

*Is a Canadian Curriculum Studies
Possible? (What are the conditions of
possibility?): Some preliminary notes
for further inquiry¹*

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The crucial, hitherto underestimated ideological impact of the coming ideological crisis will be precisely to make the “collapse of the big Other” part of our everyday experience, i.e., to sap this unconscious belief in the “big Other” of power: already the Chernobyl catastrophe made ridiculously obsolete such notions as “national sovereignty,” exposing the power’s ultimate impotence. Our “spontaneous” ideological reaction to it, of course, is to have recourse to the fake premodern forms of reliance on the “big Other” (“New Age consciousness”: the balanced circuit of Nature, etc.). Perhaps, however, our very physical survival hinges on our ability to consummate the act of assuming fully the “nonexistence of the Other,” of tarrying with the negative. (Žižek, 1993, p. 237; emphasis in original)

In this crisis of our present lives in North America, an effort is required to think what we have become (George Grant, cited in Lucht, 2008).

"Tarrying with the negative" Žižek's term of critique is what I will hold as a theme for the discussion today, on the question of *"Is a Canadian curriculum studies possible?"* When I first suggested the question for the panel, I threw it out in haste, thinking that it might be a question worth posing. From a naïve perspective, the question comes from a lingering desire to identify if possible, something "Canadian" about our work in education and curriculum.² Eerily, it is also to echo George Grant's counsel from 1961 to make the effort "to think what we have become" (cited in Lucht, 2008, p. 213), in a time of "crisis."

Even though we have great curriculum theorists and practitioners in Canada, arguably our references—philosophical and theoretical for understanding our lived experiences—generally come from elsewhere, and as Celia Haig-Brown reminded us at the 2008 Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies pre-conference³, in often willful ignorance of indigenous people's knowledges. As you will see from my reference list, and the discussion in this paper, I do try appeal to some literature that is "Canadian", but also of course to a broader set of references. The point is not of course to be parochial, but to ask how we might read our experiences differently, and at the same time be open to the absences in our own understanding.

But I want to say that despite the naivety of my question, it also comes from a larger question, which is, even as Canadians, especially those of European descent owe our "Canadianness" to the historical colonization of First Nations peoples, we have also in complicated fashion, lived and developed as a nation under American imperial hegemony. Given the short time we have today for the panel, I know I am risking oversimplification, but in the interests of posing some possibilities for further inquiry, I want to assert that this is a legitimate concern for curriculum theory. And here I am using curriculum understood in part as a question of what is it we should stand for in articulating possibilities for a renewal of the world other than what is.

The question does pose the risk of fantasizing about a “big Other” in Žižek’s terms, i.e., there is a coherent narrative that overshadows our work as educators in Canada or our regions of Canada. That is to say that given the overwhelming conditions of globalization, and what that both offers and denies, I am not sure that an argument for Canadian curriculum theory can be made, for example, in the name of nationalism. It could be that Canadian nationalism, or the striving to be a nation in conventional terms is an incomplete project at best, and perhaps ultimately something that requires different terms of understanding and possibility—something that George Richardson (2002) argued in his book, *The Death of the Good Canadian*. Richardson’s study is significant from a curriculum perspective, because as he shows, the resources on which teachers can draw for their work with children around questions of identity is either suspect in terms of hidden or not so hidden hegemonic biases, but also, and perhaps necessarily so, filled with ambiguity. It is this ambiguity that is perhaps a starting point for inquiry, and hence the usefulness of Žižek’s term, tarrying...an interesting word for my part of the discussion today: to tarry means to delay, but also, in the origins of the word, to be “against identity.”

In wanting to tarry, I also want to say that my response is not comfortably based on a postmodernist stance. Evoking the term “to be against identity” does suggest a fundamental opposition to the rule of any “big Other” or master narrative, but for curriculum studies and curriculum theory, the question of identity is nonetheless central. There is always the danger, from a reflexive posture, of appealing to postmodernism as even in its deconstruction of a “big Other” it posits another, albeit a fragmentary one, only emphasizing uncertainly situated identities (Borgmann, 1992; White, 2000). Žižek (2008), in a recent work parodies to a certain extent the various responses to the triumph of capitalism (e.g., from new ageism to forms of spirituality and ecological movements). While I do not entirely agree with that critique, I

nonetheless see his point: the limitations of discourses that celebrate experience without a more rigorous narrative of oppositional critique.

