



JOSH COLE

## Neoliberalism as Historical Narrative: Some Reflections

In a potentially seismic contribution to the study of knowledge and power (cut short by his death in 1962) the sociologist C. Wright Mills argued that the “first rule for understanding the human condition”, is that people “live in second-hand worlds”. They are aware of much more than they have personally experienced; and their own experience is always indirect. “The quality of their lives is determined by meanings they have received from others.”<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon — in which modern “consciousness and existence” is mediated by symbols which “focus experience [and] organize knowledge” is central to the understanding of nationalism and history, not least in Canada.<sup>2</sup> Through communications — embodied in media, school curricula, in statues, museums and monuments — we learn to love our country and the history that seems to ‘naturally’ inform it. So much so that, as Benedict Anderson argues, we are willing to lay down our lives (or those of our fellow citizens) in its name.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, the paradox is that nations and their national histories are not eternal, but are themselves historical artifacts of a strikingly recent invention. There is less ‘blood and soil’ than we might imagine, and more technology at work in it. What we today recognize as nationalism is a modern phenomenon, involving a break with a past in which social life was organized hierarchically under “sovereigns whose right to rule was divinely prescribed and sanctioned.”

“Cosmological time” — that is, time conditioned by the natural rhythms of life — was dealt a severe blow by the development of sciences like geology and astronomy on the one hand, and new technologies such as chronometers, clocks, and compasses on the other. It was the same with space. Through the modern map, lands near and distant could be seen “objectively” for the first time; and, seen as such, they could be politically and economically mastered. Newspapers and magazines began to shift people’s ideas of the world, leading to a notion that things occurring *anywhere* could be experienced by *anyone* who had access to the technology of literacy.

In schools, increasingly common in the west by the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, students experienced instruction that was standardized, stratified, and conducted in a singular, vernacular language. The most important political documents of the modern period are built upon such universalist assumptions. The French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (1789) is a case in point. The idea that people — all people, in all places, in France and elsewhere — “are born free and remain free and equal in rights” — was inconceivable before such technologies made it seem inevitable.<sup>4</sup>

It is no accident that history as we now know it came into being at the same time. History gave empty homogenous time the crucial dimension of *depth*. As Anderson argues, the “five presiding geniuses of European historiography” — Ranke, Michelet, Tocqueville, Marx, and Burckhardt — were all born after 1789. After this, the idea of history itself — past, present, future — came into being. Long dead predecessors came to be seen as a single unit — a continuum: “evidence” implying “an identity with someone unrecognizable and unremembered.”<sup>5</sup> Without such a sense, and the illusion of social depth that it provides, nationalism would be impossible.

As new parts of the world became mastered in space and time (the compass led ultimately to modern colonialism, the development of technologies like statistics to new understandings of populations at home), information began to accumulate. The process of sifting through this information and making sense of it — common to both nationalism and the production of ‘history’ — became one of selection, or what Raymond Williams calls the “selective tradition.” This process of selection is at the heart of nationalism and history. It is deeply *political*, for “certain meanings and practices are chosen

for emphasis” while other meanings “neglected and excluded.”<sup>6</sup> The question then becomes, *who* chooses, and *why*. Importantly, what is not chosen does not necessarily disappear. The compass, map, and history book does not *eradicate* historical possibilities, it *delegitimizes* them. They can be discovered or re-discovered.

### **From the peaceable kingdom to the present**

This is not to suggest that there is no such thing as the past — only that ‘history’ is loaded with political meaning. The close of the Second World War saw Europe in tatters, a “blasted landscape of broken cities and barren fields ... worn out, without resources, exhausted.”<sup>7</sup> There was a widespread feeling amongst the public and alike, in Europe and North America, that the ‘old world’ must be superseded. This was a time in which many people were inclined to favour the “new” in all things. After all, what treasured traditions from the pre-1945 world did most people really want to conserve? Certainly not the cultural and material forces and tendencies that had led to the horrors of the Great Depression and two world wars.

