The Pillars of Nationalism
An Examination of Nation Formation in Canada

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THE PILLARS OF CANADIAN NATIONALISM: STATE, NATION AND IDENTITY

ABSTRACT
Canada has failed in its attempts at nation building because common theories and notions of what a nation is have failed to encompass the unique makeup and characteristics of Canada. Canada has thus followed a path from state to nation rather than nation to state. Three attempts at national myth and nation building – the Canada First Movement, the work of the Group and Seven, and various policies to create a bilingual nation – were all unsuccessful at creating a unified sense of nation because all were based on linguistic and ethnic exclusion, and did not reflect the diversity of Canada during their given time periods. But because the idea of nation is socially constructed, Canada can become a nation that encompasses its pan-Canadian identity. In order for this to happen, the pillars of nationalism need to shift and ideas of what a nation is must be broadened to include all of Canada’s population.

RÉSUMÉ
Le Canada n’arrive pas à construire un sentiment d’appartenance à la nation parce que les théories et notions communes au sujet du nationalisme ne prennent pas en compte les caractéristiques uniques du Canada. Le Canada a suivi un parcours de définition de l’État vers la nation, plutôt que de la nation à l’État. Trois tentatives de création d’une nation, celle du groupe Canada First, celle du Groupe des sept, et la politique bilinguisme, n’ont pas réussi à créer une cohésion canadienne parce qu’elles étaient toutes basées sur des exclusions linguistiques et ethniques, et ne représentaient pas la diversité canadienne même à l’époque de leur élaboration. Puisque l’idée de nation est une construction, selon les définitions bien reçues de Gellner et Anderson, le Canada pourrait, théoriquement, devenir une nation qui embrasserait une identité pancanadienne. Pour que cela puisse se produire, ce qu’on comprend par nation doit changer et s’élargir pour inclure la totalité de la population canadienne.

KEYWORDS
Nationalism, Canada First Movement, Group of Seven
INTRODUCTION

Like most construction projects, a strong foundation is needed on which one can build. This is also true of state and nation building. Yet the blueprint of Canadian state and nation building is different than most countries as it follows a state to nation narrative rather than a nation to state one. In the case of Canada, the foundation is the state and the pillars are what support the structure, which is the intended to be the Canadian nation. This is because the Canadian state was created before the formation of a pan-Canadian nation, a nation inclusive of all Canadians in the territory of the Canadian state. It is true that Canada does have nations within its borders, such as the Québécois and Aboriginal groups to name a few, but these groups will not be explored in great length in the context of this paper. Instead of focusing on regional, cultural or linguistic nations within the Canadian state, this paper will pay attention to the Canadian identity as promoted by the Canada First Movement, the Group of Seven and the Federal Government starting shortly after confederation (1867) to this day.

This paper is an ambitious call to rephrase what Canada is experiencing in terms of nation and state notions. Inspired by the shifting definition of nation from early German and French philosophers such as Fichte and Renan to the more contemporary works from Benedict Anderson, I wish to explore both theoretically and historically notions that have raised acute interests in many scholars in the world and especially in Canada, such as Gérard Bouchard, Jocelyn Létourneau and Jocelyn Maclure in Quebec as well as Carl Berger and Ramsay Cook in English Canada. This paper will argue that Canada, unlike most countries of the Western World, did not follow a nation to state path. According to a large spectrum of definitions by Johann Gottfried Herder, Ernest Renan, Benedict Anderson, and Ernest Gellner Canada has failed to foster a nation.