One of our challenges in curriculum is that even as we have appealed to postmodern perspectives, we have not yet addressed fully the legacy and ongoing impacts of modernism in our cultural and educational lives (for example, the critique of schooling and notions of the public that have roots in modernist notions of space, time, development and enlightenment). More recent, in historical terms, we are living through an extended period of neo-liberalism which, as some have argued, creates a negligence of deeper forms of meaning, being and relationship (Smith, 2008; Sennett, 2006).

Thus the question that I am discussing today may be better posed as “what are the conditions of possibility for Canadian curriculum studies?” An attempt to address that question should start with two key essays on the topic: Cynthia Chamber’s “As Canadian as possible under the circumstances: A view of contemporary curriculum discourses in Canada” (2003); and Dennis Sumara’s, Brent Davis’ and Linda Laidlaw’s “Canadian identity and curriculum theory: an ecological, postmodern perspective” (2001).⁴

There are considerable similarities between the two essays, Chambers perhaps providing a more synoptic view, while Sumara et.al., attempt to locate possibilities for curriculum within the notion of what they call the “ecological postmodern” outlining ways that curriculum understanding is bound up and within complex contingencies of place, time, region, and historical circumstance. Those conditions, understood relationally or contingently to curriculum rather than determining of it, are also manifested strongly in Chambers’ essay (and Chambers more fully addresses this historically in terms of the issues of post-colonialism and relationship with the First Nations).

In the space of time provided by this panel, I cannot hope to address fully the issues the two papers raise. However, I will try to at least begin

to offer some questions about the narrative of postmodernism to which to a greater or lesser degree both papers appeal, and the questions they raise about the conditions of possibility. It was noteworthy to me that in asking the question about the identity of Canadian curriculum theory, both essays appeal to the phrase “possible, under the circumstances.” I find this to be an interesting statement, and I interpret it as a kind of implied limit situation for a Canadian curriculum theory. But I do wonder what it could possibly mean and what the implications are for defining “what we have become” to echo George Grant.

This question of meaning in the context of difficult cultural and historical situations is something addressed very thoughtfully by Jonathan Lear in his masterful essay *Radical Hope* (2006). He frames his discussion around the Crow chief Plenty Coups’ assertion after the collapse of the Crow culture in the late 1800’s: “after this nothing happened” (p. 2) and Lear asks what that statement could possibly mean. Lear locates the search for hope in redefining our concepts and languages in ways that address situations when there are what he calls significant “breaks in narrative.” Although he is not a curriculum theorist, Lear’s questions, in my reading of them, are profoundly pertinent to curriculum in terms of linking language and concepts to hope and what he calls “longing”:

Part of the sustenance our parenting figures will give us is the concepts with which we can at least begin to understand what we are longing for. This is critical for acquiring a natural language: inheriting a culture’s set of concepts through which we can understand ourselves as desiring, wishing, and hoping for certain things (2006, pp. 122-123).

As a gesture towards “currere” I’ll first discuss my own “longing” autobiographically. Almost forty years ago I was a graduate student in sociology at the University of Alberta, in a department dominated by

(and this was the norm back then) American professors, and in terms of the orientation to sociology, heavily into positivist approaches to research. As an aspect of this orientation, as a apprentice sociologist one had to learn to accept the norms of value-neutrality—indeed the word “value” was a dirty word in that particular department. Having just returned from two years of teaching school in Zambia, and as well, having joined the radical student movement at the time⁵ the department was not a hospitable place for doing what we would now call qualitative work or work oriented by critical theory.

One of the exceptions among the faculty was a social theory professor by the name of Arthur Davis, who was also American, had studied with Talcott Parsons at Harvard, but had migrated north to work in what was then known as “socialist” Saskatchewan. In his own intellectual travels, Art left behind his intellectual roots in structural-functionalism and over time adopted a kind of modified Marxism in his social analyses. In particular, Art fostered a materialist analysis for understanding social theory: in brief, to link forms and content of social theory to the particular social, economic and cultural milieus in which they originated.⁶ To get to the point, in a social theory course I took with him, with his encouragement I wrote a paper entitled “Is a Canadian Sociology Possible?” Looking back on it, it was at best a very naïve attempt to answer that question; however, in the process of doing the paper, Art had suggested that one could not begin to deal with the question of a sociology of Canada, or a sociology that was framed within some kind of consciousness of place, without a deep historical understanding of the very place(s) in which we reside.