A level of government intervention into social affairs became not just permissible, but *expected* for the next quarter-century. In this sense, the Cold War divisions of ‘east’ and ‘west’ were two sides of the same coin — both embracing an interventionist model of social and economic affairs. Although eschewing the revolutionary tradition (represented, in however distorted a form, by the Soviet Union), liberal-democratic governments (including Canada’s) proved to be far less hostile to the supposed efficacy of planning than they were before 1945. The so-called ‘welfare state’ in the United States and Canada more often took the form of economic regulation and “pragmatic policies aimed at alleviating disadvantage and reducing extremes of wealth and indulgence.” The public expected capitalists would treat workers well, and workers were expected to play nice with the bosses in turn.<sup>8</sup> From approximately 1945-75, its success was stupefying. A *Wirtschaftswunder* (or “economic miracle”) occurred in Germany; *Les Trente Glorieuses* (“glorious thirty”) in France. The now ubiquitous term “human capital” was invented in the United States to explain economic growth without end. Harold Macmillan, Prime Minister of England, proclaimed that the people “have never had it so good.”<sup>9</sup>

And so it was in Canada. Politicians — scared stiff by the threat of socialism (workers could always look to the Soviet alternative, should they become discontented) — adopted a “managed capitalism,” and began to create a social-safety net.<sup>10</sup> By the early 1960s, Canada had entered into a period of unprecedented economic growth. Canadians now had disposable income, and “with the economy growing by leaps and bounds, there was a widespread belief that there was no limit to the gains that could be made by well-organized groups of the oppressed pressuring the state for social justice.”<sup>11</sup> These factors — as well as an animus towards the United States — fed into postwar (English)

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Canadian nationalism. Canadian Historian Ryan Edwardson has dubbed this “the Peaceable Kingdom,” which he describes as “a socialist-leaning nation of equality, multiculturalism, peacekeeping, and a social-welfare safety net directed to ensuring that all Canadians could benefit from the nation’s wealth.”<sup>12</sup> This was not only a message for the Americans, but

for the world. Canadians began to think of themselves as a more sophisticated and progressive version of the ‘city on a hill’ to the south.<sup>13</sup>

And yet, the Golden Age contained the seeds of its own undoing. The Second World War saw the advent of Research and Development, which produced technologies such as radar, the jet-engine, transistors, and digital computers.<sup>14</sup> The Cold War which followed produced ARPANET (“Advanced Research Projects Agency Network”), the beginnings of what we now know as the “internet.” Universities both grew, and grew more intertwined with government and business. As Clark Kerr, the theorist of the ‘multiversity’ wrote: “what the railroads did for the second half of the last century and the automobile for the first half of this century may be done by the knowledge industry.”<sup>15</sup> This made it possible for capitalism to adopt “radically new forms of spatial divisions of labor, increasingly locating production facilities in low-wage countries while design, management and financial functions are scattered through rich countries.”<sup>16</sup> Here, we have the beginnings of what we know and refer to as globalization.

What map and compass were to nationalism, cheap air travel and telecommunications are for our own, even more complex situation. Canadians were particularly alive to this technological shift. Marshall McLuhan, for instance, was concocting his theory of the “global village” as early as 1954. As he proclaimed: “it is hard to see how any national culture as such can stand up to the new media of communication ... at the end of the present accelerated communication process are we to expect a new world citizen? ” New technologies were, as he put it, “a menace to nationalist passions.”<sup>17</sup>

These new technologies were accompanied by an “immense discursive shift” in politics and economics.<sup>18</sup> The social democratic thrust was so powerful that a return of conservatism was inconceivable to most. The “centre of gravity” was not “between left and right but rather within the left” between communists and their sympathizers and the mainstream liberal-social-democratic consensus.

*Laissez-faire* liberalism was hardly dormant, however. A counter-hegemony was slowly but surely gathering steam — from activists in California pressing against the postwar consensus from school boards and independent bookshops to the increasingly influential work of economists Ludwig von Mises, Joseph Schumpeter, and Friedrich Hayek.<sup>19</sup> Most powerfully argued by Hayek (a key sparring partner with Keynes), the position was this: statism (in both its communist and social democratic forms) was unworkable as a means of organizing an increasingly modern society. Planning was unsustainable because there is no way that a small group of people, no matter how intelligent or well-intentioned, could possibly master the complexities of the postwar social, political, and economic environment.<sup>20</sup> Individual desires were all that mattered. Only a mechanism that can disinterestedly order those needs — the capitalist free market — could carve sense out of this chaos, giving people palpably better lives.<sup>21</sup>

All these “neoliberals” needed to press their case was (as Naomi Klein puts it) a “shock” to exploit to their advantage. That came in 1973 with the twin-threat of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) proclaiming an oil embargo in response to the United States’ participation in the Yom Kippur War, accompanied by economic inflation and stagnation (or “stagflation”) in Europe and North America. No amount of top-down planning seemed to remedy the problem, and soon enough, the neoliberal position gained

traction, quickly adopted by American liberals like Jimmy Carter and most famously by the British Prime Minister Margret Thatcher — who summed the situation up brilliantly with two intertwined aphorisms: “There is no such thing as society,” and more menacingly, “There is no alternative.”

