argued that a central pillar of left nationalism, the dominance of the economy by U.S. capital, was being undermined by secular economic developments.

The 1970s … saw the relative share of foreign investment in Canadian manufacturing and resources decline, while Canada's own investments abroad increased. Some of the major acquisitions of the late 1970s involved the takeover of American-controlled corporations in the energy field (e.g., Husky, Atlantic Richfield) by Canadian capital, while the period also saw significant Canadian investment in the United States. (Resnick 1982, 14–15)

Understanding Canadian capitalism not as a weak and declining dependency, but rather as a centre of capital accumulation in its own right, allowed for a clear understanding of the manner in which social movements in Canada would have as their principal opponents, not solely U.S. state and U.S. corporations, but also the Canadian state and Canadian corporations. This proved fruitful as an approach with which to understand the dynamics of subsequent social movements.

In the years following the signing of CUFTA and NAFTA, there *were* waves of anti-imperialism, but again and again this anti-imperialism focussed on the imperialism of Ottawa, as well as the imperialism of Washington.

In 1991 Canada was a full participant in the Gulf War. Its 1993 intervention in Somalia looked to Somalis more like occupation than peacekeeping (Razack 2004). In 1999 Canada was one of the principal contributors to NATO's bombing campaign against Yugoslavia. And from 2001 to 2011 it was a central actor in the war in Afghanistan. (Kellogg 2013, 200)

It was increasingly difficult to frame these military adventures as Canada operating at the behest of the United States – especially when, in 2003, then prime minister Jean Chrétien, responding to a split in his caucus created by a massive anti-war movement, and in spite of intense pressure from Washington, announced that Canada would not join with the United States in the war on Iraq. This was not an original move. In the 1960s, similar pressures from Washington had been placed on Canada to send troops to Vietnam, again without success. Such instances of independence would be impossible for a genuinely oppressed nation.

In the years following the signing of CUFTA and NAFTA, there was a resurgence of the national question – but not one of Canada up against the United States. In 1990, what emerged in Kanesatake (Oka) was an Indigenous resistance movement, a confrontation between the Mohawk Warriors and the armed wings of both the Quebec and Canadian states. In 1995, members of the Shuswap nation in B.C. resisted attempts at eviction from the Ts'peten Sundance Ground, and endured a month-long siege by the RCMP, a siege sanctioned by then NDP premier Mike Harcourt. That same year, Anthony (Dudley) George was shot and killed by Ontario Provincial Police, while he was participating in a peaceful re-occupation of traditional Stoney Point territories, from which the Ojibway people had been removed during World War II. That year, 1995, was also an iconic year for the national question in Quebec – where, in another referendum, the people of Quebec voted by the narrowest of margins to remain within Canada.

The point is not that a left-nationalist approach would inevitably mean an inability to see the importance of such struggles. Elaine Coburn has reminded us that Mel Watkins for instance – perhaps the single most important theorist of left-nationalist Canadian political economy – "was a consistent, vocal and relentless supporter of Indigenous nationalisms", and someone who called "for a more 'sympathetic' approach to Quebec nationalism" that challenged "Pierre Trudeau's 'fanatical' opposition to Quebec nationalism" (Coburn 2018, 185). The point is that the left-nationalist framework was a weak one with which to construct such positions. When Canada is seen as an oppressed dependent nation, it can lead to the quite mistaken positions we saw above, articulated by Hurtig and Whitaker. A perspective which clearly situates Canada as a Global North,

settler-colonial, imperial power provides a much stronger foundation than left-nationalism on which to build a politics of solidarity.

It also provides a stronger foundation from which to see the emergence of deeply reactionary, jingoist strains of Canadian nationalism. In the days before the 1995 Quebec referendum, what was called a "love-in" for Canada drew 100,000 onto the streets of Montreal. The object of this demonstration was to indicate to Quebec the desire of English-Canadians that Quebec stay within Confederation.

But for many French-speaking Montrealers, the 100,000 person march felt like an invasion. If you held up a "No" sign, you were greeted with cheers and hugs. But to hold up a "Yes" sign was to invite the most vile abuse. … The only way a demonstration in Montreal could have not been an invasion, would have been one where the crowd held up signs saying "Defend Quebec's right to vote 'Yes'". This march was a barely veiled threat. Stay in Canada and we love you. Leave, and we won't trade with you, we won't give you a passport, we won't negotiate partnership. (Kellogg 1995)

There have been mass social movements in our century where the national question has loomed large. Idle No More has made us all conscious of the long-standing oppression of First Nations. Québec solidaire has constructed an impressive political party, committed both to sovereignty and to solidarity with the struggle of First Nations. But there has been no such "national" resurgence on the left in Canada – precisely because Canada as a state is a Global North imperialist state.

There was one attempt to put the national question back into Canada's left project – a third moment of left nationalism in the first years of the 21st century. In the context of the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), and of the mass anti-globalization movement which had emerged in Seattle in 1999, the editors of *Canadian Dimension* called for the creation of a "strong nationalist resistance movement" (*Canadian Dimension* 2002, 16). This call did not find a very wide hearing:

[T]o invoke a term such as "nationalist resistance" – in the context of a movement against globalization whose roots were in the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Mexico against NAFTA, a movement that was increasingly suspicious of corporate-driven capitalism whether U.S.- or Canadian-based – not surprisingly felt anachronistic and quickly receded from view. (Kellogg 2015, 143–44)

The year 2021 will be the centenary of the launching of *The Maritime Labor Herald* – the newspaper founded and edited by J.B. McLachlan. In its very first issue, McLachlan broached the issue of how to confront free trade. He wrote that workers of his day "produce a great deal more wealth than the wage they receive from their labor will enable them to buy back … There are more ships, more engines, more steel products, more food and clothing than is needed but these things are in the hands of capitalists who cannot sell them and because the workers are unemployed they cannot buy the food and clothing they so badly need". These conditions of shortage amidst plenty – the perennial capitalist problem of overproduction – "obtain in countries that have protection and in countries that have free trade … Capitalism and capitalism alone is the evil tree that bears such fruit" (McLachlan 1921).

Citing this in 1987, during that era's free trade debate, I suggested that "today's left has something to learn from these long ago words of J.B. McLachlan" (Kellogg 1987). In the contemporary context of trade politics dominated by Trumpism and Brexit, his words might well be even more relevant.

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