Hence, Art suggested that I start with reading the work of Harold Innis (he was cited, interestingly, in Chambers paper on Canadian curriculum theory).⁷ Innis as you may know was best known for his “staples” theory of development—a mercantilist analysis that he argued was largely responsible for the structure of economic—and hence social

and cultural development in Canada (e.g., the fur trade, lumber, fishing, minerals and arguably carrying on today in terms of mining, oil and gas, and large-scale mono-agriculture). The relationship of Innis to sociology, as I tried then to work out then, was oriented to looking at the peculiarities of development in Canada, the development of social class structure, and what would be a more recent ecological perspective, the nature of Canadians' relationship to the land, space, and nature. In her paper on Canadian curriculum theory, Chambers very nicely makes the point that Innis's work in part helps to explain the kinds of relationships European settlers and colonists imposed on First Nations people.

What is the point of raising this with relation to the possibilities for Canadian curriculum theory and the conditions of its possibility? First of course, is the example of the kind of inquiry I was encouraged to follow early in my career—that is, to begin to try to develop an understanding of what kinds of historical, social, economic and cultural conditions, while not determining consciousness, nonetheless provide contingent conditions for our sense of place, identity, and social structure. A focus on this question does not make us very different from other peoples around the globe, whose lives and economies depend on the exploitation of resources. But it is worth asking what is particularly Canadian about that, and more pertinently, what it allows for understanding ourselves. In terms of contemporary curriculum theory this kind of work in the most exemplary form is taken up by David Smith (2008), who in a recent paper explores the relationships between “neo-conservative” forms of thought and the attack on modernism, including more progressive educational practices.

The second part of my autobiographical musings has to do with the kind of social/political critique that was part of the global phenomenon of “1968”. In France and Europe more broadly, this in part took the form of a generational rebellion specifically against the dominance of the old Communist Party on the left, and the entrenched bureaucracies of

government and universities (Badiou, 2008b). In the US, the war in Vietnam was the dominant focus. In Canada, the focus was particularly on the universities, and the immanent forms of commercialization and corporatization that was already taking place. For many of us on the left attention turned to the effects of American imperialism on Canadian life and the economy, leading to, for example, the short-lived Waffle caucus in the NDP which called for nationalization of key Canadian industries.

It seems that when we look back at this relatively short period of history (roughly from the mid-sixties to the end of the seventies when the reaction had already set in), there was an opening, albeit brief, for some interesting questioning and educational work (e.g., more teacher control over curriculum and assessment, child-centred pedagogies, more experimentation etc.), reflected in journals such as *"Our schools/Ourselves"* which took forward the New Left critique of institutional schooling. Obviously this whole period, as a question of curriculum history, deserves much greater attention.

What I wanted to demonstrate in this brief autobiographical segment is the contingent aspects for the conditions of possibility for curriculum and especially for curriculum theory as something that both exists within certain orders but may also live in resistant forms to it. So historically in Canada one might conclude that curriculum theory, to the extent that one can say it was "Canadian" (and here I'm betraying my own lack of historical knowledge as I am only referring to the span of my own career as a teacher), moved from positions of critique, for example, critique of institutions and institutional practices to forms of inquiry more focused on the day to day lives of teachers and children. The papers by Chambers and Sumara et al provide examples (and interestingly this parallels also the shifts in Ted Aoki's work) of theorizing focused by phenomenology, hermeneutics, post-structuralism (broadly speaking), and more lately, psychoanalysis.

But, and I think this is implicit in my overall argument, there is still a kind of default to the limits of what is possible. This has led me to the question of what is “possible under the circumstances” to consider that the answers are not only in alternative theory, but also in terms of the kinds of questions posed by Lear: “*for what may we hope?*” and “*what ought I to do?*” (2006, p. 103; italics added). Framing the question about possibilities for Canadian curriculum studies suggest further avenues of inquiry, which I would to start with questions like Lear’s.

There is first of all, the question of the adequacy of our historical knowledge and the quality of historical inquiry in curriculum work in Canada. Recently I spoke on another panel to a group of social studies teachers about the new social studies program in Alberta and the question of assessment; what struck me about that—and about preparing for this panel today—is that our histories as educators can be so quickly erased. Few of the teachers present at the session I spoke at had any memory of the struggles that went on in Alberta to insist on including inquiry in social studies, for example. Thus I realize in posing the question of Canadian curriculum studies that there is much work to be done in both recovering—and I will put this in the plural—various histories, but to also see them in terms of the complex relationships between groups of people, social forces and the *ways* that stories get told.

