JOHN A. MACDONALD AND THE INVENTION OF WHITE SUPREMACY IN CANADA

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ABSTRACT

In 1885 during debate in the House of Commons John A. Macdonald justified taking the vote away from people of Chinese origins on the grounds that they were a different species from Europeans. Far from reflecting the prejudices of the age or being the result of his personal antipathy towards the Chinese, Macdonald's exclusion of the Chinese was a key element in creating what he called an Aryan Canada through his control over Indian Affairs and immigration. Macdonald's white supremacist vision of Canada challenges received notions of a norm of multicultural tolerance highlights the fact that racisms were integral to the making Canada.

Canadian historiography underplays the significance of racisms in shaping Canada, representing them to be individual moral failings or expressions of the prejudices of the age, all the inevitable result of difference, their devastating consequences largely ignored. Yet, racisms are historically invented systems of rule that have shaped the modern world including Canada and whose origins can be traced.[1] Asian exclusion is one such system and John Alexander Macdonald's enactment of it was integral to the creation of European dominance over a vast territory that we know today as Canada.

Although Macdonald's antipathy towards "the Chinese" is well known, few historians have closely examined Chinese exclusion or how this exclusion articulated his broader vision of Canada. Instead, they represent his anti-Chinese racism as an uncharacteristic moral failing.[2] Yet, Macdonald not only excluded the Chinese, he personally introduced biological racism into Canadian state formation and used it to define Canadianness. Biological racisms depart from older racisms by constructing allegedly natural, immutable and inescapable racial categories. Previous racisms had been based on alleged cultural characteristics that could change over time.[3] For example, in the 1870s the new province of British Columbia had established white minority rule by ensuring that "No Chinaman or Indian" could vote,[4] even though the latter were the overwhelming majority of the population and the former were the next

largest group and had voted in previous elections. At the time, "Chinamen" and "Indians" were equivalent to "Englishmen" and "Americans," comparable to ethnicities today and whether the children of "Chinamen" could become "Canadians" was at least debatable. However, in 1885 Macdonald legislated biological racism so as to ensure that those labeled as "Chinese" could never escape the exclusion, while at the same time establishing what it was to be Canadian in biological "race" terms. This fixing of difference was neither accidental nor simply the result of mere prejudice.

Macdonald's introduction of biological racism took place during the debates over the 1885 *Electoral Franchise Act*, legislation designed to create the federal polity through an electoral system separate from that of the provinces. Macdonald initially proposed to the House of Commons that "Chinamen" should not have the right to vote on the grounds that they were "foreigners" and that "the Chinese has no British instincts or British feelings or aspirations."[5] When a member of the opposition asked whether naturalized Chinese ceased to be "Chinamen," Macdonald amended his legislation to exclude "a person of Mongolian or Chinese race."[6] The opposition response was incredulous, variously pointing out that the Chinese were "industrious people" who had "voted in the last election," or had "as good a right [to] be allowed to vote as any other British subject of foreign extraction."[7] This led Macdonald to make clear that Chinese exclusion was necessary to ensure European dominance. He warned, "if [the Chinese] came in great numbers and settled on the Pacific coast they might control the vote of that whole Province, and they would send Chinese representative to sit here, who would represent Chinese eccentricities, Chinese immorality, Asiatic principles altogether opposite to our wishes; and, in the even balance of parties, they might enforce those Asiatic principles, those immoralities […], the eccentricities which are abhorrent to the Aryan race and Aryan principles, on this House." He then claimed that the Chinese and Europeans were separate species, "the Aryan races will not wholesomely amalgamate with the Africans or the Asiatics" and that "the cross of those races, like the cross of the dog and the fox, is not successful; it cannot be, and never will be." Chinese exclusion was necessary or, as he told the House, "the Aryan character of the future of British America should be destroyed […]."[8]

If Macdonald was a racist, most of his contemporaries in Parliament were not. Macdonald was the only member of the Canadian Parliament to use the term "Aryan" during the 1870s and 1880s, as well as the only member to argue that Asians and Europeans were separate species. His views differed markedly from those of the previous Canadian premier, Alexander Mackenzie. Mackenzie had condemned calls for restrictive legislation on the Chinese as unseemly for "a British community,"[9] and had told the House, "To avow the principle that some classes of the human family were not fit to be residents of this Dominion would be dangerous and contrary to the law of nations and the policy which controlled Canada."[10] Macdonald's 1885 comments palpably shocked the members of the House of Commons; however, reaction in the Senate was even stronger. Because it introduced what they saw as an invidious principle into Canadian law, Senators, including some of Macdonald's own appointments, debated whether they could get away with sending the legislation back to the House of Commons;[11] this despite the fact that, as the Senators well knew, it had taken Macdonald two years to get his legislation through the House. In fact, in 1886, the Senate tried to repeal the *Chinese Immigration Act* and in 1887 and 1888 refused further restrictions on the Chinese.[12]

However, Macdonald was not merely expressing personal prejudices, he was forming the state system. As he told the House, the danger was that the Chinese might control the vote in British Columbia, which would put at risk the European dominance he was creating. The solution was to exclude people of Chinese origins in a way they could not circumvent, premising their exclusion on their supposed biology rather than their behaviour or culture. Thus they could enter the country, but would remain permanently subordinate. He was also showing himself to be familiar with the writings of Joseph Arthur, Comte de Gobineau, an obscure French diplomat whose theories of an originally pure Aryan race as the founders of all great human civilizations were gaining currency in Europe during the early 1880s.[13] Most importantly, he was inventing Candianness in racial terms, defining "Canadian" as "European" and "Chinese" as something that could never be "Canadian."