Just as mid-century discourse was “thick” with social structure in which the self “was encircled . . . with wider and wider rings of relations, structures, contexts, and institutions”, as the Golden Age crumbled, a discourse of “fracture” emerged, in which one heard “more about individuals, contingency, and choice.” The rhetorical “importance of economic institutions gave way to notions of flexible and instantly acting markets.” Ideas about politics and economics “became fluid and elective.”<sup>22</sup> The process has been completed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as those in power aggressively seek to recreate public goods as private entities. The process is particularly accelerated in public schools and universities — where decision-makers of the future most often acquire their nationalist and historical worldviews.

### **From Harper to Trudeau 2.0**

Now that we have a sense of the social context in which Canadian national and historical narratives are derived, we can move to the symbols through which recent Canadian governments ‘focus experience and organize knowledge’ in order to push their political projects forward.

Stephen Harper’s Conservative Party conceived of the history of Canada in “traditional” terms, to borrow a phrase from the scholar Jörn Rüsen. Such history “makes the past significant and relevant to present actuality and its future extension as a continuity of obligatory cultural and life-patterns over time.” The past flows into the present and determines the future, which will be, ideally, just like the past. This is the past as “unhistorical history” — a form of simplistic commemoration dedicated to the “conservation of sameness over time.”<sup>23</sup>

As Ian McKay and Jamie Swift make clear in their *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety*, the Harper government worked overtime to bury the Canadian present in an imaginary Canadian past. This imagined community was ultimately a romantic one, in which “Victorian” values, built upon the supposed “superiority of

Anglo-American institutions, a belief in rugged individualism, and a conception of the world in which states, like individuals, are necessarily caught up in a dog-eat-dog struggle to survive” took precedence.<sup>24</sup> There was less overt talk of economic strength than there was of a hardy “True North Strong and Free” — think of those annual Arctic visits, in which Harper shot guns into mounds of snow for the cameras, or rode snowmobiles to nowhere — in order to distinguish himself, and through him Canada, from lesser competitor nations or political parties (who represented, by comparison, ‘southern’ imagined communities characterized by “degeneration, decay, and effeminacy.”)<sup>25</sup>

Just as interesting for the purpose of this analysis is the less mature pre-politician Harper, who had not yet gained the whip-hand, and thus the means to remake Canada’s image of itself as a vessel channelling the “Magna Carta, habeas corpus, petition of rights, and English Common Law.”<sup>26</sup> This more basic Harper was much more attuned to neoliberal economic interests. This was the Harper who appreciated the so-called “Calgary School” of scholars who disparaged Indigenous contributions to Canadian history, Trudeau’s 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the Peaceable Kingdom most of all. As Marci McDonald writes, their agenda could have “been lifted straight from the dusty desk drawers of Ronald Reagan: lower taxes, less federal government, and free markets unfettered by social programs such as medicare that keep citizens from being forced to pull up their own socks.”<sup>27</sup> It is no coincidence that this ‘School’ named itself after the ‘Chicago School’ of neoliberals led by Hayek and Milton Freedman, author of the monetarist bible, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962).

This was the think-tank version of Harper, before he united the far-right Canadian Alliance Party and the Progressive Conservatives, to

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eventually lead two minorities and one majority government, defeated by Justin Trudeau in late-2015. As then-head of the National Citizens Coalition (NCC) Harper delivered a revealing statement in 1997 on his imagined Canadian nationalism in Montréal for the benefit of an American think tank called Council for National Policy (CNP). Here — in a speech that was meant to amuse, but also inform — his ideological colleagues about the nature of Canadian nationalism and history. This was a Canada unknown to many Canadians because they had grown up in a false Canada — that of the Peaceable Kingdom. As Harper put it, this Canada was “a Northern European welfare state in the worst sense of the term, and very proud of it.” Canadians did not understand how much the Peaceable Kingdom had disadvantaged them, for they accepted ‘inflationary psychology’ and the dependence and weakness that went along with it. For this Harper, his fellow citizens did not seem to understand that high unemployment and low economic growth were the result of the laziness and entitlement generated by life in the Peaceable Kingdom. He assured his audience that they should not feel too bad for these deluded folks, for they “don’t feel bad about it themselves, as long as they’re receiving generous social assistance and unemployment insurance.”

