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REVIEW ARTICLE

The Marxist Mystification of Newfoundland History

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F.L. JACKSON

I

I NEVER KNOW HOW TO react to pieces on Newfoundland by my academic colleagues. Half of me responds rationally as a scholar respectful of good research and welcoming new ideas, the other half as a colonial boy who grew up under Commission of Government and chronically suspicious of those (they used to be mostly British) who came from away to tell us who we were and what our past, present and future life is all about.

This ambivalence has a history. I arrived at Memorial University in the mid-sixties just as the social scientific conquest of my province had begun. Formidable phalanxes of anthropologists and folklorists descended on us like gold prospectors, enthusing over the vast, untapped resource that was Newfoundland's cultural history. They commenced with gusto to mine it and their efforts have yielded much valuable ore, though not without leaving a few slag-heaps around. Up to that point Newfoundlanders had been a modest if peculiar lot who never much thought of themselves as a consequential people. So it was quite startling, indeed very flattering, to be informed by our new social scientist friends that we were in fact an extraordinary, pristine breed, with a rare mint-condition, pre-industrial culture and living out a

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version of the world-historical class struggle in exquisite microcosm on our blighted rock.

Perhaps partly through vanity we were soon enough persuaded, however, and joined wholeheartedly in the celebration of our newly-acclaimed cultural heritage. Writers, painters, musicians and playwrights, both local and come-from-away, joined the social scientists in exhuming it and putting it on stage, page and canvas. In the '80s it became something of a political force for a time as a renewed spirit of hopefulness and independence, together with offshore oil discoveries, led to optimism that a few bold decisions might allow us at last to reclaim a measure of economic self-sufficiency. I am sure the whole exercise in identity-building was a Good rather a Bad Thing; it revitalized popular self-awareness and encouraged in us renewed respect for ourselves, our life and our past. Yet it cannot be denied that a great deal of it was also pure fancy and fabrication, for which reason we were only partly transformed by it and have lately somewhat reverted to our more traditional despairing mentality.

For those of us who predate it, the Newf-cult spree of the '70s and '80s reeked of ambiguity. True, it aroused a healthy renewal of interest in Newfoundland history and manners, and fueled a new pride of place, language and peoplehood. But there was also a distinct sense that in the analyses of the social scientists or the representations of the Michael Cooks there was a good deal that just did not ring true to a native eye, ear or memory. If we were too awed or polite to say anything, we still cringed at the caricatures of the alleged "earthy authenticity" of the old outport life which hopelessly romanticized even its most mean and desperate side. Moreover, there were aspects we vividly knew to be integral and essential in the older life that tended to be ignored — a very peculiar but developed sense of civility, for example, or the deeply spiritual perception of life. Instead, the new mythology made Newfoundland fisherpeople over into unlikely revolutionary folk-heroes who, had it not been for evil governors, fish-merchants and confederates, would surely have built Jerusalem in this not so green and pleasant land.

It was impossible to swim against the Newf-cultic tide at the time, as everyone was into it his rubber boots on. An aura of sanctity surrounded the subject, like Farley Mowat who refused to believe such nice noble savages could shoot up a whale. To suggest that a good deal of the rapturous celebration of local culture was hyperbole, or even fertilizer, only got you branded a cynic.

From the charge of trafficking in romantic construction, the social scientists, however, thought themselves exempt: such may be the stock in trade, they said, of those in the arts or philosophy (who, incidentally, I was once told had no business writing books about cultural history anyway), but we scientists stick to the facts and interpret them objectively. With the utmost

respect, I have never been wholly convinced of this. Not that social scientists are given to wilful fictionalizing, though this is not unknown. But the very nature of their subject matter renders their science notoriously theory-prone and subject to its own unique kinds of epistemic parallax. To refuse to recognize this, to insist on a blank cheque on scientific legitimacy, is to issue a license to create and perpetuate historical and cultural myths. To be sure, everyday socio-cultural research provides plenty of examples of great piles of ideological baggage loaded onto the backs of a few puny, undeserving facts, or innocent phenomena cruelly tortured to make them confess to crimes of which they are ignorant. Some of the articles reviewed below might serve as cases in point.

Let me cite just three typical pitfalls of social scientific interpretation which stick with me because drawn from personal experience. I will call them the Pooh Perplex, the Cutworm Caper, and the Specimen's Revolt.

