

In Theory, in Practice

“The struggle for democracy and the ongoing development of its political and social content was not solely a twentieth-century problem... it will continue to be one for the century to come, whatever concrete forms it adopts.”

Jorge Semprún, *L'expérience du totalitarisme* (1996)

When it comes down to it, all of the conversations at the Trudeau Foundation are about democracy. We mix disciplines, languages, and bases for knowledge; we celebrate their dialogue and we encourage them to intermarry. But our purpose is always to work together in the service of a certain promise of emancipation—an emancipation at once political, social, and cultural. This is the promise of which Pierre Elliott Trudeau wrote in 1958 that it “encourages each citizen and each group of citizens to protest against the defects of society to demand justice.”

Those who have read previous editions of *The Trudeau Foundation Papers* know that the Foundation fears neither theory nor abstraction. We know and accept that to call people and things, however different, by their true names, to investigate and uncover the relationships between them, sometimes requires us to depart from what is commonly held to be true. At times, this means risking not

being immediately understood. In this new century—enamoured of the transparent and the immediate, valuing intuition over reason, and wary of knowledge that cannot be monetized—it has become audacious to celebrate erudition, to value the long, hard work of thinking about difficult issues, to invest the time necessary for sound research. Which is really the heart of the matter.

It is evident that this precludes moving quickly to reap the fruits of what we sow. In any event, democracy, to paraphrase Jorge Semprún, is in a permanent state of development. It requires constant attention, a continually renewed supply of ideas and images, and it ridicules definitive solutions and final answers. No matter how much circumstances change, the challenges remain: freedom, justice, law, solidarity, human dignity. Our true usefulness is therefore a function of our capacity to confront these crucial issues and, above all, to continue adhering to a demanding program despite rebuffs and roadblocks.

Of course, this poses a predictable problem: is speaking or writing enough to further democracy in Canada and abroad? If the Foundation is so attached to this ideal, why does it not fund more tangible projects, more direct initiatives, more concrete actions? Why waste time with studies and endless discussion when you could leap into the fray? The truth is that the Foundation does this *too*. It would be absurd to cloister oneself in the realm of words without ever descending into that of action. The authority conferred by knowledge – an authority for which the Foundation has the greatest respect – is not marred by the authority that comes from experience and commitment. *Au contraire*: it is only right that ideas are embodied and that the surfacing of new facts and realities topples standing convictions, no matter how entrenched.

But this line of reasoning is too abstract still. The fact is that the researchers and creators whom we invite to join the Trudeau community have already proven their ability to move freely and fluidly

between the world of ideas and that of practice. Their engagement and their intellectual work are as it were two sides of the same coin, not necessarily because these people defend a cause in particular—although this is sometimes the case—but because they simply have no time to linger over less important things. They are weighed down by persistent inequality, the degradation of nature, the violent attack on the rights and dignity of their fellows, the foolish risks taken by states in their quest for power.

The reader should look, for example, to Sujit Choudry's rigorous essay on constitutional law. It is the work of a lawyer, and we are not surprised to discern the author's propensity for principles, norms, and models. But Choudry also reveals how working with countries in reconstruction, he has discovered at the heart of Canadian values an aspiration common to all peoples: the desire for "peace, order and good government," as in the famous preamble to Canada's Constitution Act of 1867. Better yet, by describing how his unique experience as an immigrant who is also the son of immigrants connects to his research, Professor Choudry shows us how it has been possible for cultural diversity to benefit Canadian society and how this approach can now help other nations presently in crisis.

The process espoused by Alain-G. Gagnon is not so very different. To be sure, the beginning of his text focuses on the question of one's roots, of humble and dignified resistance of people brutalized by modernity as manifested by involuntary unemployment, by de-industrialization, by cultural indifference. But we soon realize that the horizon is the same: in this global and plural world of ours, Gagnon aspires to ensure nothing less than that societies that wish to co-exist without merging or losing themselves can do so fruitfully and in peace. Indeed a new global movement in which Professor Gagnon is a major figure preaches a type of federalism that is exceedingly open and flexible (one is tempted to say "permeable"). As with Choudry, it is significant that this aspiration, while nourished by a

historical context that is uniquely Canadian, is emerging as a universal moral precept that transcends borders and generations.

In the case of Steven Loft, the dialectic of experience and thought is the very essence of the discourse. The powerful and disruptive power of art propels the author toward his destiny and transforms, as in a magnifying mirror, the social and political experience of Canada's Native peoples. As when Loft first read his text at the magnificent First Peoples House at the University of Victoria, it quickly becomes apparent that the author is not here to talk about a particular aesthetic, radical or otherwise. Rather, his drive is to show us the groundswell of emancipation, with all its attendant tensions and conflicts, and the subsequent return of First Nations to the forefront of history and national life after 50 years of struggle.

Only one of the five contributions to this volume is sombre, that of Janine Brodie. Some may even find despairing her insistence on the imbalance of power. This political scientist from Alberta sees everywhere the victory of social regression, of pettiness, of conformism; everywhere the triumph of the forces of order and profit; everywhere regression in culture and consciousness. Illustrations are not wanting, and we admit that we do not lack for evidence that progress has endured a long winter indeed since the beginning of the economic and financial crisis in 2008. But Professor Brodie does not remain bound to her critical position. She suggests ways to take back the initiative and to breathe new life into ideas such as equality and solidarity. Who would not agree with her call for the social sciences and humanities to think freely? Who can reject her urge to act as if history, far from being predetermined, is still wide open to our best hopes for the future?

This history, still largely open, always in progress, is at the core of the work of historian Jocelyn Létourneau. His subtle and thoughtful text demonstrates, not without paradox, that it is essential that we stand back from a history in particular—whether national, social,

or cultural—if we are to understand the richness and the complexity of the past, its effect on the present, its weight on the future. One could call his text a kind of manifesto for the historian’s craft, its risks and its rewards, its morals and its methods. Not surprisingly, by choosing striking examples in the architecture of Jorn Utzon and the monumental sculpture of Alexander Calder, Létourneau also calls for a dialogue between practice—acts that occur in a given place and time—and theory, which belongs to the realm of creativity and imagination.

Not all of these texts can be accused of being what is known as easy reading. This is not accidental. Over the past 20 years, the notion of “public intellectual” has overtaken that of “engaged intellectual,” both in deferment to the predominance of the media and, it must be said, to celebrate the debut of intellectuals on the right of the political spectrum. The public intellectual fears neither journalists nor television studios; indeed, we are sometimes astonished to observe that as long as she speaks clearly and writes well, the audience ceases to worry about the causes she defends. In today’s marketplace, the moment that ideas are stated with authority, one is as good as the next and they all finish by finding a buyer.

This is not the case of the texts presented here. This volume, like the preceding ones, presents work that has the double advantage of being derived from research, with all the caveats and aporia that this implies, without mentioning the new perspectives, and of being connected in a direct and tangible way to the democratic conversation referred to at the beginning of this introduction.

The reader need not beware: with this book in hand, you risk neither losing your time, nor mistaking the apparent for the essential.

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