According to Harper, Canada was an imagined community adrift, ruled by a “Clinton-pragmatic” Liberal Party on the one hand, and an “explicitly radical” New Democratic Party (“proof that the Devil lives and interferes in the affairs of men”) on the other. For Harper, these parties lived in the past — a past represented by ‘Nanny-State’ collectivism and a deluded ‘multiculturalism.’ All of this was a distraction from the real meat-and-potatoes for Harper: maximum freedom for corporate interests, and a strong state that could make that — and only that — a reality.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, Harper’s later use of the state apparatus to tear down the profitable but ‘socialist’ Canadian Wheat Board was as true to his roots as any Arctic adventure — as was his attempt to create a nationalist holiday commemorating the event, named “Marketing Freedom Day.”

In comparison to this neoliberalism under the cover of a “fundamentalist” national history that so underscored the Harper government is the Justin Trudeau Liberal take on the issue. If the Tory view of the national past points crudely backward, the ‘Grit’ (Liberal) version is just as basic, but the arrow points in the opposite direction: into a fantastical vision of the future, in which the marketplace,



overseen by 'qualified' technocratic experts, will solve all social Canadian problems. This is, ostensibly, a return to the Peaceable Kingdom... but one in which the market is front-and-centre.

The Liberals are solidly on the side of national and historical "teleology" — history is moving forward, in a progressive direction. If all-knowing technocrats remain in power, this 'natural' social and economic order will remain in place. As Rösen puts it, this is a version of history/imagined community that owes its allegiance to the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is interested in the past only to the extent that it serves as raw material for "laws or rules that can be applied to the present." It is ideologically devoted to science as politics, or a "positivist" vision of history.

While the traditional mode (like Harper's) ignores conflicts in the past, this "exemplary" mode of history uses 'rationality' as a means to produce hegemony, burying alternative political projects (or, "partial, prejudiced, irrational versions of the past"). The result is a "broad, universal vision that allows insight into the more limited, particularist, parochial views of people in the past (and the 'people without history' in other parts of the world)." The goal — for Trudeau Sr. and Jr. — is "the increased rationality of modern life." The American political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously proclaimed that history (by which he meant contentious political battles) had 'ended' with the fall of Soviet Union in 1992. He could have learned much from the Liberal Party of Canada, who had been saying as much since the late-1960s.<sup>29</sup>

We can see this clearly in a penetrating critique offered up the philosopher and scholar activist Charles Taylor — a pioneer 'New Leftist' — who ran against Pierre Trudeau in 1968. *The Pattern of Politics* (1970) points towards eerie similarities between father and son. He explains his loss, and P.E.T.'s victory, as in part a triumph of technology over content (once again: 'the medium is the message'). Taylor draws our attention to Trudeau Sr.'s skill with television — (just like Jr.'s with the media *du jour*: Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and so forth). For Taylor, P.E.T. grasped the possibilities of the new medium brilliantly. He understood that the nationalist politics of the pre-war era — playing out explosively in 1960s Québec — was in a sense passé. What the mainstream now wanted was a mass-mediated "personality" that would, in turn, dazzle and reassure on television. He called this phenomenon the New Young Leader (NYL).

Through his mastery (remember, the Liberal Party of Canada has never had a female leader) of new ways of creating and disseminating political information, the NYL is supposedly in tune with way young people talk about issues (significantly, in addition to his Prime Ministerial role, Trudeau Jr. is also the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Youth). To generate consent among a disparate population, the NYL must be all things to all people, which inevitably leads to political goals “without real content.” What takes the place of old-fashioned

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goals is the synchronization of government with the forces of dynamism and change — which is code for the most dynamic force in world history: capitalism (also referred to, more recently, as “innovation at the highest level”).

