Regionalism, Citizenship, Identity

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Does regionalism still matter? The question may sound odd because on one level regionalism is obviously an important factor in political economy. On another level, however, the question needs to be asked. While political scientists remain concerned about regional cleavages in the body politic, other scholars seem more interested in other matters. Studies of multiculturalism, identity, gender relations, gay and lesbian rights, diasporic communities and the place of First Nations within the evolving federal union, for instance, all tend to neglect regional dynamics in favour of other "identity markers."[1] Moreover, while regional disaffection with the working of the federal union remains strong – particularly in western Canada – public opinion surveys suggest that regional distinctions in social values are less pronounced than parliamentary political representation indicates.[2]

If scholars are increasingly focusing their attention on other matters and public opinion surveys suggest that there is a great deal that binds Canadians together across regional divides, what role does regionalism play in contemporary Canadian life? Does it affect the ways in which people self-identify? Does it affect lived experience? Does it constitute an identity, into-and-of-itself, of which scholars and policy makers should be taking note? Or, can regionalism be seen as a legacy of the past and of feature of political economy, an element of the Canadian experience that is being displaced in the cultural sphere – and in terms of identity – by what we might think of as other subject positions that are more in keeping with the supposed postmodern globalized cultural order developing about us?[3]

Regionalism counts, but in a simplistic way. The importance of regionalism for the contemporary Canadian experience – for considerations of identity, citizenship, democracy – lies not in adding regionalism to an already long list of "markers" that affect the ways in which identities are ascribed and lived.[4] Instead, regionalism is important for considerations of identity and citizenship in three separate respects: as a core social problem related to regional economic disparities that the Canadian constitution binds the federal government to address, a part of distinct regional patterns of ethno-cultural and linguistic relations, and as a problem for democracy. In each of these respects, regionalism needs to be taken into consideration if Canadians are committed to the development of effective public policy and a meaningful citizenship.

Regional Disparities and the Political Economy of Individualism

Regional economic grievances have a long history in Canada, but with the establishment of Pierre Trudeau's "just society" liberal reform project regionally based inequality took on new meanings. As Trudeau later explained, the problem of regional inequalities posed a fundamental challenge to liberal conceptions of equality of opportunity as an inherent right of Canadian citizenship. He noted that the need to address regional economic inequalities were as pressing for his government as the need to ensure an equality of French- and English-language public services on the part of the federal government. The Trudeau administration enshrined this commitment in the patriated Canadian constitution to guarantee "the principle of equalization payments for the redistribution of revenues from wealthy provinces to the less wealthy ones."[5] This commitment was to ensure that the basic needs of citizens were met and that economic disparities did not unduly hamper an individual's free self-development regardless of their region of birth.

The implication of this principle for regionalism in Canada is clear, but infrequently considered. Social rights, as David Laycock has explained, stand at the heart of contemporary liberal thought. Social rights are rights that exist beyond human and civil rights (such as the rights to life and free expression, respectively). They include such things as the right to accessible education and health care, and are the means through which the liberal commitment to individualism is actually put into place.[6] Without an activist state promoting equality of opportunity, regional concentrations of wealth and class distinctions impede equality of opportunity to such an extent that it becomes meaningless in practice.

The key here is that regional economic policy is framed as a right of citizenship. Through its "just society" reforms, the Trudeau government reconstructed regionalism as a problem of individual rights. As Canadian citizens, residents of regions have the right to have economic inequalities addressed by the federal state as a prerequisite of the state's commitment to equality among citizens. Regional economic development programmes, regionally specific social transfer programmes, and intergovernmental equalization payments were means through which the Trudeau government attempted to address this issue.

This is important because regional economic disparities remain a pressing concern. The on-going economic problems of northern, prairie, and Atlantic Canada combined with the regionalized effects of Canada's free trade agreements,[7] will ensure that intergovernmental transfers and specialized individual income transfers will remain part of Canadian political

economy. After the Trudeau era constitutional reforms, a failure to address regional inequality transcends issues of federalism to directly address the rights of citizens as individuals.