Some years back an hilarious spoof on literary criticism, *The Pooh Perplex*,[1] was making the rounds of academe. In it Milne's children's stories are subjected to a variety of well-known critical methodologies: Marxist, Freudian, historicist, existentialist and so on. Stretched on one theoretical rack, Christopher becomes alienated labour surrounded by elephant, tiger, donkey, etc., representing various embodiments of bourgeois class-consciousness. Stretched on another, he becomes the conscious ego and they the projections of his unconscious, unresolved erotic conflicts — or whatever. What comes out clearly is how thoroughly an aggressive theoretic prejudice can sneak up on and overwhelm a set of quite unsuspecting facts or, in another metaphor, how many theoretical silk purses can be manufactured out of a single sow's ear.

Theory-domination is certainly not unknown in the annals of Newfoundland sociological and anthropological analysis. Nor has it always been easy, speaking as a local boy, to suffer lectures on local history and culture by itinerant scholars operating from theoretical biases drawn from textbooks or formed in alien contexts, who make use of the whetstone of an unfamiliar local database to sharpen their academic axes. There is a good deal of contemporary social scientific literature, indeed, from which one comes away feeling, not only oppressed by theory, but beaten about the head with it, so that one can only withdraw in confusion. A good example of theory-overload is Gerald Sider on Newfoundland cultural economics, to which reference is made by S. Caddigan in the work under review (125).[2] I have to confess my own first reaction and that of Newfoundland friends to Sider's sober-sides Marxist dissection of customs we all knew so well was one of hilarity; admittedly a shameful irreverence, given the work's intent and reception as serious science — somewhat like giggling in church.

The likes of Sider's theories of mumming, tall tales and scoffs as the ineffectual sighs of the heartless world of the old truck system, or unconscious

procedures for restoring equity among "crew" and "crowd" in productive relations, leaves one awestruck to think one had actually participated in such profound economic-historical dynamics without knowing it — like Molière's solid citizen, flattered to be told he has been speaking "prose" all his life. Social theorists are not a bit troubled, however, if real-life scoffers or tall tale-tellers cannot imagine what on earth they are talking about. Like Freudians who used to declare any expression of skepticism about psychoanalytical theory a sure sign of repression, Marxists will tell you it only proves the extent of your alienation that you are unable to recognize that the seemingly innocent customs you practise are really ineffectual superstructural solutions to underlying socio-economic problems. They have you coming and going. All of which reinforces a suspicion that for all its devout deference to facts and objectivity, social scientific theory can be as dogmatic as any metaphysics and at times even degenerate into bad ideological theatre.

It is the great irony of all theory-constipated inquiry that in its concern to get to the bottom of a phenomenon and ferret out its "real underlying meaning," it is precisely the meaning that ends up being altogether missed, obscured or distorted. Which brings me to the Cutworm Caper, which refers to a vivid example of mistaken identity I witnessed as a graduate student in experimental and clinical psychology. In one seminar we used to analyze the Rorschach test records of actual mental patients. Brought up around cabbages and lettuce, I had no problem with the two "cutworms" a Newfoundland woman saw in a particular inkblot, having murdered a good many in my time. A colleague who lacked any green-thumb experience, however, wrote the poor woman up as suffering from severe ego-deterioration ("worms") with aspects of repressed hostility ("cut"). This raises the question: do facts, cultural or otherwise, have an inside as well as an outside? Is there not a vast difference between objectively knowing a fact and knowing what it means? Have Newfoundland sociologists ever been known to mistake a humble cultural cutworm for an elaborate social dynamic? The scoff, for instance?

A third vignette. During the halcyon days of the local anthropological gold rush, my wife and I were invited to a social gathering of visiting academics ending a major conference on the Newfoundland Cultural Heritage. It became clear as the evening progressed that we had mistaken our presence and function there: we were not academic colleagues, but raw cultural data; not fellow observers, but specimens. This evoked a giddy reflection as to just who was observing whom and we specimens resolved to wile away the rest of the evening observing the curious traits of *Homo Lévi-Straussicus* — the floor-sitting habit, the classification of theoretical stances into positivist/romantic, culture-free and culture-omnivorous. This too raises many nagging questions. Is the human race divided neatly into

culture-bound specimens and culture-free observers? If a specimen should rebel and turn observer, is objectivity thereby enhanced or distorted? Is theoretic detachment also a kind of prejudice?

