

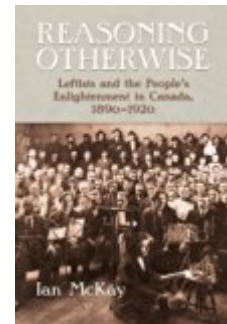


Ian McKay. *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People's Enlightenment in Canada, 1890-1920*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008. 656 pp. \$49.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-897071-49-6.

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## The Importance of Reasoning Otherwise

Ian McKay's *Reasoning Otherwise*, the introductory volume to a three-part series on the Left, examines the understudied and often maligned territory of first-wave Canadian evolutionary socialism. Using a post-polemical methodology of critical reconnaissance, McKay recognizes the cultural gulf between the past and present and addresses those historical ideas that would now be considered racist, sexist, or simply archaic. Through this methodology and his demonstration of how first formation socialists bequeathed an understanding of "reasoning otherwise" to their successors, McKay convincingly demonstrates that the Canadian Left from 1890 to 1920 truly matters. A professor of history at Queen's University, McKay has made a significant contribution to the history of the Canadian Left.

*Reasoning Otherwise* has much to offer all Canadian historians, not just those specializing on the Canadian Left. By focusing on those who noticed and challenged the inherent contradictions in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century liberal order, McKay's book can be seen as an expansion of his pathbreaking "Liberal Order Framework" article in the *Canadian Historical Review*.<sup>[1]</sup> How did Canadians respond to the challenges of the liberal order during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century period of industrial modernity? Beyond the much-needed furthering of knowledge of first formation Canadian socialism, McKay's reconnaissance opens up new and nuanced understandings of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thought on "race," sexuality, feminism, and class. McKay stresses the

importance of moving away from studies of institutions (such as the Socialist Party of Canada) to a broader study of the socialist cultural context.

Building on the framework of socialist formations introduced in McKay's *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History* (2005), *Reasoning Otherwise* expands on how Canadian workers and thinkers of the period grappled with industrial modernity. *Rebels, Reds, Radicals* is an excellent introduction to the methodological concepts (i.e., reconnaissance, liberal order) that McKay brings to the table in *Reasoning Otherwise*. Yet this multiple volume delivery has one inherent disadvantage: *Reasoning Otherwise* has to reintroduce concepts raised in McKay's previous text (*Rebels, Reds, Radicals*) in a necessarily abbreviated fashion. It also lays out the much broader project of which *Reasoning Otherwise* is only the first volume. That said, *Reasoning Otherwise* already stands at 529 pages, exclusive of endnotes, and it provides context—perhaps it will simply encourage the curious reader to examine McKay's other book.

Canadian historians, in their very limited explorations of first formation Canadian socialism, have been unkind to first formation socialism. These criticisms have largely revolved around three key components of first formation socialism: Social Darwinism, racism, and sexism. Without shying away from the behavior of these men and women, which was often racist, sexist, or archaic by twenty-first-century standards, McKay engages with the material and the cultural context to demonstrate

that first formation socialism cannot be reduced to a narrative focused simply on these factors.

*Reasoning Otherwise* is well organized, with thematic chapters on a series of “questions” (class, religion, woman, and race) bookended by chronological chapters. McKay begins with the emergence of the first formation in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and continues into socialism’s early twentieth-century climactic confrontations with the liberal order. These confrontations span from the middle of the First World War, concluding with the show trials of 1920. A thematic approach allows McKay to tie together seemingly disparate individuals and organizations within a common formation, finding commonalities and shared intellectual contexts, while the chronological beginning and ending emphasize key moments: the initial formation of evolutionary socialism and eventually the moment of “supersedure” where the contradictions of liberal order became apparent enough to lead to mass refusal. “Supersedure,” a key concept, captures the essence of what it means to “reason otherwise”: “the epiphany of understanding that the suffering and oppression being experienced emerges from underlying contradictions in the social and economic structure, [and] that it can be logically explained and actively contested” (p. 8).

McKay’s opening chapter provides the intellectual context for the first formation of socialism, which was “founded upon the insights of evolutionary theory” (p. 29). This scientific socialism was founded on the thoughts of Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Herbert Spencer. The very mention of Spencer may give pause to some readers, and in this book we see a spirited rehabilitation of the Victorian sociologist. Social Darwinism, associated with Spencer’s oft-quoted phrase “survival of the fittest,” bequeathed a shared language to Canadian leftists who saw capitalism as standing in the way of social evolution. Socialism “was the revolutionary science of social evolution” (p. 77). This shared intellectual consensus continues in the second chapter where McKay introduces the leftist luminaries Phillips Thompson, Colin McKay, and John Spargo, who are tied together by virtue of their shared commitment to Spencerian socialism despite never meeting or corresponding. The first two chapters can read together, with the first introducing the intellectual context of first formation socialism and the second documenting its subsequent birth as Canadian leftists reached their moment of supersedure and began to take action.

Following these two introductory chapters, we move

into a series of four thematic chapters centered on various questions. Chapter 3 addresses the “class question.” To date, much of the work on this question has revolved around the debate between the “possibilists” and the “impossibilists,” or the question of intermediate reforms on the path to the envisioned cooperative commonwealth. Moving beyond organizations, such as the impossibilist Socialist Party of Canada (SPC), McKay focuses on individual activists and organizations who were far more influential than the parties with which they may or may not have been affiliated. “In a formation that was so decisively about socialism as a *science*, the shape and size of the party were less important than the clarity and passion with which the precepts of the science were expounded—in print, in provincial legislatures, in the city parks. Indeed, the day of a party-centered socialism had yet to dawn” (p. 210). This reinforces the need to move beyond a historical narrative dominated by a focus on the SPC executive.