This was and is a “flexible and pragmatic” politics, which responds to “problems as they arise.” But in fact it is code for compromise at its most base: social justice issues must become *secondary* issues — problems

or inconveniences to be managed after the fact. How else could a government make the sort of ‘tough choices’ that keep the march of progress alive? In short, the NYL represents the “end of ideology,” and the birth of a kind of post-politics for a hypermodern age. *Plus ça change.*<sup>30</sup>

### **Trudeau 2.0 and #FutureCanada**

The government of Justin Trudeau has worked steadily to “brand” itself as #FutureCanada. The appointment of the Minister of “Innovation, Science and Economic Development,” Navdeep Bains — an accountant who holds a Masters of Business Administration — is case in point. Bains is steeped in our contemporary mode of communication: the ‘medium’ greasing the path for the ‘message’ indicating that this is a government ‘open for business.’ That’s why his selfies with Henry Kissinger, a person widely considered to be a war criminal, are

irrelevant. In #FutureCanada, the complications of history (like human rights, and issues of justice or injustice) are transcended by the genius of the market. Humanism is trivial, *passé*, and more to the point, *inefficient*. “Stakeholders,” not citizens, will be accorded pride of place, and consensus, not conservation, will rule, as we identify means “to find solutions and avoid escalating conflicts unnecessarily.”

We can see this logic at work in Trudeau 2.0’s quite conscious re-shaping of Canada. As Bains’ ‘Mandate Letter’ indicates, his job is to “bring real change” to Northern North America by rehabilitating its “strong and growing middle class.” This class is, by any realistic measure, in decline due to the very same neoliberal mechanisms that Bains and Trudeau champion — free trade and more deregulation — as the means of future economic growth. But no matter. Bains has been explicitly instructed to expand “effective support” for market-driven mechanisms, “incubators, accelerators”, and to establish an “emerging national network for business innovation and cluster support.”<sup>31</sup> I have no idea what this means.

As the American historian and journalist Jill Lepore argues, this is the neoliberal language of our day: proudly and unreflexively drawing on business professors, consultants, (“deliverology”) gurus<sup>32</sup> and “hucksters” of all kinds. It’s our era’s “theory of the past and the present, of what was and what is — a notion of time: a theory of history.” Such faith used to be considered “supernatural” (“the hidden hand of the market?”), though now it is presented as secular, forward-looking, and deeply ‘commonsensical’.

Welcome to the age of “innovation,” which (as Lepore argues) is to our own era what “evolution” was to the 19<sup>th</sup> century — though much more nakedly cruel. It’s “the idea of progress,” shorn of the critical “aspirations of the Enlightenment, scrubbed clean of the horrors of the

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20<sup>th</sup> century, and relieved of its critics." It's also a total repudiation of Golden Era planning and social and economic security.

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Hospitals, schools, and universities are no longer public goods, but rather potential markets to be opened through the coercive force of the state. The Peaceable Kingdom was a blip — a mistaken step, misaligned with the 'natural order.' Above all else, Canadians must "let go of the past."<sup>33</sup>

The Liberal Party's confidence in its ability create a kind of miraculous consensus

beyond the riotous tussle of actual politics was seen early on in its approach to Indigenous peoples living in Canada. Carolyn Bennett is the current Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs (which used to be called — incorrectly and insultingly — "Indian Affairs"). Her job is to create a "nation-to-nation relationship" with the Canadian state based upon "recognition, rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership," addressing a panoply of vexing issues including "housing, employment, health and mental health care, community safety and policing, child welfare, and education." The crimes perpetrated upon First Peoples under colonial rule are staggering, yet nationalist communication—the "process of truth telling and healing" — is supposed to heal the wounds of historical reality. Bennett is also supposed to make things right in global terms by bringing Canada into line with the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) whereby health and "physical infrastructure" needs (the basic necessities of life; housing and food — "positive liberty," in other words) would also be met. Education would be paramount: Bennett is tasked with "lifting the 2% cap on annual funding (established by Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin in the 1990s), while incorporating "Aboriginal and treaty rights, resi-

dential schools, and Indigenous contributions into school curriculum” across the country.<sup>34</sup>