It goes without saying that scientific methodologists have long been aware of such difficulties and continue to debate them. But they are worth calling attention to from time to time to offset the notorious tendency, especially among those with little or no epistemological background, to fall into the habit of confusing science with dogma, theory with metaphysics and information with truth. In any event, I only raise this whole issue of social scientific objectivity to explain in advance my perhaps somewhat irreverent approach to the task of reviewing some recent examples of social science research in the recent issue of *Labour/Le Travail* on Newfoundland labour history. I do not claim expertise as an historian, not to speak of a labour historian, of course, but I do take some small confidence in the fact that Newfoundland history is my own history too, and also, though not trained in social science as such, I am reasonably well acquainted with the mother of all cultural sciences, philosophy.

II

I was relieved to find most of the articles in the special Newfoundland issue of *Labour/Le Travail* far from abstrusely technical, thus offering no problem for the general reader. For the most part they are documentary narratives put together on the basis of public archival materials such as official letters and newspaper reports. Three of the five principal articles make for uncontroversial and informative reading; the other two, Linda Little's "Collective Action in Outport Newfoundland: A Case Study from the 1830's" and James Overton's "Economic Crisis and the End of Democracy: Politics in Newfoundland During the Great Depression," *are* controversial in that, while bringing much interesting history to light, they also seek to demonstrate theoretical positions and in the process arouse many of the doubts about the pitfalls of social scientific method alluded to above. I will deal first and briefly with the three less controversial articles, and then discuss the other two at some greater length.

S. Caddigan's "Battle Harbour in Transition" is one of a number of recent articles questioning Sider's stark Marxist division between merchant-capitalist masters and fisherfolk slaves. He describes a much more gradated texture of power in outport fishing communities, which certainly includes destitute families on one end of the scale, and real-life "rogues and sleeveens" (in my father-in-law's favorite term for them) on the management side. But in between were fisherman of varying degrees of competence and autonomy who knew how to play the companies, as well as company agents and

managers who knew they had to walk somewhat softly with certain fishermen if they wished to keep their loyalty and thus maintain security of supply.

Thus the truck system, in which fish buyers had virtually exclusive disposition of the product in return for outfitting fishermen and sustaining them through the winter on the strength of an uncertain seasonal catch, is not rightly viewed as a blunt instrument of outright enslavement. Though admittedly a very one-sided arrangement, it was in practice more complex than might appear. While in theory resting on total control of a fisherman's fate, it could be and was successfully opposed by more able and independent fishermen. Moreover, extremes of circumstance resulting from the varying luck, talent or initiative of individual fishermen forced merchants to pass responsibility for the welfare of the more destitute over to government, thus compromising their own absolute hegemony.

In Caddigan's piece there is a down-to-earth, measured sense of the real-life workings of what we used locally (and wrongly) to call the "barter" system, raising questions as to how far the Marxist models now so widely appealed to really describe the actual situation. Did the system truly rest on a rigid, two-party class division? Does the simplistic "Good-fisherman/Bad-merchant" model wholly explain all the evils and difficulties of the early fishery? Is a system that would seem more a hangover from the era of paternalistic, mercantile-colonialist economics properly described as "capitalist," a term one would think that more strictly describes the new world of Fishery Products International and trawler fleets? "The fishermen of Battle Harbour were no more proletarians than capitalists," says Caddigan (147), and I would agree. They were not passively exploited, but as primary producers could demand and sometimes get fairness. It leads one to wonder how different really, in terms of contingency and dependency, is the contemporary fisherman's lot, in spite of the vastly improved quality of outport life. Though loan boards rather than private merchant-outfitters now stake the fisherman and take some of the risks, and though unemployment insurance takes up the slack on seasonality, isn't the fate of whole villages still often dependent on the fortunes and whims of fleet and plant entrepreneurs?