This paper will go on to claim that if Canada will ever be a pan-Canadian nation, it will have to base the construction of the nation on factors other than culture, race and territory, which are typically associated with the nation and the decaying pillars of the Canadian nation as it presently stands. Building on the classical definition of the nation – the founding ones of those of Herder and Fichte and the classical critical ones of Anderson, I will demonstrate that changing the pillars of nationalism is possible when considering the nation as a constructed concept.
In order to support this thesis, the paper will be divided into three parts. The first section will explore definitions of the state as explained by political theorists such as G.W.F. Hegel, Thomas Hobbes and Michel Foucault, on which the paper will develop a definition of state which will be used in the context of this paper. The paper will then form a definition of nation based on ideas from Herder, Renan, Anderson and Gellner and give examples of present day states that have emerged from the nation, which as this paper argues, is the a progression that Canada does not follow. The third section will show that the aforementioned definition of nation does not represent Canada, by exploring various attempts at nation building by government, artists and elites that were made after the creation of the state. Finally, the paper will discuss that if Canada is ever to create a nation, it will have to redefine the components of a nation, as to allow for a more culturally and racially diverse population, with complex associations with the land.

**Defining the State**

In order to explore state and nation relationships in Canada, one must first explore definitions of both of these terms. Niccolò Machiavelli was the first modern to write about the state, desiring a stable state that could overcome foreign and domestic threats (Adams and Dyson, 39). Since then, political theorists have redefined the state and changed its role. This section will explore various interpretations of the state as explained by modern political thinkers still studied today by examining works by Hobbes, Hegel and Foucault. From there, the paper will construct a definition of state that will be used in the remainder of the paper.

In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes discusses the need for a state, arguing that without political order, humans would live in a state of nature, a condition of constant war which exits because of humans’ need for more power (Hobbes, 161, 186). Hobbes develops the social contract as a way to avoid this perpetual condition of war. The social contract is an agreement where citizens give up the freedoms that they have in the state of nature in order to be protected from brutal death, which is what is most feared by humans (Hobbes, 192-193). When citizens give up their freedoms they become subordinate to the state, in this case a commonwealth, which Hobbes calls the Leviathan (Hobbes, 228). Hobbes explains that monarchy is the best type of government but the main point, for the purpose of this paper, is that the state is used as a way to maintain order and protect the population. Moreover, Hobbes’ social contract shows the association between citizens.

The idea of a social contract is also seen in Hegel’s *The Philosophy of the Right*, which explores different political institutions and argues that the state is “the
highest expression of a man’s freedom” (Scruton, 199). To show this, Hegel explains that the state protects an individual’s family life as well as his relationship to civil society and that the interaction within these communities if self-fulfilling (Adams and Dyson, 109). Civil society is very similar to Hobbes’ social contract, since an individual can choose to enter into civil society by agreeing to a certain contract. This is different than familial obligations because the individual is joining the state on his or her own desire, and not that of someone else (Scruton, 199). By joining the state, an individual is guaranteed protection but must follow certain moral obligations (Adams and Dyson, 110).

Hobbes and Hegel’s idea of a social contract is relevant as it is a primary component of the Canadian state. This is seen in Canada by the rules and regulations that bind each citizen to the government. A Canadian citizen gives up some of his or her freedoms in order to be protected by the government’s rules, which are useful to the citizen when injustices are made against him or her or other members of the state. Canada’s criminal code and legal system are examples of how the government can reinforce order by powers vested in them by the citizens.

Foucault has also speculated on what a state is composed of, writing about the seventeenth century concept of raison d’État, which explores the national consciousness of the state (Foucault, 257). Foucault explains that raison d’État creates the laws but does not have to obey them. This is seen as problematic since if the state does not obey its own laws it may be overturned by a coup d’État (Foucault, 262). The coup d’État is therefore the way in which a state can come back to its initial goal of protecting the people by respecting the boundaries it has established on its citizens (Foucault, 262). The relationship between coup d’État and raison d’État shows a certain degree of legal organization and the limits of state power over its people, in order to assure that the state does not overstep its boundaries. This is very different than Hobbes’ vision of the role of the state, which does not place a limit on how much power the state can hold. Furthermore, the relationship between coup d’État and raison d’État can be seen within constitutional clauses which declare that no one is above the law, including government.

