

PREFACE

This book developed out of my engagement over the past decades with the history of labour, the working class, and the left in Canada. It was clear that it was impossible to understand what was going in Canada without an awareness of the rest of the world. After all, the ideas and practices of wage labour and capitalism, as well as the social-democratic, communist, and trade union responses, were not inventions of the Canadian settler society. But by the same token, what happened in Canada over the past two hundred years was similar to developments in other regions. Indeed, insights into social and economic relations in Canada were pertinent to understanding what was happening throughout the developing industrial and democratic world. It was not that Canada was at the cutting edge, but rather that the institutions, social relations, intellectual debates, and historical understandings could be seen, despite local variations, as being cut from the same cloth: the history of liberal capitalism and its antagonist, the left. What follows is not a discussion of Canada; it is a look at the broader world from the entry point of a Canadian sensibility.

This book both is and is not a scholarly work. It is a scholarly work in that it draws on French philosophers, American Analytical Marxists, British cultural historians, and Italian theorists, among others, manipulating and using their ideas. But it is not scholarly in that there is no attempt to engage fully a particular author, a particular idea, or a particular text, to assess who is right and who is wrong. I have used the ideas of others less in the interest of understanding the range of their thought

and how it fits into the academic literature than in drawing on them to put forward my own sense of what is going on. Nor does the section on the history of the left meet scholarly standards, in that it provides a general overview rather than a detailed, comprehensive account. What follows is more a meditation than a scholarly monograph.

And while the book necessarily deals with terms and ideas that are not commonplace in day-to-day conversation, I have tried to use jargon as little as possible. Alas, this has not always been possible, especially in the early theoretical chapters, but when forced to use it, I have tried to explain it. I have also avoided, for the most part, the intricacies of academic, scholarly debates.

The nature of this book has allowed taking liberties with academic protocols. There is a fairly extensive bibliography, but few endnotes. Direct quotations and ideas associated with a particular writer are referenced, but much general and historical information is not. Readers wishing to explore particular topics more fully will make use of the bibliography, where titles largely reflect the content of the books. There are also online sites, especially Wikipedia: here can be found the people, organizations, events, and ideas noted in the text, and direction for deeper investigation. Well-known phrases, for example statements by Karl Marx, are also easily found online and thus are not referenced here.

Some main themes run through the text: I try to persuade the reader that the left is usefully understood as a discourse; that a discourse, as it applies to the left, includes behaviours, practices, institutions, and unarticulated values, as well as ideas, principles, and debates; that the discourse approach allows understanding the component parts of the left, often in conflict, as cohering in a larger whole; that it is meaningful to disentangle the left from progressive discourses; that current debates about issues such as the role of government, economic arrangements, democracy, and economic equality can fruitfully be developed within the left, and not only in dialogue with the anti-left; that the left is best juxtaposed to “liberal capitalism,” not something called “the right”; that history is more than a collection of stories; that for the left, reorienting the direction of history, not sudden transformation, seems the most feasible goal at present; and that populism, rightly understood, is part of the way forward.

The book does not provide tips for activists or a confident presentation of the one true path. Nor does it end with a resounding call to arms. The goal is to understand the left and the environment in which it operates, a complex intersection of individuals, history, ideas, institutions, possibilities, and behaviours.

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Framing a Political Discourse for the Present

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