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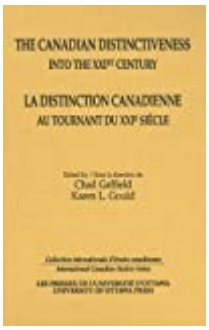


**Chad Gaffield, Karen L. Gould, eds.** *The Canadian Distinctiveness into the XXIst Century.* Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2002. xii + 335 pp. $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7766-0551-7; $48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7766-3022-9.

**Reviewed by** Mark Proudman (New College, Oxford)

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"The Canadian Distinctiveness": Constructing a Nationalist Ideology

This book consists of papers presented to a conference on "the Canadian distinctiveness," held at the University of Ottawa in May 2000, and now drawn together in a memorial volume. It contains chapters by prominent public intellectuals, state officials, and senior academics, and covers most of the major themes frequented by the present brand of official left-liberal Canadian nationalism. The volume is therefore a useful guide to the Ottawa state's official ideology, though of course that is not how it is intended to be read. I pay it the compliment of taking it seriously not because it is unusual, but precisely because it is typical, and even exemplary, of a prominent species of officially propounded nationalism.

Inevitably, "the Canadian distinctiveness" is thought by the various authors in this volume to be our allegedly unique practice of pacific, egalitarian, multicultural, pluralist democracy. This governing theme is no more surprising than the fact that prominent Canadian officials and intellectuals should wish to discuss, if not precisely to debate, their Canadian identity. There is an implicit contradiction here: identity analysis examines the discursive and political functions of identities, and is therefore in some measure demystifying and deconstructive; most of these writers greatly value the (and usually their) Canadian identity, and therefore have little motive to deconstruct it. They are very fond of its fully constructed form. It is a contradiction on display throughout these pages.

Professor Chad Gaffield of the University of Ottawa introduces these papers with the inevitable worry that September 11 may have rendered previous ideas about Canada's place in the world irrelevant, a worry quickly assuaged with the insight that "an increasing number of analysts are now insisting on the need to situate all current events, no matter how cataclysmic, within larger contexts across space and time" (p. 3). There is guidance, Prof. Gaffield assures us, to be found in the work of an artist by the name of Alexander Calder, discussed in one of the papers in this volume. His artistic works apparently suggest the need to "shift and change gracefully in response to new external pressures" (p. 9). In conclusion, we are instructed–and instruction is the primary mode of discourse at work at this point–that: "The challenge is no longer simply to know ourselves as Canadians, but rather to use this knowledge to create a healthier and more just society in a rapidly changing international context within which the 'changed world' after 9/11 must be situated" (p. 9).

Responses to the events of 9/11 generally range themselves somewhere on a spectrum from Tony Blair's

"shoulder to shoulder" solidarity on the one hand to attempts on the other to locate the proverbial "root causes" of the attacks among the shortcomings of the society that was attacked: Gaffield is telling us that the good Canadian will adopt the latter attitude. Canadians, we are to gather, are essentially enlightened people, and knowledge of those "larger contexts across space and time" will direct critical attention toward a putative lack of health and justice (Gaffield's words) on the part of the society that was attacked–and away from the defects of the society that produced the attackers. The appropriate response to these "new external pressures" (a euphemistic phrase, to put it mildly, for a murderous attack) is to "shift and change gracefully" (neatly putting the onus to change on the attacked rather than the attacker): obviously the authentic Canadian will not favor making war on the attackers. Such views, and the attendant relocation of guilt from attackers to the attacked, are of course common among left-liberal intellectual elites around the world, and are hardly distinctively Canadian. Nevertheless, we are to understand that these attitudes are more authentically Canadian than possible alternatives.

Although Calder, whose art suggested the (apparently previously unfamiliar) theme of response to change, is an American, whose ability therefore to "capture metaphorically the Canadian dynamic will undoubtedly be contested by some," Gaffield tells us to be broad-minded enough to look beyond Calder's defective national origin (p. 9). This is an essentialism that takes itself very seriously, and that takes seriously the notion that an American–as opposed to a more culturally sophisticated Canadian, presumably–might be inherently incapable of certain artistic feats. I am reminded of G. K. Chesterton, who remarked that while he quite liked many Americans, it was the ideal American to whom he objected. These writers object to their ideal other; the difference is that Chesterton was joking.

