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Imagining Politics

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Bryan D. Palmer

IF I WERE TO KICK OFF this closing commentary with a punchy pronouncement on imagining politics it would be, sadly, that they (the Harperites) have it and we (the broad but amorphous opposition to their policies) do not. That is not adequate as a commentary, but it is a realistic starting point. This does not of course mean that the Harper agenda is creative and sophisticated, imaginative and persuasive. For it is not. But it does mean that Harper and his cronies are willing to reach for their particular sky, even if it often seems to us to be a descent into the deep nether world of acquisitive individualism.

One problem with the overworked use of Benedict Anderson's phrase "imagined community" is that those who employ it sometimes fail to acknowledge adequately that all nations are fractured into different and often contesting components. "Community," in any meaningful sense, is never realizable within nations, ordered as they currently are, fragmented by powerful divisions. At least this is the way it looks from the history of "actually existing capitalism," which, it can be argued, parallels the history of nations as we know them.

One of the purposes of the modern state has been to imagine nationhood, willing into being a sense of united peoplehood. Through the manipulation of representations, choices about what to commemorate and what to sidestep, and decisions defying and denying the contest and conflict that have occupied the ground of actual social relations, states "make" official quite particular readings of the past. In this project, history tends to be rewritten, crafted to create a sense of didactic History that serves the state and those dominant interests that orchestrate its work, however adroitly this is done. This state project of imagining the nation and its history is, of course, prefabricated and packaged in ways that antagonize academics (and many others) who rightly reject the simplifications, shortcuts, and stubborn sterility of much that is presented in the name of national heritage.

As our commentators above have suggested, the rebranding of Canada that is currently underway, pushed in particular directions by the ruling government of Stephen Harper's Conservative Party, is not all that new. The state has always had its hand in History. There was a time when the ideological project of socially constructing Canada as a mythical land of multiculturalism, of peacekeeping, of social harmony and caring universalism was worked to good effect by states commandeered by the Pearsons and the Trudeaus. Their counterparts in the provincial wings, the likes of Ontario's John Robarts or Bill Davis, or their challengers in the federal arena, such as Robert Stanfield, would have rewritten the script only slightly. Toryism in those times contained hues of pink and Red. Liberals sometimes shaded into radical nationalists or social democrats. The mainstream currents of political life in Canada were content

to offer a bow in the direction of social democratic icons (Tommy Douglas/Stanley Knowles) as long as their place in History was purely iconographic. Governing parties – Liberal and Conservative alike – picked and chose what they might utilize from the left, as long as these adaptations confirmed power's ultimate hegemonic hold.

What is different now is that the political imagination of the state, with Harper at the helm, has gone into ideological overdrive, pulling absolutely no punches. It was a political maxim of Bill Davis during a long period of Conservative governance in Ontario that you could catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. And so corporate rule was sugar-coated. Those were the days, however, when it was possible to bankroll the sugar with state revenues. Harper's meaner and leaner agenda emerges out of an entirely different political economy. The maxim now is that you will catch more flies with shit than with anything else, and Harper and Company have been piling it on.

The shit storm we all find ourselves within spells not only the end of certain historical sensibilities but, arguably, the end of a certain kind of political culture. Promiscuous use of proroguing of parliament; termination of the right to strike; curtailing of structures protecting the vulnerable, such as the disabled and children; abuse of both the spirit and the letter of the law in terms of fair practices in the electoral arena; the undermining and outright dismantling of institutions and practices relating to evidence gathering and its availability; relentless attacks on critical, scientific inquiry and the freedom of speech and thought that allows for public airing of research findings, however unsettling; a strident, bellicose, and more militaristic foreign policy; overt international endorsement of corporate interests, whatever their destructive ecological impact; and a culture of entitlement evident in Senate scandals and the Harper government's clear understanding that it can pursue any means necessary to 'protect' its leader – all speak of the demise of accountable, representative government and inclusive, historical (but not *only* historical) sensibilities.

How the Harper government conceives of Canadian history, and what it is prepared to do to validate its new counter-mythology, is one part of the rewriting of the entirety of our political culture. Every rewritten line contains, in embryo, an attack on, metaphorically, the many, and the privileging of the few. Harper's Conservatives have reduced First Nations, Québec, labour, women, ethnic and racialized groups, the poor, and many other constituencies, not to mention the environment, to a footnote to its ideology of globalization from above, in which market dominance is tied to atavistic Cold War understandings (socialism is *anything* but dead in the political imagination of neoliberalism!).