Although taking place on a different continent and a few centuries later, this is true of the first clause of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms found in the Constitution Act of 1982, which states, “Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rules of law” (Dyck, 695). The rule of law explains that no one is above the law, no matter how important, this includes the government. This phrase is placed at the beginning of the act as a way to assure that raison d’État will remain consistent and that the Canadian
government will not forget its mandate to protect the people by respecting the boundaries established in constitutional documents, such as the Constitution Act of 1982.

By examining these different theorists’ views on the definition of state and its role, certain similarities become apparent. Moreover, one can recognize that countries have implemented these definitions to the way their state functions. Hobbes and Hegel both suggest that the state is a contract among its citizens, meaning that there is a relationship between individuals within the state. In his Dictionary of Political Thought, Roger Scruton explains that there are four characteristics to the state: association, as seen with the social contract; legal organization, explored in la raison d’État; territory, where the legal aspects have jurisdiction; and personification, this is seen in Hobbes’ Leviathan as a man representing each individual or the personal contract one makes to join the civil society when reading Hegel (Scruton, 446). These four characteristics are central to defining the state as it encompasses numerous elements discussed by political theorist and touches on important components of the modern state and characteristics of the Canadian state, since its formation in 1867.

**Defining the Nation**

Unlike like the state, which was used as a term by Machiavelli and as an organization much earlier with the *polis*, the concept of the nation is a much more recent phenomenon, first described in the 19th century. The following section will examine works by Herder, Renan, Anderson and Gellner to create a definition of nation that will be used for the following argument.

Herder, a German scholar, asserted that the nation was based on a common territory and language (Wilson, 820). This contrasts the French writer Renan who argued that the nation was something to be found in a common past and present amongst people (Renan, 1882). While Herder’s understanding of the nation was based on land and culture, that of Renan was based on the narrative of a group. To him: “A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future” (Renan, 1882).

A century later, in his book Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Anderson asserts that “nationalism has no great thinkers” (Anderson, 5). This comment by Anderson does not apply to the state, which as we have briefly overviewed, has lots of thinkers. Anderson defines the “nation as imagined community and imagined as inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson,
6-7). It is imagined because the members do not all know each other; limited because the nation cannot encompass everyone, which defeats the purpose of the nation; sovereign because it is created in an era where monarchy is no longer popular; and a community because its citizens are willing to die for one another (Anderson, 6-7). Anderson argues that the rise of nationalism is a result of print media, especially newspaper that brings people together in a daily ritual (Anderson, 35). By reading a common daily newspaper, members of the community share a common tradition that involves a common sharing of ideas, in this case the daily news.

Gellner has a similar understanding of the nation arguing that social organization is natural, since it can be found universally, while nationalism is not (Gellner, 5). Like Anderson’s, Gellner’s argument shows that nations are not natural but constructed concepts. Gellner explains how nations come to be created. If a group lives in the same location for a long time, it often has a common language and culture, and therefore is confident in its identity deciding to form a state (Gellner, 50). It will then be the state’s role to protect the identity, such as language and culture (Gellner, 50). Gellner poses that nation building leading to state formation can be seen in many eastern European countries like Spain, France and England.

I argue that this “nation to state formula” cannot be applied in Canada. Groups which founded a nation in the European countries mentioned above were comprised of a singular cultural entity when becoming states. Canada was already a combination of more than two cultures when it formally became a state. For the purpose of this paper, the definition of nation I will be using will recognize Herder’s explanation: the nation comes from common ethno linguistic qualities, as well as Renan’s idea of a shared past. Additionally, following the demonstration of Anderson and Gellner, I will acknowledge that the nation is a constructed concept.