The volume's leading paper, "The Inclusive Shape of Complexity," based, one gathers, on the keynote speech of the original conference, is by that inevitable authority on the Canadian essence, John Ralston Saul, now of course resident at Rideau Hall. It is a valuable paper, and anyone who has not read Saul's other writings on the Canadian identity will find it a useful precis: Saul's *Reflections of a Siamese Twin* says in four hundred pages what he here communicates in fifteen.[1] He has caused similar themes to be repeated extensively elsewhere, most notably in the speeches of his wife, the Governor-General, which often borrow almost word for word from Saul's writings. Saul's chapter is an exemplary articulation of what is very much the official ideology of the state based at Ottawa, and deserves our attention on that score alone.

Readers of H-Canada will be aware of the themes that Saul imagines under the sign of the red maple leaf: Canada is a "permanently incomplete" nation of three founding peoples, the natives, the French, and the Anglophones. We have an inherent talent for peaceful reform and a deeply egalitarian nature. We are un-American and non-European, and have only the most coincidental connections to the British. We have a stable four-hundred-year-old national identity, Saul tells us, defined by "distance, the North, marginality, poverty" (p. 16). It is the kind of romantic hankering for some more authentic, non-Western, anti-modern mode of existence that has afflicted well-connected, mainstream, affluent Western intellectuals since Rousseau.

Saul is keen to put blue water between Canada and the English: of the three founding groups within Canada, he insists that the Anglophones must not be called English because many were actually Scotch or Irish, notwithstanding that throughout most of the history of English-speakers in Canada those past people called themselves "English" or "English Canadians" (p. 18). As for the United Empire Loyalists, Saul reminds us that many of them were Germans (p. 18); their loyalty to the King of England and their Anglo-Scottish union flag are written out of the story. That we have much in common with the Australians is for Saul pure coincidence; I had imagined that the British Empire had something to do with it (p. 27).

The similarity of our political institutions to those of Great Britain is a further coincidence. Our institutions operate, Saul assures us, in completely different ways (p. 21). Obviously, under the first-past-the-post Westminster system, a Canadian government with a majority can become a kind of elected dictatorship, able to browbeat MPs and to override public opinion on many points: Tony Blair would recognize it instantly. Useful commentary on the state of our political system would have to begin with an accurate idea of its history.

Saul teaches that the idea of peaceful reform was a Canadian innovation, and was unknown to the British Government in the mid-nineteenth century: the Canadian government reacted cautiously to the 1849 Montreal riots, rather than sending "troops into the streets in order to do what was done in London which was to shoot down the people who were causing trouble," a statement so far from the reality of Victorian England, and of the

nearly contemporaneous Chartist demonstrations, that it does not merit refutation (p. 17). That it survives in this volume suggests that it was not questioned at this conference–nor indeed by the editors–and that, I think, says more about the nature of the proceedings memorialized here than any polemical misstatement on the part of a nationalist ideologue. Two points come through: an exquisite concern to observe the multicultural and egalitarian sensibilities of the present day, and a simultaneous desire to obscure Canada's English roots. Accurately to discuss those roots would imply that one culture was more important than others, and that would be offensive to those valued sensibilities.

Saul is particularly keen to inflate–one might say to construct–the contributions of natives to Canadian history. He teaches that Metis military victories helped settle the southern boundary of the country (p. 18); I had thought Lord Ashburton's treaty of 1842, backed by the far distant ships of the Royal Navy, was in some way involved. To be fair, Saul is probably referring to battles between the Metis and the Sioux. But a mythologist with another agenda could equally well portray the Metis as an ally of the U.S. Cavalry. This is the kind of narrative that pillages history for useful fragments of facts; it is driven by its present polemical purposes, not by a desire to know the past as it really was.

The United States, the necessary existential other, is never far away. The ostensibly peaceful nature of Canada is contrasted to the propensity to violence attributed to the Americans, with whom of course we have nothing in common. But then, having used our pacific essence to dispose of the unwanted Americans, Saul concludes by telling us how similar Canada is to Latin America, that famous hotbed of peaceful reform (pp. 26-27). A writer who leaves himself open to such obvious rejoinders is clearly not engaged in self-critical thought. What we have here is a mythical narrative, not a critical analysis.