The account of the early days of the Longshoremen's Protective Union (LSPU) in Jessie Chisholm's "Organizing on the Waterfront" was also informative and evocative. The LSPU always had a flavour of legend about it which, in a curious way, the preservation of their old Hall on Victoria Street in St. John's helps to sustain. Perhaps it was the Union's paternal and moral spirit, typical of the old guilds, which showed as much concern for the general welfare of workers and their families as for their jobs as such; a spirit similar to that in the Fishermen's Protective Union. For anyone growing up in this city, the longshoreman was the ubiquitous epitome of the St. John's workingman, to be seen eternally cruising Duckworth Street East, watching

the Narrows for evidence of pending employment and sidling up to passers-by cadging nickels and dimes for a little warming refreshment or to murmur "screttelyuhbutty" ("give us a cigarette, will ya buddy?") in one's ear. It was common wisdom that of all downtrodden St. John's workers, including policeman, the longshoremen's lot was not a happy one. And it is sobering to contemplate, as Chisholm reports, that at the turn of the century they comprised the largest workforce in the city, eking out a living and raising families in miserable hovels on miserable pittances. How easily one forgets the vast slums that disfigured St. John's until World War II. Chisholm's poignant account of the intractable poverty which forced men, women and children into virtual slavery on the waterfront, and of the LSPU's difficulties in attempting to ameliorate their dire circumstances, might serve as a powerful prophylactic to any inclined to wax too romantic about the so-called good old days.

Finally, Peter McInnis' account in "All Solid Along the Line" of the organizing of the Newfoundland Industrial Workers' Association (NIWA) and its highly successful strike against the Reid Newfoundland Company in March-April, 1918, is a masterful account of the confrontation between one of the first real-life capitalist enterprises in Newfoundland and a modern industrial union. The absolute and corrupting power wielded everywhere by railroad and steamship robber-barons around the turn of the century is legendary. It was a power which in many cases, certainly in this one, surpassed and even usurped the power of government. The story McInnis tells of how an oppressive and arrogant conglomerate employing a quarter of the St. John's workforce was finally brought to heel is a fascinating tale of collective courage, enlightened organization and the triumph of the principle of workers' rights over the Reid "octopus." The patriotic spirit of the times and general disgust over wartime corporate profiteering combined to reinforce public support. A new optimism and confidence in the rightness of their cause gave the workers the strength they needed to put chains on a rampant industrial monster.

Quite apart from labour history, the story of the Reid Newfoundland Company is worth telling for another reason. It is key to an understanding of the late 19th and early 20th century transition to what has become an established pattern in Newfoundland of prostituting the economy to "benevolent" foreign capitalists, invited by desperate governments to bring about a measure of industrialization in exchange for inordinate powers and privileges. Third-world countries have a great deal of experience with this kind of economic distortion and political usurpation at the hands of General Bullmoose corporations, and it is significant that the residual railway debt after the Reid bail-out is commonly adumbrated as a major cause of the Dominions's collapse in 1933. McInnis points out how intense public resentment of this new kind of colonialism was an important factor in popular

support for the successful NIWA strike, but it is ironic how the lesson remained unlearned thereafter. After Confederation a whole parade of Doyles, Valdmanises and Shaheens has taken Newfoundland to the cleaners and we are still on the lookout for new saviours.

III

By comparison, the other two main articles, while certainly interesting and competent in their research, are irking in being theory-burdened and cutworm-infested. The first, by L. Little, seeks to seduce rather plebian facts into testifying on behalf of a rather lofty, and questionable, thesis. The second, by J. Overton, is an example of doctrine grabbing facts by the throat.

Little's "Collective Action in Outport Newfoundland" purposes to demonstrate the existence of a "strong tradition of Newfoundland resistance" (7) on the part of the "plebian population" against the "ruling class," focussing on the Harbour Grace-Carbonear area in the 1830s. Chiefly drawing upon magistrates' reports, she cites a number of samples of what is dignified with the title "plebian collective acts," defined as any "act committed for the perceived benefit of a given group" (10) — a broad definition which could include anything from high-jacking a truck to Christ on the Cross. Three sets of samples are cited: first, assorted incidents of general mayhem, then election riots in particular, and finally the sealers' strike of 1832. As "class acts" (in the sociological, not qualitative sense), only the last really qualifies, as the author admits. It was indeed a collective action, since it featured an identifiable group of workers organizing and demonstrating with a view to getting a better working arrangement. Or, if one insists on that language, it was a "simple opposition of capital and labour."

