

Reviews

Ian McKay, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005).

Reading this book is a humiliating experience. You spend a few years of your scholarly life exploring some seemingly important topic. You read, research, write, take account of comments from friends and colleagues, re-write, research more, revise and re-revise. In the end, perhaps, you are reasonably happy with the result. You just may have figured something out, and maybe you convince yourself that you are pretty smart. *Rebels, Reds, Radicals* will soon disavow you of this notion. Here is an historian working at a different level than the rest of us, combining intense theoretical engagement and intellectual imagination with astonishingly wide historical reading and deep empirical research (any one of these would be impressive enough on their own!). The book will make you feel like the plodding, boring, myopic moron that you are, burrowing away at your pathetically narrow topic, and will produce a profound academic weightlessness, perhaps the closest you will come, while sitting down in your office chair or library cubicle, to the sinking feeling that early moderns described when they first rode an elevator. At least McKay's earlier articles on this topic had the saving grace—in the last refuge of a scoundrel sort of way—of being a bit dense and hard to decipher. No such luck here: the prose is light, lively, accessible, and the book is filled with easy to understand but analytically powerful metaphors. (At one point, he shows that left ideas and institutions were not fixed essences by comparing the way the Queen of Spades has one meaning in Hearts and another in Gin Rummy).

No left intellectual should have such a self-centred reaction to a book, so I should say that it provokes an inspiring and challenging kind of humiliation. *Rebels, Reds, Radicals* is a small book with a big purpose, meant to introduce a much longer, multi-volume history of the Canadian left. As such, it is broad and synthetic in approach, sweeping across the twentieth century, drawing together analytic frames from international literature with some empirical discussion of Canadian events, parties, and movements. It reminds me of what was attractive about meta-narrative before it fell out of favour—the wide sweep, the bringing together of discrete events into a broader whole, the sense of setting up an intellectual agenda that can be collectively followed, revised, re-considered, and perhaps eventually displaced—but proposes to use “the strategy of reconnaissance” to avoid the pitfalls of such bold and overly dramatic analyses. (McKay also adopted this approach in his earlier article on the “liberal order framework” [*Canadian Historical Review*, 81, no. 4 (December 2000): 617-645]).

Moreover, *Rebels* provides (again, like much of McKay's work) a promis-

ing way of seeing history, examining Canada from politics to culture, social to institutional, top to bottom, small to large, low to high—from fenceposts to federalism, if you will—with refreshing disregard for the established sub-disciplinary boundaries that we wasted so much energy delineating and defending over the last few decades. He does this by immersing himself in this very literature but rejecting its premises and self-conscious historiographical positioning. He reads and re-reads dusty classics (too often dismissed as simplistic by later generations) and groundbreaking new work, appreciating what each book adds while dispensing with the flaws of their reasoning. He disagrees with many established arguments, but he reads the work of many other scholars for its value rather than its position in some arcane historiographical debate—at several points, he explicitly rejects a book’s overall thrust while recognizing that the author has much of use to say. In this sense, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals* needs to be read partly as an analytic lens or blueprint rather than a specific history.

McKay’s more specific purpose is to present the history of the Canadian left in terms of changing attempts to “live otherwise,” to conceive of ways of being and living that were opposed to the liberal capitalist order. This is a broad and inclusive definition, and McKay traces this analytic thread through five basic formations of left thinking, intentionally skating over sectarian disagreement in each era to seek out deeper similarities of language and assumption. “Living otherwise” allows McKay to trace many paths to leftist thinking. All significant left formations, in his view, engaged in some sort of dialogue with Marx, but leftists could take many routes to their vision of living otherwise. Class-based thinking was certainly one starting point, but there were others (including gender liberation movements, religion, global awareness, and generational experience). From this perspective, McKay wants to loosen (but not fully sever) the links between working class history and the history of the left. “Even in legendary sites of struggle ... the socialists were, more often than not, in the minority,” he writes (making a surprisingly uncommon point). “Individualistic liberalism, in all its guises, has always had a much larger working-class base ... than socialism” (37).

Readers will no doubt find much to disagree with in *Rebels*, particularly in McKay’s desire to mute sectarian and ideological differences at specific moments, and perhaps most of all with the broad nature of the “living otherwise” idea, though both approaches add much more to our thinking about left history than they subtract. Others may find the introductory quality of the book a bit frustrating—there is lots of information here, but substantive discussion obviously awaits the main volumes of the work. The synthetic power of *Rebels* might sometimes be hard to appreciate without a fair bit of knowledge of Canadian history. (If you do not already know a lot about, say, the national policy, being told that it was a key moment in putting “capitalist priorities at the centre of the liberal vision” in Canada will probably not resonate very strongly

[52]). But there is plenty of political and intellectual insight and challenge here for non-historians, and the broad synthetic canvas simply whets the appetite for the more substantive volumes. *Rebels* is an astonishing book by any measure, and should be read for both its take on the left and for the way it re-thinks ossified categories in Canadian history.

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Gareth Stedman Jones, *An End to Poverty? A Historical Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

In his extended essay, *An End to Poverty?* Gareth Stedman Jones provides a novel account of the origins of social democracy and its prescriptions for dealing with poverty. Rather than tracing the evolution of the nineteenth and twentieth century welfare state and the ideas that sustained it, Stedman Jones depicts Thomas Paine and the Marquis de Condorcet as the intellectual progenitors of modern social democracy. Responding to the American and French Revolutions, Paine and Condorcet sought to apply enlightenment ideas about education and actuarial probability to the problem of mendacity through universal education and social insurance schemes. They reasoned that such contributory social programs would help develop a republican social citizenship; that the social, political, commercial, and moral were all interconnected and the possibility of eliminating chronic economic deprivation could be accomplished within the parameters of civic life. Drawing on the initially optimistic response of liberals to the American and French Revolutions, Paine and Condorcet offered a reading of Adam Smith that allowed them to combine his embrace of commercial society with an egalitarian project of democratic community building.

The fierce monarchial and anti-republican reaction to the revolution in the 1790s, and the conservative nationalism and evangelicalism that followed, however, buried these moderate republican proposals by appropriating and re-interpreting Smith in entirely different directions. Indeed, in a sense this book is all about how rival authors fought over the legacy of Smith's ideas. Paine and Condorcet are Stedman Jones's heroes because they recognized that Smith's economic analysis was entirely compatible with liberal, moderately egalitarian republican politics. Malthus is one of the chief villains because of the way in which he redirected later political economists away from such social democratic ideas with his heterodox Christian views about the origins of poverty.

Further, Stedman Jones sees early political economists, like Jean-Baptiste Say, splitting the social and political realm, and pushing political economy to concern itself with economic freedom and markets rather than with democratic