This chapter is exemplary Saul, not merely in its content but in its style. His fractured prose ("We share values because our societies are similar. Experience. The Situation. History. Geopolitics. Values. Climates. Geographies. Political systems. Attitudes toward violence. And so on and so on. There may also be a language to share. Maybe not" [pp. 26-7].) is presumably intended to communicate some sense of spontaneous, authentically heart-felt urgency; it thereby tends to insulate his essentialist nationalism and his frequent historical howlers from critical analysis. The sophisticated writer is aware of his own rhetorical techniques; reading Saul, I am always left wondering whether his rhetoric is ingenuously written or disingenuously constructed.

The other papers in this collection are more conventional academic essays, examining specific policy issues, from defense to aboriginal policy, in the attempt to find "the Canadian distinctiveness." In this, the volume hangs together rather more than is customary with compilations of conference papers: the common theme, the Canadian identity, is clearly of specific and central interest to all participants, and all are agreed that the kinder, gentler, multicultural, somewhat left-of-center Canadian identity is a great and good thing, and they proceed to apply that ideology, with minor codicils, to their respective topics. There is, for all our vaunted diversity, no debate here–only an intellectual conformity that would have warmed the stony heart of old Mikhail Suslov.

Donna Winslow observes with commendable honesty that North American defense is provided by another power, while arguing, with an element of self-contradiction that she seems not quite to recognize, that peace-keeping is an expression of our best qualities, and that in any case our parsimonious attitude to the military forbids anything else (pp. 253-266). Maria Teresa Gutierrez-Haces portrays Canadian foreign policy as a means of creating a distinct Canadian identity, an identity which is, in turn, reflected by the very foreign policy said to create it; I fear that she is quite correct, though the circularity of the entire project seems to evade her notice. Diplomatic historians have long debated whether foreign policy is driven by external or internal politics; identity politics seems an extreme, not to say parodic, form of the latter. Along the way, Gutierrez-Haces traces the expected narrative of Canadian independence and national difference, in which she announces that the majority of Canadian troops in the First World War spoke French (p. 240); as with much in Saul's paper, one wonders how this got through the peer-review process.

Other writers have similar agendas, and are no more original. Huguette Labelle, a former head of the Canadian International Development Agency, produces the by-now familiar rhetoric of "human security," a convenient way of changing the subject from national or continental security, and goes on to tell us that Canada's model of multicultural democracy will be useful to India, Nigeria, and China (p. 270): I await with bated breath the release of the archives of the Chinese politburo. Monique Begin, the former Liberal Cabinet Minister, teaches that healthcare policy is a key to the Canadian identity. Once

again, an aspect of public policy is justified less with respect to its results than by reference to our neurotic need for "distinctiveness." But I am becoming tediously predictable: you get the feel of this volume.

Editorial material, including Gaffield's introduction, is presented in both English and French. The vast majority of the essays, however, are in English. Only three of the nineteen chapters are in French, and the concluding section on "Canada's place in the world" has no chapters at all in French; the three chapters that are in that language rehearse the standard celebrations of multiculturalism. The volume really functions only in English. One can certainly sympathize with those Francophones who would have preferred, over relegation to some adjunctive chapters in a book in someone else's language, a full discussion in their own language of what they wish to do with their own country.

Gaffield notes in his introduction that terms like "complexity," "contingency," "ambiguity," and "chaos," not to mention "identities," run through the volume and are present in much academic and intellectually ambitious writing around the globe (p. 7): ours is a singularly common kind of distinctiveness. The rhetoric of "complexity" is frequently combined with neologism, often a sign that an author is engaged in conjuring up what he would like to exist rather than describing what does exist. It is a style perhaps best exemplified by the chapter of Gilles Paquet, who would have us go "towards a baroque governance in twenty-first century Canada," in the phrase of his chapter title. His chapter is replete with calls for multicultural "bricolage" and "ad-hocery," all constituting a Canadian "habitus," and drawing on that most inevitable of post-modern cliches, "irony."

One might, in the ironic spirit enjoined upon us, point out that the Duke of Marlborough, another member of a newly-elevated national elite, was also a fan of the baroque. New elites, from those of Britain three centuries ago to Canada today, have often set about constructing serviceable, not to say profitable, national identities, in the process drawing on motifs and styles widely fashionable among other, better-established elites. New classes associate themselves with symbols of cultural status, be they vast piles or big words, and eagerly speak the vernaculars, architectural or discursive, associated with sophistication. The baroque has often been the favored style of socially climbing, culturally insecure and self-interested classes, and in that we Canadians are less than distinct.