"Multicultural Regionalism"[8]

A second issue with direct implications for regionalism is ethnic and linguistic diversity. "Region" is a complex and contested term; regions are not static but part of a process of historical change.[9] As Leo Driedger has explained, in contemporary Canada, regions are not simply political entities but also include distinctive patterns of ethno-cultural diversity and language usage. According to Driedger, it is these distinctive patterns that distinguish different Canadian regions from each other. Atlantic Canada, for example, outside of northern New Brunswick, is characterized by relatively modest levels of bilingualism, limited use of second languages. The vast majority of people living in Atlantic Canada trace their ancestry to a British heritage. Immigration is similarly limited and the dominant factors in regional diversity are defined by the indigenous black community, First Nations, and Acadians. Northern Canada, by contrast, is characterized by the extensive use of Aboriginal languages, the minority status of ethnically British Canadians, and new experiments in the eastern arctic in self-government within territorial status for the Inuit. Western Canada is the most ethnically diverse part of the country. Here, Canadians of British and French descent constitute a minority of the population. This, combined with high rates of immigration and a large First Nations population, makes for a diverse society and extensive second-language use in a regional social order that is, nonetheless, also notable for its integrative use of the English language.[10]

What is important to note are the implications of distinctive patterns of cultural diversity within regions for an understanding of regionalism itself. Instead of isolating particular and distinctive types of regional culture, Driedger's argument suggests that regional cultural processes need to be understood as processes of ethno-cultural interaction and regional cultural dynamics retain their importance precisely because of this. Regional location can have a determining effect on the availability of heritage language education, religious institutions, important foods, access to ESL or FSL education, and a range of other matters.

The implications of regional cultural geography bear directly on public policy, particularly multiculturalism and diversity. In Atlantic Canada, for example, immigrant settlement and integration policies must necessarily proceed in different ways than on the Canadian West Coast or in the GTA. While the aim of a fair and just integration may remain the same, the institutional and social structure that can sustain this objective differs dramatically in practice. A failure to consider regionalized demographics, in other words, will produce public policy ill suited to the dynamics of life, the needs of immigrants and ethnic minorities, and the needs of regions.

Regionalism, Citizenship, Democracy

A final important matter related to regionalism is the integration of regional voices into the political process. This is another long-standing concern of regional protest movements, but one with new implications. A number of public commentators feel that the most effective response to regional alienation lies in enhancing democracy in Canada. Regionalism, in fact, expresses discontent with national politics virtually by definition. Democratic reform could allow Canada to simultaneously address its "democratic deficit" and provides regions with a means to articulate their concerns directly within the federal government. Canada, it is frequently noted, is almost unique among federations in providing little means for regional concerns to be articulated within the central institutions of the federal government. The end result is combative federal/provincial relations and a sense of regional alienation and frustration with federalism.[11]

On a regional level, democratic reform will also need to address the aspirations of First Nations. In Northern Canada, for instance, particularly the eastern Arctic, regional voices also need articulate Inuit voices into the policy process. Measures designed to enhance democracy in the northern territories need to take the changing status of Aboriginal peoples into account and their need for expanded social, economic, political, and cultural autonomy. Autonomy does not imply isolation or even self-sufficiency, but it does imply the ability of First National groups to manage, administer, and direct policy in their national interests.

Similar matters need to be addressed in Atlantic Canada, where a distinctive regional treaty structure and a limited land base combine with other elements of a unique regional history for First Nations to create a problem that may be difficult, if not impossible, to resolve outside of a regional policy framework.[12] In British Columbia, the complete absence of land surrender treaties in much of the province poses other, different issues that are addressed – to a greater or lesser extent – through a modern treaty process, used in only limited instances elsewhere in Canada. Regional political reform, in other words, may be needed not only to extend democracy but to address the legitimate demands of First Peoples.