If in view of the manifest solidarity and common cause among the sealers in withholding their labour to get a better system of payment one has no trouble calling the 1832 affair a "strike," I am not at all sure what it adds to events quite intelligible as they stand to assimilate them to the abstract terminology of "class acts" exemplifying "collective plebian resistance" to "the ruling class," and so forth. The author betrays an unwillingness to allow events to speak for themselves, and instead forces them to read from a prearranged script. Again, there are all sorts of questions which pop up along the way, such as whether the concept of "negotiation" properly extends to wanton ransacking or physical intimidation with deadly weapons (sign this or you're dead). Answers are not to be found in Little's text, however, since her method throughout is to give a strictly empirical account of the head-breaking and general uproar, and only at the end formally to baptize what preceded as genuine cases of Plebian Collective Actions. This is followed by a sermon making clear that "PCA's," as one is tempted to

call them, are invariably just and virtuous no matter what actual violence, injustice or indignity is perpetrated in the process.

This approach usually makes for a good many interpretive cutworms among the cabbages, and at points the gulf between interpretation and fact is so wide one has great difficulty leaping across it. Take the first category of examples, dealing with assorted incidents of violent confrontation with the law: shoot-outs, muggings, beatings, maimings, house burnings, threats against officials or witnesses, attacks on their wives and children and so on. One has read much of same in Jack Fitzgerald, though without all the socialist superstructure. Most of the events are coloured by the denominational bigotry of the time, which Little regards, quite wrongly in my view, as simply an aspect of a class struggle between "good" (liberal, democratic, Catholic) fishermen and "evil" (tory, authoritarian, Protestant) merchants.

Thus when Orange ears are cut off, Anglicans and Kerry boys toss an unwanted corpse back and forth like a hot potato, an Irishman evicted from a condemned shanty threatens the magistrate's life, and so on, are these incidents evinced in the old-fashioned way to demonstrate the lawlessness and shoddy justice of rough-and-ready times? Not at all. They reflected "a popular view of justice that transcended the law" (10) and an "underlying appeal to a common idea of justice or plebian right" (18). This is pretty heady stuff. It assumes that justice as represented by the law is categorically unjust; that a natural right to flout it is constituted directly by the resentments of those who feel its edge. If the point were only that the administration of justice in those times was blatantly biased and callously indifferent to what they used to call "the lower orders," in that one could enthusiastically concur. But Little goes much further. She suggests those who break the law always do so from principles higher than those of legal justice, never from ordinary motives of simple viciousness, rampant prejudice or sheer desperation. Thus violent personal or sectarian attacks, the raiding of stores by desperate, famished people, or the abuse of women and children by crazed and murderous mobs are all pressed indiscriminately into service to demonstrate the existence of a "detached hostility toward the 'respectable' and merchant community" and show that in such actions "principle, rather than desire for personal gain, was at stake" (12).

Little's explanation of early election rioting as further testimony to the rise of virtuous "plebian collective action" in Newfoundland is more than dubious; it is downright strange. There is certainly a tale to be told about the racial-religious paranoia which thwarted attempts to democratize institutions in Newfoundland from the early days of representative government to the Confederation referendum. But Little turns the story into a total collectivist whitewash through the use of absurdly inappropriate sociobabble and the same good-guys/bad-guys scenario. Listen to this: "When large numbers of people participated in a political event, they

preferred to use informal rather than formal means to exert their powers" (20). Translation: attempts to hold democratic elections were frustrated by sectarian mobs using violence and threats of violence to intimidate candidates and voters, à la Guatemala. Or again: "assuming direct control of the hustings and applying force to an individual candidate were the most logical [!] and efficacious ways for those without power to exercise control over the political process." Translation: if your crowd has been unsuccessful in rigging the election, then simply trash the whole process. It gets worse. If we are inclined to suppose that the muggings, public donnybrooks and spontaneous ear surgery must surely have compromised respect for the democratic process in Newfoundland, Little assures us the opposite is true; it actually promoted it. "The elections provided a framework and an opportunity for increased plebian input into the working of the society" (25). What can one say? It appears the rights of Plebian Collective Action are sacred (because plebian? because collective?) and not only inherently supersede those of constituted legal justice, but take precedence over the right to democratic process in the disposition of power.

IV

J. Overton's "Economic Crisis and the End of Democracy," on the events leading up to the Commission of Government, is a well researched piece but also annoyingly doctrinaire in its approach to this important issue.[3] He raises perfectly good questions: why was there so little popular outcry against the move to "end" parliamentary government, and why were the representatives of the working class in particular not only receptive to the idea but active and vocal in promoting it?