Margaret Atwood, in one of the most intelligent papers here, writes that she is often asked whether she "identifies as" a woman or a Canadian. She responds that she is a writer (p. 47). As Atwood remarks, the phrase "identify as" would have until recently been incomprehensible; it speaks of an era in which we have unprecedented freedom to choose among any number of prefabricated identity variants. This volume demonstrates that the identity of the "Canadian" melds easily with the other standard identities on offer, which is undoubtedly one source of its attractiveness within both official and academic circles. We have here feminist Canadians; we have indigenous Canadians; we have Francophone Canadians; we even have a bourgeois financial-industry Canadian–verily does tolerance brook no bounds. There is a burgeoning academic sub-field called "subaltern studies"; no one has to my knowledge yet invented an explicitly subaltern version of the Canadian identity, but no doubt some iconoclastic and unpredictable genius is even now constructing the subaltern Canadian, and probably at taxpayer expense. "The Canadian distinctiveness" claims to be unique, but it integrates suspiciously well with other current ideological fashions and with their cognate academic subfields.

What is missing is obvious, and it is what is missing in the whole field of identity studies: any larger conception of an identity that would go beyond immediate needs and grievances, an identity that would be larger, more coherent, and more ambitious than these ever smaller, ever more particular, and ever more aggrieved ways of distinguishing the individual from the world. Is it not the point of the intellectual to think ambitiously, on a large scale, "outside the box," as it were? It is not happening here–these authors are very comfortable in their box–but this volume is hardly distinctive for that.

Any intelligent view of Canada's place in the world would have to begin by observing that we are a massive net-gainer from the current global order. A conservative would ask whether Canada, a neo-British (in J. G. A. Pocock's phrase [2]) settler state once renowned as a warrior of empire, had now become a source of strength or weakness to the Western and Anglo-American civilization to which it belongs. A radical or neo-Marxist would see Canada as a capitalist power of the second rank, given to hiding behind the emollient but ultimately self-serving rhetoric of multicultural internationalism. Obviously, a nationalist whose focus of loyalty is the Ottawa state has to avoid both of these systematic global views.

An ideologue of "the Canadian distinctiveness" will

wish to establish Canada's distance from an increasingly unpopular Western civilization, and in particular from its successive hegemons, England and the United States. At the same time, an explicitly materialist or Marxisant view of our relation to global conflict would make the moral claims of Canadian nationalists hard to sustain. The Canadian nationalists here duly and predictably avoid these unwelcome thoughts: like any good horse, the nationalist ideologue is required to wear a blinker on the left as on the right, to ward off frightening and unfamiliar apparitions.

The Department of Canadian Heritage spends a couple of billion dollars a year propounding the kind of nationalist ideology exemplified by this volume, and the acknowledgements page informs us that it was produced with the financial assistance of "The Canadian Identity Directorate of the Department of Canadian Heritage." I had no idea there was such a sub-organization: its name is either admirably frank or unconsciously self-parodic. Benedict Anderson, whose name is predictably dropped in these pages, argues in his seminal book *Imagined Communities* that nationalisms are created for self-interested class reasons by national elites deploying the technologies of "print capitalism."[3] Anderson is holding up a mirror in which our national *nomenklatura* ought to recognize itself. But our elites only drop the name of that eminent critic: they do not think with his analysis.

Foucault said somewhere that in ideological rhetoric we should hear the distant roar of battle. That would be a ridiculously magniloquent formulation to apply to a second-rank polity as intellectually constricted as the Ottawa state. But we should at any rate hear in the ideologizing of Ottawa mandarins an argument about the public purse: they take our money, and they need to persuade both themselves and others that they do good things with it. To ask if their state served any large, let alone progressive, purpose would undermine that process of persuasion; their ideology is therefore constructed so as to avoid such awkward questions, and so as to paint the Canadian identity as an essence that is inherently valuable, historically stable, and in need of their expensive services. It is duly propounded in the expected venues and formats, one of which is the academic conference. Here we have the memorial volume: it will make an excellent primary source for students of a certain kind of nationalism.

Notes

[1]. John Ralston Saul, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin* (Toronto: Viking, 1997).

[2]. J. G. A. Pocock, "The New British History in Atlantic Perspective: An Antipodean Commentary," *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 2 (April 1999): p. 492.

[3]. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).