

that in the American War of Independence, the Natives all sided with the British. (138) And like so many non-historians, the authors frequently refer to Native culture before the colonial period as “traditional,” as if no changes occurred in Native history until the Europeans arrived. There is no attempt at historical interpretation and analysis which could be very helpful in explaining *why* changes in aboriginal-state relations have occurred over the last two hundred years.

Sympathy for aboriginal aspirations for a greater measure of self-government is the engine that drives the discussion here, so readers will not find much critical analysis of contemporary Native politics. In those politics at the moment, there is a great deal of posturing, often expressed in emotional, symbolic terms that the authors tend to accept at face value. In particular, they assume the truth of accusations about secret government agendas and duplicity at the Department of Indian Affairs. At one point, they even imply that a conspiracy is afoot to keep the American public uninformed about the legal status of Native Americans. (168) Surely such provocative assertions require some evidence. The authors point out that the settler societies created myths about aboriginal peoples that need to be recognized for what they are; they should also recognize that First Nations politicians are just as creative in developing their own myths.

There is another form of one-sided discussion in this survey. In the Canadian section of the book, there is a lengthy consideration of aboriginal aspirations for self-government, but the perspective is almost entirely that of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) with its interest in province-like powers protected in a constitutional base. Of course, the AFN’s position is probably the best-known because the AFN has the ear of the Canadian mass media, but there are other ideas being expressed by Native peoples across Canada that ought to be given equally serious consideration. The brief section on the Sechelt experiment in B.C. could have been expanded to include a discussion of alternatives to the AFN perspective.

One perplexing aspect of this book is the question of intended audience. Some sections are devoted to good basic background information to assist the novice, while in other

sections, the authors assume that the reader has a detailed and sophisticated knowledge of the subject. Newcomers to the field will be baffled by the latter while initiates will be bored by the former. Neither is well served as a result. Even in some cases where background is provided, the organization of the material is counter-productive. For example, in the New Zealand section, issues arising from the Treaty of Waitangi are discussed before an explanation is provided about the origins and purpose of that treaty. The reader must shift back and forth in the text to sort it out. Perhaps this was really intended to be a post-modernist analysis!

Ultimately, the most disappointing aspect of this book is that the authors really have nothing new or original to say. Their sources are mostly secondary and journalistic; the ideas are drawn primarily from these. Although a comparison is promised, it is never developed (the book consists of separate sections on Canada, the United States and New Zealand) and the reader is left to draw the comparisons for her- or himself. The idea of “nationhood” is never defined or explored, even though it is the central construct of the discussion and there is an interesting new body of literature available on the subject. The concluding observation that liberal democracies require a “paradigm shift” to accept the ideas of collective rights and cultural pluralism is hardly a new insight, and has been more fully developed elsewhere.

The most useful part of the book is the survey of recent developments in New Zealand aboriginal affairs which remain largely unknown in North America. In the end, though, readers will find a quick review of the standard sources on contemporary Native politics just as helpful as *The Nations Within*.

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Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*. Introduction by Ernest Mandel (New Jersey and London: Humanities Press 1990).

In Stalinist Poland, there was a joke about the schoolboy who comes home puzzled over a lesson his teacher had given on democratic centralism. Happy to play the tutor, the lad’s

father tells him to go down and stand in the street. The boy obeys and the father goes to the open window and spits down three floors, hitting his son squarely in the face. "Now," says the father, "that's the centralist part. For the democratic part, *you* spit back."

This grim humor expresses the bitter contempt for Stalinist hierarchy felt by the working people that Leninism was supposed to serve. It reminds us, too, of the stock western caricature of Lenin's career: a ruthless opportunist, unable to brook the slightest opposition and committed to seeking power for himself at any cost, Lenin invented a party that substituted an elite of intellectuals for the proletariat as the agent of revolutionary change. By this account, Lenin's political life was a chronicle of sectarianism and authoritarianism, unrelieved by any principled commitment to democracy or genuine regard for Marxist theory. Little wonder that the party created by this fanatical egomaniac carried within it the bacillus of Stalinist totalitarianism, which began its poisonous work with the *coup d'état* of 1917.

Recent scholarship has fatally undermined the validity of these views. Historians have demonstrated that 1917 was no elitist coup but the culmination of months of growing popular mobilization in support of the Bolshevik program, while the party itself was fundamentally democratic and rooted in the working class. For an introduction to this work see Daniel H. Kaiser (ed.), *The Workers' Revolution in Russia, 1917* (1987). Neil Harding's magisterial *Lenin's Political Thought* (2 vols., 1977, 1981) reveals that Lenin was a systematic Marxian theorist and demolishes the hoary argument that he was a life-long authoritarian Jacobin. Paul Le Blanc's book on Lenin and the party is a welcome addition to this literature.