Beyond Regionalism?

Regionalism in Canada is not about to disappear. Economic disparities, distinct histories, and differing demographics combined will ensure the salience of regionalism into the future. But, the regionalism of the twenty-first century is not the regionalism of the twentieth. Regional identities and cultures are not "in competition" with other identities. Advances in scholarship on ethnicity, multiculturalism, gender, sexual orientation, and a host of other matters, in fact, suggest that regional considerations need to play an important role in public discourse about diversity and in public policy. The ideal of equality of opportunity, a supposedly fundamental right of modern liberal societies, cannot be addressed without attention to region nor, I would argue, can a host of other matters. An understanding of regional demographic, economic, and cultural dynamics is, then, central to considerations of citizenship, individualism, identity, and diversity in Canada. It is the practical ground on which supposedly general problems actually need to be addressed.

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2. David Laycock, The New Right and Democracy in Canada (Don Mills, ON: 2002).
3. Naomi Klein, No Logo (Toronto: 2000).
4. For an extensive review of work on identity in Canada, see Joanna Rummens, "Canadian Identities: An Interdisciplinary Overview of Canadian Research on Identity" (Department of Canadian Heritage, 2000).
5. Pierre Trudeau, "The Values of a Just Society" in Pierre Trudeau and Tom Axworthy, eds., Towards a Just Society (Markham: 1990), 363.
6. Laycock, The New Right and Democracy in Canada.
7. George de Benedetti, "Reflections on the Tenth Anniversary of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement: What Has the FTA Meant for Canada?" in Michael J. Tucker, Raymond B. Blake, and P.E. Bryden, eds., Canada and the New World Order (Toronto: 2000), esp. 156-7; and 160.
8. Leo Driedger, Race and Ethnicity 2nd ed. (Toronto: 2003), ch. 4.
9. Gerald Friesen, The West (Toronto: 1998).
10. Driedger, Race and Ethnicity, ch. 4.
11. Jeffrey Simpson, The Friendly Dictatorship (Toronto: 2001).
12. Ken Coates, The Marshall Decision and Native Rights (Montreal and Kingston: 2000).

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1. By recording and measuring the distribution of teacher attention, the use of gender-specific examples (in textbook illustrations, for example), gender stereotypes, outright put-downs as well as a host of other overt and more discrete vehicles of learning, Myra and David Sadker (Sadker & Sadker, 1994) attempt to demonstrate that students learn that males and their concerns are more important. While "cheating" or short-changing girls, these practices – and the values they communicate – also make up the "miseducation" of boys. Naturally, these claims are disputed. For example, Christina Hoff Sommers (Sommers, 2001 <2000>) argues that boys in fact are poorly served by the education system, a fact borne out in their lower scores and higher drop-out rates.
2. Policy considerations aside, individual students and student groups also resist the dominant culture of the education system. One example is the creation of Muslim Student Associations by Muslims high school students to fight against discrimination, to enjoy mutual support, and to lobby the administration for consideration of specific religious needs (an unused classroom for prayer, for example) (Zine, 2000).
3. James Banks, perhaps the most prolific author on multicultural education, lists the five dimensions of multicultural education: 1. Content Integration (including information about women or minority cultures in history classes for example); 2. Knowledge Construction (teaching students how knowledge is created and how it reflects bias of the creator's social class, race, gender, etc.); 3. Prejudice Reduction (programs to combat racism); 4. Equity Pedagogy (introducing teaching techniques and methods of assessment that ensure equality for all students); and 5. An Empowering School Culture (changing grouping practices, student labeling, the social climate of school, and staff expectations so that all students feel equal and empowered) (Banks 1995, 4-10).
4. Canadian debates on inclusive schooling and multicultural education follow those in the United States and the United Kingdom (Moodley, 1995). However, there are debates on similar issues in every pluralist society.
5. For an example involving Muslim students, see Zine 2001.

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