

Reflections on Modernity and Antimodernism in Ian McKay's *The Quest of the Folk*

Stephen Dutcher

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Reflections on Modernity and Antimodernism in Ian McKay's *The Quest of the Folk*

IAN MCKAY'S 1994 *THE QUEST OF THE FOLK: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* is a powerful dissection of the attempts of cultural producers such as folklorist Helen Creighton and folk art and craft promoter Mary Black between the 1920s and the 1950s to create an archetypal Nova Scotia. McKay documents how middle-class cultural producers sought to foster the notion of an rural, innocent, antimodern "Folk" in the province through collecting stories and songs, encouraging the production of folk art and crafts, and generally promoting images of an idyllic, rural and sea-bound New Scotland; Nova Scotia, McKay maintains, "was essentially innocent of the complications and anxieties of twentieth-century modernity. Nova Scotia's heart, its true essence, resided in the primitive, the rustic, the unspoiled, the picturesque, the quaint, the unchanging: in all those pre-modern things and traditions that seemed outside the rapid flow of change in the twentieth century". Such an approach is problematic for McKay for two main reasons: it not only hinders people from thinking "historically about alternative outcomes, or about patterns of power and privilege in society, or about themselves as agents and victims of history", but it also "exemplifies the transformation of living people (and their customs and beliefs) into articles of exchange".¹

I was a doctoral candidate at the University of New Brunswick just beginning the work on my dissertation on the origins and evolution of mid-20th-century co-operative wholesaling in the Maritime Provinces when *The Quest of the Folk* came out, and it had an enormous impact on my work. I admired McKay's tough-minded, well-documented critique of Helen Creighton and her work and his uncompromising critique of the creation of a backward, rustic "Folk" in the province to serve the interests of middle-class cultural producers and tourism. I was less impressed with his more muted criticisms of Mary Black and "craft capitalism" – perhaps because of my affinity for and interest in co-operatives as an engine of economic development and as a means for the individuals to support themselves with dignity within a tough economic climate.²

But what really attracted me to *The Quest of the Folk* was its application of antimodernism and modernity to the history of Nova Scotia. Modernity, in particular, seemed to provide unparalleled explanatory power in helping to account for much of the phenomena I had uncovered in my examination of co-operative wholesaling and the co-operative movement in general in the region; McKay's succinct definition of modernity as "urbanization, professionalization, and the rise of the positive state" became almost a map that guided me through the analysis of what happened during the middle decades of the 20th century in the Maritime Provinces.³ Evidence of

1 Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal & Kingston, 1994), pp. 30, 40-1.

2 McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, pp. 288-90.

3 McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, p. 39.

rapidly increasing rural decline, for instance, was apparent in each of the three provinces, especially in the postwar era as thousands of small farmers were forced off their lands and into Maritime urban centres or into migrating to other parts of Canada or to the United States. I could also see evidence of increased professionalization in terms of co-operatives as, unlike the 1930s, when most of the small, local co-operatives were overseen by locally appointed managers who often had little formal training in the job, many co-operatives from the 1940s onward became increasingly large and complex. Co-operative managers began to meet on their own as an organized body, and began to articulate interests separate and distinct from those of the general membership of co-operatives; they became, in the words of Father Moses Coady, the director of the Saint Francis Xavier University's Extension Department, "the Praetorian guard of the co-operative movement".⁴ Greater centralized control of local co-ops also occurred as the largest co-operative wholesale, Maritime Co-op Services (MCS) based in Moncton, instituted "supervisory agreements" with its member local co-ops whereby MCS would hire, train and supervise the local managers.⁵

Evidence of increased professionalization could also be seen in the changing relationship between most provincial and federal government officials and the regional co-operative movement. During the 1920s and 1930s, many government officials were staunch advocates of co-operative action by small, primary producers. Not only did a predecessor of MCS, the Maritime Livestock Board, have specific seats for government representatives on their board of directors, but many of these officials, such as J.K. King in New Brunswick, would sometimes work for periods of time for these producer organizations or use their government positions to promote these organizations' advancement. By the 1940s, however, this relationship had largely faded; while a few government officials such as S.O. Keohan in New Brunswick and R.J. MacSween in Nova Scotia remained staunch advocates of co-operative action, they proved to be the exception as many officials within the federal and provincial governments took an increasingly disinterested and less sympathetic view of co-operatives – even to the point of trying to undercut one of the basic tenants of co-operation as tax officials tried to tax members' patronage dividends declared by co-operatives.⁶

McKay's last characteristic of modernity – the rise of the positive state – was also much in evidence during the 1940s and 1950s. Governments were less inclined to support and promote small producers (or their co-operatives), and indeed often encouraged these producers to abandon their rural operations and move to areas that had more opportunities. During the 1950s, the "decade of development", governments were much more inclined to support large, private companies and a "free enterprise" ideology – especially in terms of economic development through mega-projects such as the Beechwood Dam and the Canso Causeway. The expansion of the welfare state

4 Father Moses Coady, "Digest of Opinion: Views and News From Meeting of . . . Managers", *The Maritime Co-operator*, 16 March 1942, p. 1.