Le Blanc shows that the balance between centralism, local autonomy and party democracy in Lenin's organizational approach varied with the political context. He argues that the ultracentralist, apparently elitist views of *What is to Be Done?* (1902) were generated by the peculiar difficulties of political work in an autocratic police state and by the polemical struggle against economism. By contrast, when the Revolution of 1905 brought more political liberty, Lenin insisted upon establishing electoralism throughout the party and

began to speak of the spontaneous striving of workers toward socialism. The difficult years after 1907 meant a return to centralism but this was again reversed as 1917 brought political openings and a mass influx of working-class recruits. Whatever the circumstances, however, Lenin saw spirited debate as essential to party life while insisting that, once arrived at, decisions of the majority at party congresses be faithfully carried out by all factions. Moreover, it was not until the crisis of civil war that Lenin opted for one party rule.

According to Le Blanc, Lenin's final break with the Mensheviks in 1912 was motivated not by bloody minded sectarianism but by political principle. He was convinced that, by opting to liquidate the underground and compromise with liberals, they had abandoned the democratically approved party program. Le Blanc shows that the Mensheviks were just as anxious for a split as Lenin, the difference being that Lenin was quite straightforward about his views while the Mensheviks hypocritically wrapped themselves in the cloak of party unity. Le Blanc concludes that Lenin's insistence on acceptance of the revolutionary program and upon strict implementation of party policy once democratically decided upon paid off: the more unified Bolsheviks could respond to the crisis of 1917, while the Mensheviks floundered in factionalism.

Le Blanc's analysis loses power when he confronts the last depressing years of Lenin's career. It was then, as Harding shows, that Lenin abandoned his class analysis for a version of Jacobin elitism. This theoretical and political degeneration contributed powerfully to the subsequent bureaucratization of the USSR and was an important antecedent of Stalinism. Le Blanc does not adequately address this, though Ernest Mandel's introduction partly compensates for his failure to grasp the nettle.

Finally, Le Blanc is deeply concerned about the negative consequences of the eclipse of Leninist perspectives on the party for contemporary socialist politics in the west. Perhaps this is what leads him to overemphasize the Bolsheviks' organizational achievements as the explanation for their success in 1917. For though it is true that the Bolsheviks were better organized than other left groups in 1917, it was less superior organization than

Lenin's ability to persuade the party to abandon its traditional commitment to bourgeois revolution in favour of soviet power and proletarian dictatorship that underlay Bolshevik political success in 1917. It was this that permitted the Bolsheviks to formulate radical positions in favour of workers' control, land reform and peace that eventually won over the mass of the popular classes. Le Blanc underestimates both the extent of this programmatic shift and its political impact. Yet, without a new program the Bolsheviks would probably have finished up as a relatively well organized but politically impotent party, unable to lead an insurrection and eventually swept away with the rest of the left by a right wing dictatorship.

On the balance, though, Le Blanc has made an important contribution to our understanding of Leninism and Bolshevism. Not only has he read his Lenin, but he has also achieved an impressive mastery of the secondary historical literature. This he deploys in a highly readable and critical fashion to relate the development of Lenin's organizational theory to its social and political context. The result is a fine work of historical synthesis, of great use both to historians of socialism and to activists.

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Denise Leclerc, *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada 1992).

To be clear from the start: *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s* is an impressive undertaking. Denise Leclerc, assistant curator of later Canadian art at the National Gallery of Canada (NGC), and the staff of the NGC, have assembled a multi-media production. The 158 paintings and sculptures in this exhibition (representative of 62 artists who lived in seven different urban centres across Canada) are complemented by the presentation of some of Molinari's original manuscript musings on *Plasticisme*, a short video, a recorded audio commentary, and a well-documented, finely-written catalogue which also contains an extended technical essay by NGC art conservationist Marion H. Barclay. The

entire program has been, or will be, on display at five different galleries or museums in different parts of Canada over the course of the next year. *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada* is, in other words, not a simple exhibition but rather, a serious endeavour in public history which merits the serious attention of Canadian cultural historians.

This exhibition takes as its central theme the concept of crisis. This crisis was not, however, triggered by political or economic developments. Instead, in the extended historical introduction to the catalogue, Leclerc argues that the crisis of Canadian art in the 1950s was structured largely by the internal efforts of Canadian artists to respond to the international challenge to established artistic practices raised by abstract art in general, and in particular American abstract expressionism. The crisis emerged as a variety of different artists in a series of different locations wrestled with the impact of abstraction on their own artistic ideals and practices. This intellectual wrestling began as a movement away from figurative art. But, once severed from its established moorings, Canadian art entered a period of rapid experimentation as artists moved onto qualitatively new aesthetic ground. In short order artists began to use a variety of new materials, experimented with a broad array of new styles of painting and sculpting, transgressed the boundaries defining different types of art, and attempted to establish new aesthetic standards. The result, according to Leclerc, was both a radical break with previous aesthetic canons and a vibrant period of artistic development within which artists such as Jean-Paul Riopelle, Guido Molinari, The Painters Eleven, The Regina Five, and Jack Shadbolt moved to the forefront of Canadian art.

The story which is here being told through these diverse media is, then, a story of the transformation of Canadian art and, ultimately, of the triumph of abstraction. This story develops differently in different parts of Canada. For example: in Montreal, the *Plasticien* movement emerged in opposition to the radical, surrealist impulses of *automatisme* and the discourse of *Refus Global* constructed in the 1940s by Paul-Emile Borduas and his followers. In Toronto, painters such as Jack Bush and Harold Town moved in a process of critical interaction with American artistic de-