The Minister of the Environment and Climate Change, Catherine McKenna, is expected to be just as revolutionary. McKenna — a lawyer, professor, and former negotiator with the United Nations, has been tasked with coming up with a “Pan-Canadian” plan to “combat climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions” — one that is somehow consistent with “sustainable economic growth.” She is to keep the environment intact, for that is who we are as Canadians: we are the land. We don’t have history (i.e. revolutionary republicanism) like the U.S., but we do have geography (which is supposedly ‘apolitical’). Thus, McKenna is to “treat our freshwater as a precious resource that deserves protection and careful stewardship.” She is to use science and technology to simultaneously exploit and conserve Northern North America’s precious ‘resources.’ “Geo-mapping, watershed protection, and ‘best practices’ in wastewater treatment technologies” will heal the damage caused by Industrialist and Post-Industrialist capitalist practices. Canada’s endangered species will be salvaged by “responding quickly to the advice of scientists,” and creating “recovery plans” after the fact. “National emissions-reduction targets” will be adopted that will “recognize the economic cost and catastrophic impact that a greater-than-two-degree increase in average global temperatures would represent, as well as the need for Canada to do its part to prevent that from happening.” Alongside accelerating resource extraction, a “new Low Carbon Economy Trust” will come into being, funding “projects that materially reduce carbon emissions under the new pan-Canadian framework” as well as “investments that lead to cleaner air and healthier communities.” Low-income Canadians will be introduced to the land that undergirds their historical and national identity through ‘eco-nationalist’ programs through which they experience “Canada’s outdoors.” All of this would allow the Trudeau government to build a “greater country” because, after all, “Canada is back.”<sup>36</sup>

## **#BecauseIts2016**

A year into the Trudeau Jr. era — an era of blanket celebration — things seem to be changing. Communications are falling out of sync with reality. In one of his last columns before retirement, journalist

Terry Milewski questioned the government's notion of a neoliberal free trade regime that 'works for all.' As he put it, via a quote by a 19<sup>th</sup> century British Prime Minister, "Nations have no permanent friends or allies; they only have permanent interests."<sup>37</sup> And what are these interests? Milewski argues they are the same as those held by Conservatives. He quotes the NDP leader Thomas Mulcair to make a rhetorical point: "Was this always the Liberal plan? Attack Stephen Harper's policies to get elected and then, once in government, adopt those exact same policies?"

Let's be frank: when it comes to their policies (if not their rhetoric), the Liberals and the Conservatives — as I hope I've made clear — have always been, more or less, on the same page. Milewski makes the point better than I can: "Remember NAFTA? Why, Brian Mulroney's Conservatives would surely burn in hell for that betrayal of the nation's future, according to Jean Chrétien's Liberals. But, once Chrétien took power, the Liberals embraced it. And the GST? That, too, was the devil's work until it wasn't. In Opposition, the Chrétien Liberals swore to 'kill, scrap and abolish' Mulroney's hated tax. Check your bill. It's still there."

Perhaps even more directly (even acidly) *The Guardian's* Martin Lukacs<sup>38</sup> points out the disconnect between the first Canadian PM with a tattoo — a Haida-style tattoo — and the damning facts. A legal order to "end racial discrimination against Indigenous children"? Ignored. The 16,000 children snatched by non-Indigenous parents in the notorious "Sixties Scoop"? Fought in court. The much-vaunted \$8.4 billion dedicated to lifting up Northern North America's First Peoples? Most of that largesse will flow only in 2020 — "after the next election." Worst of all, it appears that despite commitments by both the PM and Minister Bennett, the 2% cap on annual funding increases for First Nations on-reserve, installed by former Liberal PM Paul Martin, has not been lifted.<sup>39</sup> And recently, Trudeau's government dealt another blow to Indigenous peoples and environmentalists by conditionally approving a massive Liquid Natural Gas operation that will run through British Columbia's northwest coast, through pristine rainforest.<sup>40</sup> This is not, as Lukacs stresses, how so many hopeful people envisioned the "new relationship that Trudeau announced to rapturous international applause."

## Conclusion

“Limits of my language are the limits of my world,” according to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. He meant something along the lines of what Mills meant — that we understand the world through the ways we talk about it. Politicians know this acutely, and they exploit it. But Wittgenstein’s statement has a kind of determinism to it that Mills’ doesn’t have. Mills, though his relationship to Marxism was complex, would surely agree with him that “philosophers have only talked about the world. The point is to change it.” This process begins when we take the stories that we are expected, day-in-day-out, to swallow whole and make them properly *historical* — that is, located in time and space, always undergirded by political and economic interest, and most importantly *anything but determined*. Next, we should learn how to tell our own stories, creating ways to be more honest about the world in which we live.

In other words, Wittgenstein was wrong. Language can be used in many ways — it can propagandize us, but it can also liberate us. Think about it: a good piece of literature can make entirely different worlds vividly real. Why can’t we do the same with our politics? With our economies? We need to become less cynical, and more utopian.

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## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

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