By way of answer we are presented with a Marxist model of politics in capitalist society as a struggle between two species, those defending democracy, understood exclusively in terms of working class power, and capitalists bent on frustrating it at every opportunity by seeking to limit the franchise.[4] We are asked to view the closing of the legislature as the triumph of a local capitalist conspiracy, the victims the Newfoundland people and the villains the born-in-hell local merchants. By exacerbating fears of destitution and mob rule, the latter managed to con everyone into believing an excess of democracy was at the root of the evils of the day, thereby gaining popular support for rule by commission, which Overton assumes, illegitimately in my view, was wholly in the merchants' interest.[5] Overton's interest is to present the case for this alleged right-wing conspiracy and to explain in particular what might otherwise appear to contradict his argument, namely the fact that the working class seemed to favour the move as much as, if not more than, the wicked businessmen who, in Overton's strict canon, qualify automatically as "anti-democratic."

So if Newfoundlanders at the time and since viewed the decision, though tragic, as a reasonable response to a desperate economic and political situation, Overton thinks we were simply dupes of the machinations of "a movement attacking democratic institutions." This is not to say "the capitalists" initiated the economic crisis, but that the latter "triggered a political crisis which gave anti-democratic arguments particular force" (91). Citing Mill's worry about the abuses of majorities, "hysterical" fears of Bolshevism following the revolution in Russia (87) and other similar reservations, Overton reconstructs a "tradition" of conservative, anti-democratic sentiment — terms routinely overloaded with connotations of evil empire. This sentiment is betrayed in any concern, however slight, that there may be such a thing as "too much democracy," i.e., that democracy is corruptible. In any and all such suggestions there lurks, Overton thinks, conservative intrigue to stymie democracy.

The argument goes on to explain the apparent anomaly of Coaker's and Smallwood's strong advocacy of a non-partisan commission by appealing to the standard revolutionary analysis of the dualism of left-leaning liberals, who believe capitalism can be reformed from the inside but invariably leap to the defense of the system when it is threatened. That their pro-worker sentiments were thus only skin-deep is adduced by pointing to Smallwood's anti-Bolshevist sermons and Coaker's long-standing alliance with the Liberals, as well as his fascist longings for a strong man with "soul encased in steel" once things fell apart (110). In the end we find both joining the chorus for suspension of the legislature. As for the outpouring of ordinary working class support for an end to party politics, it is emphasized that a number of prominent merchants were among the chief instigators of the mass marches and demonstrations, "suppressed" in the end anyway with the help of the Great War Veterans' Association. There is sketched for us the typical textbook scenario of workers manipulated by the forces of reaction to get rid of liberals, then billy-knockered for their pains when they got out of hand by calling out the only "state police" then available. In such bluntly Marxist terms the course of the alleged conservative, anti-democratic conspiracy of the 1930s is unfolded.

Told by a less articulate or industrious researcher, the account might well be written off as so much socialist melodrama. The secret of Pooh-Perplexism, however, is not to twist facts but to play very close to them, while using them adroitly to force them to testify to what in reality is a thesis *a priori* — see Sider *et al.* The plausibility of Overton's piece is due partly to profuse and graphic reference to the empirical record, partly to the borrowed weight of the familiar and powerful Marxist theory of class struggle, and partly to the fact that he is perfectly right, of course, in suggesting that tensions between owner and worker, capitalism and socialism, were indeed paramount in the politics of the era. It is one thing, however, to recognize

the importance of these class divisions and tensions in grasping the significance of the events of that era, but quite another to interpret them entirely from one side of that division as if this were the whole story. It is quite as easy to find evidence to support the one side as the other, but the point surely is that to support either exclusively is to conceive the matter too narrowly.

Who would not admit that a significant faction existed, and included a good many Water Street merchants, whose attitude toward working people was exploitative and repressive and whose politics were decidedly reactionary? Who can doubt their support of government by commission was limited to the extent they thought they could control it for wholly self-interested ends? But there were certainly many others, indeed a majority of workers, fishermen, professionals, journalists, clerics, academics — even businessmen — whose concern with the fate of the Dominion was intelligent and sincere. Far from hating democratic institutions, they were dismayed at the spectacle of their blatant corruption at the hands of petty politicians, and quite aware of the threat to democracy, looming everywhere as on the streets of Berlin, of conspiracies of both the right and the left. It was to save their state in this circumstance, not to throw it to the capitalist dogs, that desperate Newfoundlanders sought help from a British parliament they had some reason to trust, at least as a devil they knew. They suspended their constitution, not to "end democracy," but to rescue it from an evident, looming threat of destruction.