5 See, for example, a circular dated 19 January 1951, entitled "Area Management" and put out by Maritime Co-op Services, Saint Francis Xavier University Archives (FX), RG 30-3/2/2270.

6 W.H. McEwen to A.B. MacDonald, 4 November 1943, FX RG 30-2/2/1654 and *Canada Year Book*, 1946, "Internal Trade: The Royal Commission on Co-operatives", pp. 618-22.

during the 1940s and 1950s through the creation of government programs such as Unemployment Insurance, Family Allowance and a modernized Old Age Security also served to undercut the need for co-operative action as Maritimers and others came to rely increasingly on the state to meet their needs.⁷

In the end, McKay's notion of modernity contributed much to the main thesis or argument of the dissertation: the increasing concentration within the capitalist economy and the changes arising from the advance of modernity threatened the well-being of the region's co-operatives, and this prompted various co-operative leaders to adopt different strategies. Maritime Co-op Services, under its long-time general manager W.H. McEwen, adapted to these changes through a gradualist, business-oriented approach which stressed fiscal stability and centralized control of the locals by the wholesale. Island Co-op Services on Prince Edward Island embraced modernity by focusing on the rapid expansion of services through such things as modern merchandising techniques while financing these, at least in part, through speculation on Latin American potato markets. Eastern Co-op Services was closely associated with the Antigonish Movement, and combined an emphasis on providing a growing number of services to members with a renewed focus on the Movement's Christian, agrarianist antimodernism and its celebration of rural, pastoral life.

In completing the dissertation using McKay's conceptualization of modernity, however, there were two problems. First of all, several phenomena that were obviously part of the profound social and economic changes during the mid-20th century in the region could simply not be accommodated within McKay's notion of modernity: increased economic concentration through vertical and horizontal integration in the agricultural, retail and distribution sectors, the rise of national chain stores such as Dominion and regional chains such as Sobeys with their "modern", self-serve supermarkets, and revolutions in transportation (i.e., vastly improved roads and trucks and trains) that enabled large corporations by the mid-1950s to buy and ship goods across a continent cheaper than many farmers could produce them in Nova Scotia.⁸

In the end, I had to compromise in the dissertation and pair modernity with increasing economic concentration as in the thesis statement above. McKay, of course, is not oblivious to the connection between modernity and economic issues. At several points in *The Quest of the Folk* he writes about the impact of "capitalism", "capitalist modernity" and "global capitalism" yet, surprisingly, he does not explicitly incorporate this economic dimension into his definition of modernity.⁹ This is somewhat curious, as he does make an explicit connection in one of his earlier works – the introduction to his 1992 edited collection of essays on Canadian history *The*

7 See, for example, Francis Mifflin, "The Antigonish Movement: A Revitalization Movement in Eastern Nova Scotia", Ph.D. diss., Boston College, 1974, pp. 120-1, Ian MacPherson, *Each for All: A History of the Co-operative Movement in English Canada, 1900-1945* (Toronto, 1979), p. 199 and "The 1940s: War and Rehabilitation", in E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muike, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto, 1993), pp. 328-9.

8 See, for example, Eleanor O'Donnell MacLean, *Leading the Way: an unauthorized guide to the Sobeys Empire* (Halifax, 1985), p. 4, "Chain Store Buys Out Competition", *The Maritime Co-operator*, 15 September 1955, p. 1 and Minutes of Maritime Co-operative Planning Committee, 17 June 1952, p. 1, FX RG 30-3/22283.

9 See *Quest of the Folk*, pp. 27, 37, 277.

Challenge of Modernity. In that essay, McKay not only refers to “capitalist modernity” as “a dynamic social machine, a powerful juggernaut that crushes everything in its path”, but also states “modernity is the experience of that capitalist revolution that, since the mid-nineteenth century, has transformed the northern half of North America”.¹⁰

McKay draws much of his inspiration in this introduction to *The Challenge of Modernity* from the work of Marshall Berman; McKay, in fact, uses the title of a book by Berman – *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* – as the title of that introduction. Yet Berman apparently has a wider conceptualization of modernity than McKay in that, for Berman, people have been going through the “maelstrom” of modernity for nearly 500 years and that modernity itself has three phases: from the beginning of the 1600s to the end of the 1700s, from the 1790s (the French Revolution) to the 1890s, and the 20th century. Modernity itself, as Berman states in an eloquent passage, is characterized by a wide variety of phenomena:

great discoveries in the physical sciences, changing our images of the universe and our place in it; the industrialization of production, which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creates new human environments and destroys old ones, speeds up the whole tempo of life, generates new forms of corporate power and class struggle; immense demographic upheavals, severing millions of people from their ancestral habitats, hurtling them halfway across the world into new lives; rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth; systems of mass communication, dynamic in this development, enveloping and binding together the most diverse people and societies; increasingly powerful national states, bureaucratically structured and operated, constantly striving to expand their powers; mass social movements of people, and peoples, challenging their political and economic rulers, striving to gain some control over their lives; finally, bearing and driving all these people and institutions along, an ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market.¹¹