Building for example, on Chambers work and that of Sumara et al, what would need to be articulated are not only the contributions of curriculum theorists in Canada, but also a more extensive genealogy of the content of that work and how it is oriented. William Pinar’s (2007) recent work on “verticality” and “horizontality” in curriculum inquiry provides a framework and examples for engaging in such work; he suggests the urgent need to understand curriculum theorizing, and our understanding of the disciplines in the complex intersections between history and current contexts.⁸

Secondly, it may well be that there is a history of public schooling that is unique to Canada, or at least visions and experiences of public life that are peculiar to the places and regions in which we live in Canada. Whether or not one can appeal to certain aspect of the ethos of national or regional cultures, whether mythical or not—such as the more collectivist roots of Canadian life as opposed to individualist forms south of the border—curriculum theory has an obligation to bring forward and explore the roots, or to use Charles Taylor’s term, the sources of identification for understanding the possibilities for curriculum.

The question of our relationships to place and the way that it has been taken up in some recent curriculum writing is something, however, I find problematic. I understand the impulse to locate ourselves in and through identifications with the places in which we find ourselves, and through that to claim something more primordial about our relationships to where we live. The romanticization of that in much curriculum writing is perhaps an antidote to our instrumental relation to things. But there is nonetheless what I would call a kind of nostalgia embedded in some of that work (although, more charitably, perhaps a kind of “longing” that Lear identifies as an aspect of our desires to locate and name).⁹

Perhaps here fictional and narratives from alternative sources can encourage us to re-imagine our lived spaces and our historical connections to them in ways that tug with greater tension at the experiences of lived space. I will only offer a very few examples: Guy Vanderhaeghe’s *The Englishman’s Boy* (1996); Rudy Weibe’s novels about the experiences of Big Bear; Sharon Butala’s *Perfection of the Morning* (1995); Aretha van Herk’s *Places far from Ellesmere* (1990); and Sinclair Ross’s bleak evocation of life in Saskatchewan during the 1930’s drought and depression, *As For Me and My House* (1957), which acts as an antidote to W.O. Mitchell’s much more romantically and nostalgically inclined work *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1947).

What texts like these offer is a re-reading of our imagined—or perhaps even ideologically framed relation to place; both Vanderhaege and Butala, writing about the same geographic area (southeastern Saskatchewan) remind us of First Nations people’s blood and artifacts soaked and embedded in the earth, but hidden to the stories that non-Native people have told about it. It could be that our relationship to place, while remembered romantically is actually marked by other than care, which the work of Innis, cited earlier, reminds us: that is, our relationship to land has been one of exploitation, and has created both the limits and possibilities for cultural and social forms, and the narratives that we create to represent those.

Nonetheless, there is something to be recovered here. The point is that stories matter, and how we tell them matters even more, as Thomas King (2003) suggested in his work on stories. My example of Innis above suggests that our stories about place cannot be told in the absence of understanding the deep impulses of exploitation of the land and the social relations of production that privilege certain people and certain things over others. Both in the discussion of history and place, then, the question of knowledge and traditions are paramount. Postcolonial, indigenous and other counter narratives are critical for understanding possibilities for curriculum; at the same time we might ask what holds those stories in relation; while postmodernism resists totalizing discourses, there is still something which is required to hold things together, or in perspective, or in tension.

Thirdly, there is the question of globalization. It can certainly be argued that globalization has made us, in very real and everyday terms, part of one world. Žižek’s point at the outset of my discussion is that while at one time we might have relied on some big “other”—nationalism, Communism, liberalism for example—the reality is that to base identification on such master narratives has become problematic at best. However, as Perry Anderson (2007) has written, globalization is

not a unitary process, even as it flattens out the world in the name of capitalism and production. He argues that interesting possibilities for re-examining our responsibilities for instance, are opened up. While globalization has its roots (in more recent human history) in the modernist impulse to “conquer” the world and nature, it has also opened both the possibility and need to understand the “other”, and indeed as someone for whom we must take responsibility (Kapuściński, 2008).

The French philosopher Alain Badiou (2008a, 2008b) has raised provocative questions for the work of critique in our altered world (and this has become even more accentuated by the global financial crisis), which also speak to the work of curriculum theory. He notes, in a way that I think addresses my concern about the conditions of possibility that, “The political problem...has to be reversed. We cannot start from an analytic agreement on the existence of the world and proceed to normative action with regard to its characteristics. *The disagreement is not over qualities but over existence*” (2008a, p. 38; italics added).