**Attempts at Canadian Nation Building**

Based on of the aforementioned definitions of state and nation, Canada cannot be like the states that emerged from the nation since definitions of nationalism do not work within a pan-Canadian identity, an identity that encompasses all Canadian citizens on the vast territory of Canada. As a result, attempts at nation building in Canada were made after the creation of the state. Therefore, instead of being the protector of the established nation, the Canadian state had the responsibility of creating the Canadian nation. The following section will examine Canadian nation building by exploring three myths that are based on
the definition of nation mentioned previously. Specifically, it will show how elites, academics, government and artists use their tools - whether it be policy, art or literature - to create myths on which to base the foundation of the Canadian nation. The three myths that will be analyzed are: a northern race, a place of nature and a bilingual nation. These narratives have been chosen as they reflect the classical definition of nation as proposed by Herder, Renan, Anderson and Gellner. The following section will explore attempts at Canadian nation building as successive through time, showing that nation-builders relied on the constructed concepts of nation seen through a European lens, which was forming prior to its introduction in Canada.

A Northern Race: Ethnocentric Nationalism

The first example of nation building in Canada is one based on ethnocentric nationalism generally matching the definition of classical German scholars, such as Herder, where the Canada First movement attempted to build a nation based on the racial notion of Canadians as northern people. The following section will show that race-based nationalism was at the center of early immigration policy. The paper will explain that ethnocentric nationalism is exclusionary toward anyone who does not fit the northern people definition of nation – omitting a large portion of the population of the time and an even greater proportion people in present day Canada.

In order to comprehend race-based nationalism in Canada one must understand the Canada First movement. A Toronto-centered nationalist group founded in 1868, the Canada First movement aimed to create a nationalist narrative in the new country of Canada (Vigod, 2011). This nationalist narrative was important to the group as they believed that in accordance with the state, which was created a year before the group’s formation, a unified nation could withstand threats from American counterparts as well as proving itself as a valued ally to the British. The group believed that Canada’s nation should be based on its strong northern race and Anglo-Saxon values, values it hoped the citizens of the state would all share. In an address, W.A. Foster, a founding member of Canada First, makes this point clear by saying:

The old Norse Mythology, with its Thor hammers and Thor hammerings, appeals to us,—for we are a Northern people,— as the true out-crop of human nature, more manly, more real, than the weak marrow-bones superstition of an effeminate south (Foster, 13).

The movement pushed to assure that immigration policies respected its criteria of northern people, strongly preferring British immigrants or American
Loyalists. It feared that allowing other immigrants into the country would dilute the bloodline making it less “pure” (Vigod, 2011). Early Canadian immigration did primarily come from Britain. But as time passed, ideas of the Canada First movement were seen as inherently racist and were ill received by new emerging academics and Canadians. This can be seen with academics such as George Wrong and Harold Innis, who would write about Canada shortly after the Canada First movement without racial arguments. Immigration policies would also change to include a more diverse group of immigrants, most of which no longer of British origin. This can be seen by “[t]he flood of people that poured into Canada between 1900 and 1914 and the dramatic changes in immigration patterns that occurred in more recent decades created a present–day population that bears little resemblance to the population in 1900” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2006).

At the time of the Canada First movement, fifty-seven percent of Canada’s population was of British origin, followed by the French with thirty percent (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2006). The demographics have shifted dramatically since then with only forty-four percent of Canada’s population in 1971 coming from British origin (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2006). With Western expansion, much of Canada’s early immigration policies were relaxed in order to settle the West. As time passed, immigration policies would continue to change and focused less on race or country of origin, no longer making the northern people a characteristic of the Canadian nation.

Canada as a Place of Nature: Territorial Nationalism

The second example of Canadian nation building is that of territory. This has been primarily constructed on images of wilderness, most notably with depictions of Canada by the Group of Seven. This section will explore nation building through landscapes and territorial attachment by showing the role the Group of Seven had in the national consciousness. The section will also explain that this is another instance of exclusionary nation building as it bases the nation on one’s relationship with nature and cannot survive in a post-industrial society. In addition, it is important to consider spatial identities that may have conflicting ideas of territory: this is especially true of French and English associations of territory in Canada, and furthermore the same could be said for Aboriginals.