“The Religion Question” is the focus of the fourth chapter, which showcases the reconnaissance methodology well. Building on questions (compellingly raised in *Rebels, Reds, Radicals*) of whether one could both be left and Christian, and to what effect, McKay begins by ruminating on the “What would Jesus do?” quotation, a mainstay of the religious Right today. “When placed in a different context—the first formation, for example—the same words can mean something radically different.... In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in sharp contrast to the 21<sup>st</sup>, ‘What would Jesus do?’ was an invitation issued to a group to think through collective issues of social justice. It was an open question” (p. 215). McKay demonstrates how many men and women found themselves on the left through their spiritual convictions.

Despite the clarity of the preceding chapters, perhaps the most enjoyable and forceful chapter of *Reasoning Otherwise* is on the “woman question” (chapter 5). This chapter directly responds to the most ardent criticisms of first formation socialism levied by previous historians, notably Janice Newton, *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left, 1900-1918* (1995), and Linda Kealey, *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour, and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920* (1998). The “woman question” is one of the more studied aspects of this otherwise neglected period, and McKay engages fruitfully and respectfully with these authors. Faulting them for their overreliance on the Dominion executive members of the SPC and the editorials found in the SPC-organ *Western Clarion*, McKay argues that pro-feminism was de rigeur on the left. We see again McKay’s strong argument that

one must move away from studies of institutions to a study of the broader socialist cultural context and movement. By doing so, McKay convincingly demonstrates the existence of a “formidable socialist-feminist cultural movement,” which both spurred women to stand for political office and politically intervene, and also opened up spheres of discussion on questions of marriage and sexuality both within and outside the Left (p. 342).

Despite this, McKay does not ignore sexism, instead he demonstrates it as only part of the story. Previous historians who focused on and elevated the SPC and its small executive have given disproportionate attention to sexism. At times, I wished he had expanded on the sexist current within first formation socialism, although this has been well-traveled ground. Much of *Reasoning Otherwise* focuses on the impact influential men and women had on first formation socialism, and McKay could have perhaps dwelled more on the sexist polemics of SPC luminaries, such as D. G. McKenzie, Roscoe Fillmore, and E. T. Kingsley. Although McKay demonstrates each of these men’s influence elsewhere in the book, he dismisses their contribution to the “woman question” in a paragraph as standing astride the “overall record of most of the first formation” (p. 301). Again, however, this is admittedly well-traveled territory elsewhere in the historiography, and McKay persuasively shows that historians need to move beyond the party structures of first formation socialism.

On the heels of his chapter on the “woman question,” McKay engages with the “race question” (chapter 6). The chapter opens with an extensive rumination on the nature of race in the liberal order, providing compelling context for the subsequent exploration of how radicals responded to this question. The “race question” challenged the socialist movement: “The anti-immigration fervour of the 1900s and 1910s, in some places a veritable mass movement, bears the marks of many moments of refusal of capitalism; for many workers apparently saw in the ‘Coolie’ and ‘Chink’ and ‘Jap’ not only the figures of their future enslavement, but also, in White Canada, the emblem of the superseding of troubling transnational realities” (p. 387). Yet alongside the narrative of racism, McKay importantly demonstrates that the period practically saw the emergence of “language-based movements and parties, the rise of at least some minority socialists to positions of authority, and the generation of a framework of new diaspora socialisms both connected to and autonomous within the wider formation” (p. 415). Thus, the narrative of the SPC needs to be balanced with that of the Social Democratic Party of Canada (SDPC), a loose fed-

eration of various ethnic locals (i.e., the Ukrainian SDPC, the Finnish SDPC, and so forth).

The book ends with two chronologically based chapters. The first of these, “War, Revolution, and General Strike,” documents the crisis of the liberal order which emerged from the dramatic changes that beset Canadian state and society between 1915 and 1920. Amid conscription, censorship, prosecutions, and raids, socialists “learned from their opponents that the mere exposure of the evils of capitalism was insufficient” (p. 459). The narrative culminates with the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike where we see elements of all four questions: race, women, class and religion. For example, Winnipeg was marked by working-class religiosity, with a people-driven Labor Church empowering the strikers to question and discuss. Socialist feminists adopted positions of authority, flourishing in a short-lived period of “gender elasticity” (p. 474). Despite the widespread adoption of evolutionary theory and the racist rhetoric of many of the white workers, Winnipeg also saw the strikers refuse to be drawn into interethnic strife. McKay convincingly demonstrates that Winnipeg 1919 was not simply a defeat, as it sent a warning message to the liberal order, nor was it simply a moment of excess. Rather, it “was a conscious attempt to imagine what new relations of freedom would look like in the post-capitalist future,” with men and women coming together—against severe repression—to challenge the hegemony of liberal order (p. 493). The last chapter, “Showtime, 1920,” describes how the show trials in the aftermath of Winnipeg sought to delegitimize and destroy socialism but instead became the site of socialist articulation and enshrined the Winnipeg General Strike as a world historic event.

McKay’s book is a fascinating and comprehensive account that will undoubtedly become the benchmark for studies of the period. The historiography has gone from a paucity of work on the Canadian Left generally to a dominant text that will help spur further studies; scholars now have a base from which to work. While *Reasoning Otherwise* is neither an easy or quick read, it has greatly enhanced both our understandings of the Canadian Left and of Canadian cultural history more broadly. Beautifully bound and well-laid out, it is also yet another in a line of exciting offerings from Toronto’s Between the Lines press. For many readers, one suggestion is to use *Rebels, Reds, and Radicals* as a companion book to provide further context, but it is not necessary or required. McKay makes a convincing case that these men and women who dared to reason otherwise in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries matter to the history of Canadian lib-

eralism, as they made sense and found meaning in their tumultuous world.

Note

[1]. Ian McKay, "The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (December 2000): 617-645.

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