The direction of our curriculum work to follow Badiou (and I think, also Lear) is thus to “focus on the conditions of existence, rather than just improving its methods” (Badiou, 2008a, p. 37). What has become difficult of course is to find a point, as he argues “that would stand outside the temporality of the dominant order and what Lacan once called the ‘service of wealth’” (2008a, p. 37). Badiou asks what the consequences would be of thinking about globalization as “one world”, and responds evocatively,

A first consequence is the recognition that all belong to the same world as myself: the African worker I see in the restaurant kitchen, the Moroccan I see digging a hole in the road, the veiled woman looking after children in a park. That is where we reverse the dominant idea of a world united by objects and signs, to make a unity in terms of living, acting beings, here and now (2008a, p. 39).

The terms Badiou uses to describe such possibilities for linking us in the struggle for understand and building a better world, a “performative unity.” For example, he notes, in asserting that globalization means “there is only one world”, he responds that “this is not an objective conclusion. It is performative: we are deciding that this is how it is for us” (2008a, p. 38). Citing Lacan, he notes that on the one hand we can turn to the “big Other” for comfort and to assuage our guilt or depression, or we can turn to the performance of certain virtues or dispositions as something which might unite us...for example, courage, which “is the virtue which manifests itself through endurance in the impossible” (2008a, p. 41). Jonathan Lear also writes that our inquiries “are directed to a future goodness that transcends our current ability to understand what it is” (2006, p. 103). I think that these ways of defining “theorizing” so to speak, in terms of performativity, is a call to responsibility.

To finish this admittedly fragmentary discussion on a tarrying note: I think what I am suggesting is the possible argument that in part the conditions for Canadian curriculum theory has rested on a negation of what it is as other, principally what is non-American, but in very problematic ways that have also negated the voices of others in Canada, historically and presently. To paraphrase Žižek , and Badiou above, in part our work requires a kind of negation of the negation, and to find what is possible in our thinking and practices. It means that the work of curriculum theorizing in Canada, as it must be elsewhere too, is to always, as Hannah Arendt suggested, think “anew”: *“The need to think can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts which I had yesterday will satisfy this need today only to the extent that I can think anew”* (Arendt, 2003, p. 163; italics added).

Notes

¹ Invited panel presentation to Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies President's Symposium at the 2008 annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education in Vancouver.

² William Pinar, in his introduction to the re-issue of George Tomkin's (2008) *A Common Countenance. Stability and Change in the Canadian Curriculum*, (Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press) argues that Cynthia Chambers (2003) "overstates" the differences between Canadian and American contexts and that there are common cultural and educational referents shared by Canadians and Americans. While this may undeniably be the case, I would argue that there is still a need to interpret such referents in terms of the specificities of history and place, and the way that even history and place are always problematically fluid. Perhaps Tomkin's book itself is a case study of how it cannot be simply read as addressing "Canadian" curriculum, since regional differences and histories are so important in the Canadian context.

³ Keynote address to the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies Annual Pre-Conference: "Locating Canadian Curriculum Studies in Global Traditions." University of British Columbia, May 30, 2008.

⁴ Another significant set of writings, which particularly address curriculum in terms of [Canadian] contexts, is that edited by Erika Hasebe-Ludt and Wanda Hurren, (2003). *Curriculum Intertext: Place/Language/Pedagogy*. New York: Peter Lang.

⁵ While there were diverse movements, I am referring specifically to the Students for a Democratic University (which mirrored to some extent the Students for Democratic Society in the U.S.).

⁶ See for example the set of essays in his *Farewell to Earth. The collected writings of Arthur K. Davis*. (Adamant Press, 1991).

⁷ See for example, Innis, Harold. (1930) *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*. Revised edition (1956). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

⁸ Pinar's re-introduction of George Tomkin's work, cited earlier at once demonstrates the work not only of historical recovery, but also how we might read such work in the contexts of understanding ourselves and our inquiries in the present.

⁹ I would consider some of the chapters in Hasebe-Ludt and Hurren (2003), cited earlier to reflect qualities of the kind of longing that Jonathan Lear identifies as an aspect of radical hope. It is perhaps the quality of the writing and representations that tend to suggest a more "romantic" espousal of place.

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