This has all been possible because of a fundamental post-1975 shift in both the economic and political spheres. Economically, since the mid-1970s the advanced capitalist west has experienced crisis after crisis. Stagflation, deindustrialization, unemployment, the decline of the wage and its trade union mainstay, and economic meltdowns that wipe out the savings of working-class

households, as registered in pensions and housing stock, have all taken their toll. Youth lives with the uncertainties of precarious employments, if work can be found at all. Entire countries are mired in unimaginable debt. A climate of fear stalks global capitalism. Yet, politically, never has the hegemony of capitalism been stronger. It faces no effective challenger, because the organized left, within the capitalist nation states, has seldom been weaker. On the international stage socialism has been vanquished, a decisive termination having been proclaimed to the contest between capitalism and socialism. This is the "community" of capital, the so-called "end of history."

To be sure, nothing is ever entirely one-sided. Québec's students recently showed the world that there was radical life still left in the young. Their rough-musicking of power and their selfless sacrifice for the good of their understanding of "community" was an important reminder that resistance can never be simply snuffed out. Yet the students were outmaneuvered, received too little support from their counterparts in English Canada, and were not forcefully enough backed by powerful entities such as the trade unions. They were disadvantaged by having too little of an organized left to draw upon, and had to forge too much on their own slim resources. There are indeed uprisings of promise in the global South, indications in Asia and Latin America of counters to capitalism's secure grip on the trajectory of the globe's future. Yet these are offset by capitalist restoration in the once-Soviet Stalinist bloc and the incursions of the market into waning outposts of planned economies such as China and Cuba. This is the political counterpart of economic crisis. Its balance sheet, in any sober socialist assessment, is bleak.

The far right has seized the initiative in this moment of crisis-induced opportunity. Harper and his Conservatives are the Canadian expression of this political victory. Their attack on history is but one small part of their radical reconstruction of Canadian economic and political life. Like the Milton Friedman-influenced project of the New Right of the 1970s and 1980s, Harper is convinced that piecemeal reform to the right, with concessions to critics, is a dead-end. Friedman preached from the pulpit of total revolution, of the need to attack, attack, attack. Converts such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan followed this Friedmanite admonition. Harper is our Canadian embodiment of this political imagination. As we are seeing, it is increasingly unfettered by any sense of moderation, by any limit to his project imposed by Canadian history and its traditions. The current governing party is intent on melting all that is solidly opposed to its rewriting of Canada's past, present, and future, into the thin air of ideological smoke and the distorting imaginary of a particular house of accumulation mirrors.

Precisely because, like most things Canadian, Harper's project follows past precedents, it benefits from finding itself ploughing the trough of the New Right's transitioning into globalized neoliberalism. As the Canadian political spectrum has moved unambiguously to the right, with the New Democratic Party abandoning any pretence of the struggle for socialism and the Liberals

jettisoning the national and social policies that now seem the last gasp of a bygone era of reform, Harper's Conservatives have been relatively free to downshift into a hard drive to the right. They have been liberated from all manner of past constraint in their capacity to imagine a political course for Canada unencumbered by history and past state-embraced understandings of History.

What we are seeing in the Harper government's rewriting of History's script is how it is possible to push political imagination in specific and extreme directions. This is what happens when right-wing constituencies are able to rule unopposed. As virtually all of our commentators suggest, there is a need for Canadian historians, political scientists, sociologists, and other academics to start fighting back. This needs to happen, and such opposition can unfold in all manner of ways, inside professional bodies, through committees of concerned scholars, and within popular writing and scholarly research.

But what I am suggesting is that this will never be enough. Harper's assault on history flows out of his government's successful attack on the politics of our being and the material foundations of our economic life. This, in turn, has indeed been enhanced by his capacity to push the state's invigorated ideological imagination to new heights. We need an alternative political imagination on the left, one that lays out not only its refusals but also its *demands*, doing so in ways that do not compromise and obfuscate issues and that begin to resonate with men and women on the street as well as among those ensconced in universities and their classrooms. Unless Harper's vision is challenged decisively and relentlessly by a coherent left politics – which contemporary history indicates neither the Liberals nor the NDP can possibly be expected to articulate – then we are lost. We could all be reduced to the kind of ultimate dismissal too often registered in that ill-informed, illogical vernacular put-down, "That's history."