For Berman, then, the capitalist economy is not only an integral part of modernity, but it is the factor which propels it forward. Similarly, sociologist Anthony Giddens advances a broad, four-fold model of the institutional dimensions of modernity in which economic factors are central: capitalism (“capital accumulation in the context of competitive labour and product markets”), surveillance (the “control of information and social supervision”), military power (the “control of the means of violence”) and industrialism (the “transformation of nature” and “development of the ‘created environment’”).¹²

10 Ian McKay, ed., *The Challenge of Modernity: a reader on post-Confederation Canada* (Toronto, 1992), pp. x, ix.

11 Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York, 1982), pp. 15-6.

12 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, 1990), pp. 55-63.

A second problem with *The Quest of the Folk* is McKay's conceptualization of antimodernism. He quite rightly, I think, points out many of its often negative aspects such as a stifling homogeneity, the exclusion of minorities and a conservative, even reactionary, political agenda. But I do not think that antimodernism is, by its very nature, entirely negative. McKay's assumption that the traditional, pastoral, communal life beyond the pale of the industrial world is not desirable is just that – an assumption – and I think we have to allow for the validity of alternative voices and values. McKay, in fact, at one point alludes to this possibility: he notes in *The Quest of the Folk* that, as Raymond Williams argued in *The Country and the City*, antimodernism has a “Janus face” which can include both “accommodation with and resistance to capitalist hegemony”. For McKay, however, antimodernism in Nova Scotia, “shaped by the province's precarious socio-economic position in the second quarter of the twentieth century, was much more one-sidedly reactionary”.¹³

While it may be true that antimodernism in mid-20th-century Nova Scotia was predominantly “reactionary”, co-operative wholesaling in that province provides an interesting counter-example to this tendency. In the early 1950s, a young John Chisholm returned to his home town of Antigonish as director of rural education in eastern Nova Scotia for the Saint Francis Xavier Extension Department, and he quickly realized that there was a crisis in farm production in eastern Nova Scotia because, in his view, primary producers had not kept up with modern trends in production and marketing. To address this problem, he penned “A Program of Rural Development for Eastern Nova Scotia” – an ambitious program of co-operative initiatives premised on increased production of existing agricultural products, an expansion of production into new products and the establishment of new processing facilities for milk and milk by-products, poultry, and vegetables and small fruits. Not only was this approach for Chisholm “the road to a co-operative economy”, but also “the most direct road towards a sound Christian society”. While he admitted “the days of self-sufficient family farming are gone forever”, Chisholm asserted that family farms could be run as businesses while affording the inhabitants all the good and beautiful things that rural life has to offer including “little children grow[ing] up in daily communion with the freshness and beauty of nature, so characteristic of God's Divine plan”. This way of life was, according to Chisholm, much to be preferred to “the distractions, exposures and temptations of a modern corrupt world” in urban centres.¹⁴ Chisholm's efforts led to the creation of a new co-operative wholesale – Eastern Co-op Services – and the expansion into several new endeavours, including the building of a \$300,000 agricultural processing plant in Sydney. Although “the Chisholm Plan”, as it was popularly known, ultimately failed to be the salvation of agriculture in eastern Nova Scotia and, in fact, resulted in the 1961 bankruptcy of ECS and its eventual absorption into Maritime Co-op Services by 1965, this attempt to restore “a sound Christian society” in rural eastern Nova Scotia through increased production, new products and the establishment of a modern processing plant provides an interesting example of just how complicated antimodernism could be.

¹³ McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, p. 33.

¹⁴ John Chisholm, “A Program of Rural Development for Eastern Nova Scotia”, Antigonish, NS, September, 1955, pp. 3-5, 11, Beaton Institute, ECS, MG11, 7, C4.

Antimodernism in 20th-century Nova Scotia, therefore, is considerably more complex than McKay's analysis in *The Quest of the Folk* allows – much in the same way that modernity can most adequately be seen as more than just “urbanization, professionalization, and the rise of the positive state”. Despite these problems with *The Quest of the Folk*, however, I would be the last to downplay the many significant contributions it has made in the field of Atlantic Canadian history. This book stands as a model of innovative and insightful scholarship that has helped shape the research agendas of many of the newer scholars in the field today.

Stephen Dutcher