While it is illuminating to see events in Newfoundland in the context of the times, one needs to go beyond the narrow bias of an abstract, revolutionary-socialist point of view. The rise of political ultra-modernism between the two world wars is a much broader and more inclusive phenomenon. A radically technocratic idealism, it promoted once-for-all, "scientific" solutions to the ills of political society, typically advocating a total, resolute expropriation of state power on behalf of the people. Who "the people" might be — the masses? *Das Volk*? — and what form the new ultra-political order was to take, were questions over which there arose the most violent controversies. For some it meant the glorious socialist revolution, overthrowing capitalism and subordinating the state to an all-powerful Party representing the universal, collective interest; for others it meant the absolute right of particular peoples to consummate their own historical destiny, at any cost, under the infallible leadership of a political genius. The deepening tension between these two chief manifestations of 20th century "ultra-democracy" exploded into wars in China and Spain and finally into a world conflagration.

Through the 1920s and '30s, the choice between these twin idealisms tore at the conscience of most thinking people, who found themselves equally fascinated with Mussolini and Lenin, with fascist ideals of national resurrection or the communist world revolution.[6] It does no good to

moralize now from our vantage-point beyond World War II and the Cold War about those who believed passionately at the time in the capitalist or the socialist millennium and could not have had insight into the monstrous totalitarianism which became their later legacy. And it is surely passé, if not perverse, that we should continue reading the history of the period as either the magnificent struggle of the working class against capitalist fascism or the triumph of free enterprise over the Red Peril; that is only to perpetrate the whole bloody, catastrophic opposition. Having witnessed both ugly faces of totalitarian dictatorship, fascist and proletarian, surely our generation must be inclined to repudiate both.

The rhetoric surrounding the collapse of responsible government locally certainly did echo the global debate. An intense ambiguity is all too evident in the musings of Newfoundlanders at the time; in the admiration of Mussolini by the unionist Coaker or the inconsistency of the "socialist" Smallwood in embracing government by unelected junta. But compared to the utter devastation of democratic institutions under the Bolsheviks or the Nazis, the voluntary appeal of a small, virtual colony to its mother Parliament for a temporary caretaker administration in a time of dire need hardly seems to qualify as an utter abandonment of democratic institutions. If the Commission could be called a "dictatorship," in Lodge's strained metaphor, it was certainly a very benevolent one, by no stretch of imagination comparable in concept or degree to the actual suspension of democracy under Hitler or Stalin. Sketched against the larger world canvas, Overton's claim, based on little more than observation of the popular frustration with corrupt party politics, the widespread suspicion of communism, and the longing of businessmen for stability, that local "capitalists" brought off a coup which "ended" democracy in 1933-4 sounds excessive, betraying a dated ideological and historical perspective.

The trouble with all heavily theory-laden approaches is that so much that should be obvious is sacrificed on the altar of an implacable doctrinal deity. It has always been a perfectly obvious question, for example, whether political independence makes sense for Newfoundland, given its size and doubtful economic viability. If obvious still today, the dilemma was excruciating in 1933, when a helpless and impotent Dominion of Newfoundland found itself almost totally without markets, money, credit and food. Moreover, the possibility of good government really had been frustrated, not only by rapacious, scheming merchants (though by them too), but also, and more so, by the new breed of populist politicians who knew how to exploit a long-suffering electorate for their own ends.[7] It seems downright extravagant now to suggest that the general consensus that it was the latter particularly who were mainly responsible for having run parliamentary democracy on the rocks was, after all, nothing but a right-wing cover-story. If one is going to cite assorted remarks about Bolshevism,

Coaker's "Reds" or "too much democracy" as evidence for a right-wing conspiracy, one should be willing to put in the same balance the equally commonplace left-wing prejudice which, then as now, always blames every evil in Newfoundland social history upon a congenitally malevolent merchant class.