To show the rise of territorial nationalism in Canada one can turn to the Group of Seven. Formed in 1920, the Group of Seven was composed of commercial artists from Toronto who shared a common distaste for conservative and repetitive Canadian art (Varley, 2011). They were interested in developing a
close relationship with their subject – Canadian landscapes. The group was seen as controversial by other Canadian artists for coining itself Canada’s national school of painters, since its members were almost exclusively from Toronto. Eventually, the group expanded to include a wide range of artists from different provinces (Varley, 2011). A.Y. Jackson, a leading member of the group, traveled to Algonquin Park, the Rockies and Georgian Bay for inspiration for his paintings that would shape the way Canadians saw themselves (Davis, 2011).

In her article “The Group of Seven and the Tourist Landscape in Western Canada, or The More Things Change,” Lynda Jessup stresses the impact the group had on the national consciousness. She claims that the group’s work is based on Anglo-Celtic ancestry and excludes Aboriginals and immigrant groups of various origins (Jessup, 145). Jessup explains that the group was primarily focused on Ontario landscapes making it regional not national, adding to a sense of western alienation (Jessup, 146). In addition to this, the paintings portray a land that is uninhabited, erasing the presence of Aboriginal cultures (Jessup, 146). This sense of Canada as an empty country also falls short when considering the industrial changes and large population centers in metropolitan areas, suburbs, towns, etc. These residential areas are not represented in paintings of vacant wilderness, where few Canadians will venture, let alone reside. Can someone living in Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver identify with the images of an empty wilderness, when they are accustomed to a busy metropolis? Another problem with the use of territorial nationalism is spatial identities; this will be further explored in my forthcoming section on language-based nationalism.

**A Bilingual Nation: Linguistic Nationalism**

The third example of nation building in Canada is that of the bilingual nation. This can be seen through the myth of the two solitudes, wherein two cultural and linguistic communities, the French and the English, founded Canada. The following section explores how this myth came to be with the Durham Report of 1839, which aimed to study the rebellions in Lower and Upper Canada, and much later with the establishment of the Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission and the Official Language Act of 1969. I argue that the bilingual nation is not an accurate portrayal of Canada since French and English settlers did not identify as Canadian on the continent when first arriving. Furthermore, the conception of the two solitudes goes against a pan-Canadian nation, since it ignores the linguistic regionalism, which can be seen with spatial identities. In addition to this, the myth of two founding nations ignores the role of Aboriginal peoples in
Canada as well as the role of immigrants, two groups that do not fit into the idea of the bilingual nation.

Reporting on the causes of the Rebellions of 1837-1838 against the British Crown in Upper and Lower Canada, Lord Durham wrote about “Two nations warring in the bosom of a single state” which for the first time in Canadian history showed a difference between the two groups, French and English, inhabiting Lower and Upper Canada. For Guy Laforest and many other Canadian scholars, the narrative is a marker of the arrival of nationalism in Canada and the beginning of identifying oneself to a particular ethno-linguistic nation. Yet this nationalism is not pan-Canadian, as it deals with two very different groups who do not identify as Canadian. For the most part, English-speaking settlers saw themselves as British subjects, as well as being very diverse in country of origin coming from other English-speaking European countries as well as America. The French-speaking inhabitants also did not see themselves as French Canadians but rather as Canadiens. This shows that the bilingual nation could not have emerged during Durham’s lifetime, as it was not present in the consciousness of French Canadians nor of English Canadians. In addition, the Durham Report suggests that there were two nations within the state, which contradicts the possible emergence of a single state with a single nation.