Thus, Macdonald's introduction of scientific racism into Canadian law was part of his larger imperialist agenda. It came as the major European powers were

completing their division of the world and as scientific racism was also becoming popular. Macdonald himself had been the architect of the greatest land grab in British Imperial history; the purchase of the territories nominally controlled by the Hudson's Bay Company. He had devoted much of his career in federal politics to constructing actual Canadian control over these territories. Indeed, Macdonald's 1885 comments came as his project of imperial control was being realized: the railway was almost finished, Canadian and British Imperial forces were putting down the Northwest Rebellion and with it, they were completing "the pacification" of the First Nations of the plains. His exclusion of the Chinese parallels his ruthless marginalization of the First Nations on the southern prairies through government-organized famine, military actions and total bureaucratic control over their lives.[14] *The Franchise Act* was therefore a key moment in the history of Canadian state formation: it defined who this new territory was to be for and who would be a member of the new polity that was emerging *ad mari, usque ad mare*.[15] This was Macdonald's "greatest triumph."[16] More important than the railroad or Confederation, the legislation assured that the new polity of Canada was to be for European men who owned property.

Just as his National Policy of building the railway, protective tariffs, and opening the prairie west to European resettlement was premised on a fourth element — the "pacification" and exclusion of First Nations people from their traditional territories — Macdonald's imperialism was about creating the dominance over this territory of racialized men like himself, i.e., of European property-owners. In 1885 there was only one group of property-owners who threatened his Aryan vision: men from China. If the 1885 *Chinese Immigration Act* was designed to limit the entry of racialized Chinese workingmen and their families, the *Electoral Franchise Act* was designed to keep Chinese merchants and businessmen out of the federal polity. Thus, Macdonald's exclusion of the Chinese was part of his larger project: the creation of a society of people from Europe on the territories of the First Nations, Inuit and Métis people of Canada. To make it the land of Europeans, it first had to be emptied of Aboriginal people. Then non-Europeans had to be kept out. In 1885, this not only meant restricting the entry of Chinese, but removing their access to the political power that would control the territory.

The term for the political system that Macdonald was actively creating, i.e., a system premised on the dominance of racialized Europeans, is white supremacy. As his contemporary critics pointed out, enacting one invidious distinction made others possible. In future years, Macdonald's Aryan vision would mean further legal and popular restrictions on Asians, Africans, Jews and Moslems as well as the continued exclusion of Aboriginal peoples. Meanwhile, the racialized Chinese people of Canada would bear the consequence of his actions for the better part of the next century. Even today in popular belief people cannot be Chinese and Canadian in quite the same way that they can be European and Canadian. This might be something worth remembering in a multicultural, multiethnic and multi-racial Canada as Canadians begin to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of the father of Canadian white supremacy.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

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NOTES

1 EG., Michel Foucault, *"Society must be defended": Lectures at the Collège de France,1975-76* (New York: Picador, 2003) and David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2009).

2 E.G., Richard Gwyn, Nation Maker: *Sir John A. Macdonald: His Life, Our Times*, Vol.2, 1867-1891 (Toronto: Random House, 2011): 528-533.

3 Edouard Beasley, *The Victorian Reinvention of Race New Racisms and the Problem of Grouping in the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

4 "An Act respecting the Qualification and Registration of Voters," *Statutes of British Columbia: Up to and Including the Year 1888*, Ch 38, s. 3: 301 (Victoria: Richard Wolfenden, Government Printer, [188?]).

5 Canada, House of Commons, *Official Report of the Debates of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada* (Ottawa: Maclean, Roger & co, 1885) (Henceforth, *Commons Debates*), 18, May 4, 1885, 1582.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid*., 1585.

8 *Ibid*., 1588.

9 *Commons Debates*, 4, March 18, 1878, 1209.

10 *Ibid*., 1262.

11 Canada, Senate, *Debate of the Senate of Canada 1885*, Vol.2, July 13, 1885, 1276-1301 and July 14, 1885, 1326-1329.

12 Christopher G. Anderson, "Restricting Rights, Losing Control: Immigrants, Refugees, Asylum Seekers and the Regulation of Canada's Border, 1867-1988," (unpublished PhD thesis, McGill University, 2006), 213-252; see also Anderson, "The Senate and theFight against the 1885 Chinese Immigration Act," *Parliamentary Review* 30, 2 (Summer 2007): 21-26.

13 Gregory Blue, "Gobineau on China: Race Theory, the 'Yellow Peril'; and the Critique of Modernity," *Journal of World History* 10, 1 (Spring 1999): 93-139.

14 James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013).

15 Veronica Strong-Boag, "The Citizenship Debates: The 1885 Franchise Act," in Robert Adamoski, Dorothy E. Chunn, and Robert Menzies (*eds*), *Contesting Canadian Citizenship: Historical Readings* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2002), 69-94.

16 Macdonald to Charles Tupper, July 7, 1885, cited in Donald G. Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Old Chieftain* [Ebrary Electronic Resource] (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 427.