No one could be more delighted than I am at the renewed interest on the part of historians in a turn of events which I describe elsewhere as Newfoundland's "greatest political disaster . . . that broke its historical career in two" and which, rather than Confederation, "is the central, pivotal point in [its] history."[8] But it really does little to elucidate that history to co-opt it, as Sider co-opted outport customs, as a "Newfoundland illustration" of the Marxist world-historical morality play, starring local merchant-capitalist Simon Legrees visiting a fate worse than death upon the hapless Newfoundland working class, with Smallwood and Coaker as their unionist running dogs. There is just too much theoretical violence in it, too much throttling of facts by ideology. Claiming specimen's rights I must, with respect, rebel.

Notes

[1]Crews, F.C., *The Pooh Perplex* (New York: Dutton, 1963).

[2]G.M. Sider, *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). For a guided tour of the whole cultural-theoretical landscape, see Ian McKay, "Historians, Anthropology, and the Concept of Culture," *Labour/Le Travail* 8/9 Fall/Winter (1981/82).

[3]Though, since my own views are quoted (124, note) as a recent example of "anti-democratic sentiment," I might be judged an incompetent, even a hostile witness!

[4]Overton defines "democracy" very narrowly and literally (86, n.4), quoting as authorities sociological articles one is unlikely to have read, as if a profound historical development of this concept never existed. Identifying democracy directly with universal franchise, he assumes that any expression of difficulty with this view, conceptually or in practice, must invariably spring from "anti-democratic" prejudice. This baldly dogmatic approach abandons two of the most notable insights of political thought from Aristotle through Montesquieu to the present.

The first is that every form of government is susceptible to its own peculiar form of perversion; monarchy into autocracy where unconstitutional, for example, or democracy into ochlocracy in the absence of "political virtue," i.e., a developed public consciousness of civil rights. To claim that this common truism is only capitalist obfuscation is ridiculous.

The second is that there is inescapable ambiguity as to what a democratic society really is. If it is a society devoted to the collective welfare, requiring subordination of the individual to the general will, it is also a society organized to liberate, enhance and protect the unique interests and life of particular individuals as such. Surely recent history has confirmed that this well-known conflict is not easily reconciled or reducible to some winnable cosmic showdown between "good" socialist populism and "bad" capitalist liberalism. On the specific question of the franchise, there has been and remains real tension between two equally valid demands, namely that it (a) be universal and yet (b) be restricted to its responsible exercise. It is dogmatic to assert that the individualist argument from (b) can simply be written off as in all cases expressing

nothing more than the sophistry of "conservatives" out to frustrate democracy, understood in the collectivist sense of (a). Such rootless one-sidedness unfortunately flaws much of Overton's subsequent argument.

[5]Beyond the fact that attitudes pro and contra were mixed no less among businessmen than among others, the policies of the Commission, paternalistic and limited though they were, and heavily focussed on fiscal retrenchment, did nonetheless place considerable emphasis on economic development and social reform, including the extension of public health and welfare, compulsory education, attempts to encourage cooperative agriculture (e.g., the Markland project) and other people-friendly things of the kind. Along with rank conservatives at the table also sat people of high social commitment such as H.L. Pottle.

[6]The ambiguous social idealism of 1930s activists in Newfoundland, as elsewhere, remains a major unwritten thesis. Overton reveals it somewhat in his references to Coaker and Smallwood, but then obscures it again under his decidedly Marxist mantle. It was a much wider phenomenon, familiar to me at an oral-historical level through my father who, a Welsh Fabian turned Newfoundland Methodist activist, was a sometime confederate of Coaker, Paton, Lodge, Grenfell and others. They shared a common belief that a "bright new day" of social reform was aborning, not to be brought about through violent revolution, but through the inspired genius of resolute individuals devoted to public consciousness-raising, the organization of cooperatives and youth movements, or to single-handed medical or educational feats of reform. Their idealistic program, at once avant garde and ambiguous, might be said after the fact to have had both fascistic and communistic elements, but as it was carried out more often than not in distinct opposition to the existing political and commercial establishment, it is difficult to see it as nothing more than disguised support for "capitalism".

[7]It seems again all too obvious from the record that it was precisely disgust over the cynical exploitation of an unsophisticated and vulnerable electorate by populist tyrants that inspired the language of "too much democracy" and "no more party politics" at the time. But in the very same phrases which others read as expressions of concern for the very survival of political democracy, Overton finds only the sinister cutworm of a conservative conspiracy against it.

[8]Jackson, F.L. *Surviving Confederation* (St. John's: Harry Cuff, 1986), p.60.