In 1963, reacting to the growing unrest in Quebec, Lester B. Pearson established the Royal Commission of Bilingualism and Biculturalism, with the mandate to examine if French and English speakers had equal opportunities within national institutions, in addition to seeing if employers encouraged bilingualism (Laing, 2011). Recommendations made by the commissioners André Laurendeau and Davidson Dunton were not implemented with the notable exception of the Official Languages Act (1969) stating that French and English are the official languages of Canada and that federal institutions must provide services to the people in the official language they choose (Yalden, 2011). Although Canada is legally recognized as a bilingual country, this is far from a reality for its citizens as only 109 415 of Canadians considered themselves bilingual in French and English in the 2006 census (Statistics Canada, 2007). Not only is the bilingualism rate in Canada low, French and English-speaking Canadians are concentrated in certain areas, with a higher percentage of French Canadians in Quebec, dividing the country into two linguistic territories. The promise of a bilingual country has not been realized. If bilingualism is something the state, in the form of the government, tried to implement it had failed to do so and therefore cannot claim it as a basis on which to foster the Canadian nation, as language is not a binding force is Canada.
In his article “Two Nations in Search of a State: Canada’s Ambivalent Spatial Identities,” David H. Kaplan explores territory perceptions between linguistic groups in Canada. A spatial identity is the perception someone has of his or her territory (Kaplan 585). The article suggests that French and English Canadians do not share the same spatial identity while living in the same country. It explains that both French and English Canada are nations without states and shows how these groups tend to remain together holding a certain territory separated from the other (Kaplan, 595). As time has progressed however, the English spatial identity has come to encompass the whole Canadian state, speaking on behalf of French-speaking Canadians and other regional or cultural groups (Kaplan, 598). The French spatial identity is still restricted to a certain area, or small regionalist pockets spread across Canada, but do not encompass the whole territory. This fact suggests that the notion of a bilingual nation only applies in certain areas of the country, where both French and English identities meet, but not others.

As well as inadequately representing both official linguistic groups, the myth of a bilingual nation does not consider those who do not speak both or either language and gives supremacy to English and French-speakers by giving them the status of official language. The notion of the two solitudes, French and English, also ignores the presence of Aboriginal peoples and their languages as well as the languages of immigrants. By choosing French and English bilingualism as a pillar of Canadian nationalism, the government has ignored the scholarly-called triangular reality, that of a country based on three founding peoples; French, English and Aboriginal, as well as ignoring the immigrant groups who have settled in Canada. Moreover, the idea of a bilingual nation can be considered an oxymoron, as it can never achieve a homogenous linguistic and cultural nation.

Conclusion

After having seen how nation formation has been unsuccessful in Canada through the examination of three myths – the northen race, the Canadian landscape and bilingualism, all three led by an explicit nation-building intention, it becomes clear that nation as it is presently defined, is much too narrow to encompass Canada. By basing the nation on characteristics like race, territory and language, Canadian nation builders have excluded large parts of the Canadian population. According to the most recent and well accepted definitions of nation as a constructed concept, redefining the nation is therefore possible. Changing the

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1 Aboriginal peoples were not consulted in the concept of the triangular reality. Moreover, the federal government created the department of Indian and Northern Affairs in 1966. Prior to the creation of INAC, the federal government held jurisdiction of Aboriginal affairs under section 92 of the Constitution Act of 1867 (Dacks, 304).
pillars of nation and what they mean can be achieved. When doing so, one must learn from the failures of cultural, racial and territorial nationalism in Canada.

Contemporary attempts at nation building show progress in the regard of the inclusion of marginalized groups. Although far from perfect, they shift from cultural practices and race towards symbolism and institution. An example of this is civic nationalism, which attaches pride in one’s state institutions (Senese, 113). The shortcomings of civic nationalism become apparent when noting that civic institutions in Canada are derived from Britain’s and therefore represent the cultural traditions of only one group, once again ignoring institutional traditions from other cultures (Senese, 113).

The Canadian state sees value in the nation, as it has tried to foster it since its conception. Moreover, inclusivity is important to the Canadian state since it keeps trying to bring more groups into its constructed nation with combined forces of notions like civic nationalism and multiculturalism. The Canadian state seems to believe that these new narratives may come to replace the old and damaged pillars of Canadian nationalism. What makes Canada different from other countries is that despite having proven unsuccessful in creating an all-inclusive Canadian nation, it has achieved state status. Proving that nation is not necessary to state formation is perhaps a unique Canadian characteristic. By not having a pan-Canadian nation, the Canadian state does not need to play the role of the protector of the nation. Instead, the state can focus more attention to its role in its social contract with its citizens.
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