

The Canada Syndrome, a Captivating Mass Psychosis

By Richard Sanders

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”¹

Although appealing as a rhetorical call to action, this well-known aphorism on acquiescence hides the more disturbing reality that “good” people are sometimes very directly involved in actually helping to carry out atrocious travesties of justice. In fact, institutionalised programs of systemic violence, abuse and exploitation cannot succeed without the active support and complicity of sincere, well-meaning people.

Huge institutions filled with “good” people are essential in the planning and administration of major crimes against peace and humanity. With the best of intentions, such people also create and propagate the most eloquent narratives to justify, promote and cover up criminal transgressions. Canada is not exempt from this pattern. The history of our so-called “Peaceable Kingdom,” from its very roots, is replete with grave injustices wrought by fervent believers who thought they were doing the right thing. Driven by a profound desire to promote progress, all-too-many Canadians have collaborated in such offences as occupation, ethnic cleansing, land plunder, genocide, chattel slavery, internment camps, weapons exports and a slew of wars fed by corporate greed.

Despite this ongoing imperial tradition, Canadians are still ready to embrace an extremely flattering and self-righteous national mythology. Canada’s official story portrays this country as a shining beacon spreading its enlightened code of ethics and benevolent ideals throughout a dark and troubled world. Sadly, this self-satisfied myth of exceptionalism is utter moonshine; an intoxicating swill of political hogwash that has been lapped up as the gospel truth by generations of citizens on the right, left and centre. Now marketed under the heart-warming brand “Canadian values,” this cultural koolaid is regularly dispensed by our national cult makers. Although Canada’s soothing elixir is a strange brew laced with hypocrisy, duplicity, artificial maple flavour and patriotic Red Dye, it’s main ingredients are commonly listed as peace, multiculturalism, human rights and democracy.

The fanciful idea that Canada symbolises these worthy ideals did not arise out of thin air. Throughout the nation-building project that spawned this country, the heartfelt conviction of Canada’s dominant, west-European settler society was that the pioneers who forged this blessed kingdom were on the imperial frontline, promoting morally-superior “Christian values.” This proud Canadian identity myth—proclaimed with missionary zeal and hubris by progressives and conservatives alike—has repeatedly gone beyond enthused ethnocentrism to push the limits of racism, xenophobia, religious elitism and political paranoia.

The guardians and gatekeepers of Canada’s official fairy tales have vilified and targeted certain people as the enemies of progress. Aboriginals, nonAngloSaxons and those feared as the potential recruits of radicalised socialists have been scapegoated, bullied, outlawed and forced into mass captivity on reserves, or interned in prisons and labour camps. Their supposed crimes have included threatening the status quo by standing up for justice, equality, peace and labour rights, and spreading counternarratives that oppose the accepted biases of mainstream culture. Ironically, the most powerful proponents of our national myths—while posing as champions of the deified mantra of “Canadian values”—are our main obstacle to achieving these noble ideals.

Colonial Occupation Psychosis

The pattern of social stereotyping upon which Canadian identity myths are founded, is not unique. Other nations built on colonial expansion and occupation have developed similar mass delusions. Canada’s version of this imperial psychosis shares symptoms with the cultural pathologies that evolved in the US, Australia, South Africa, Israel and elsewhere. These settler societies were leavened with a profound sense of entitlement and superiority—religious, ethnic, economic and political. To carry on, such cultures have required convincing narratives to rationalise the seizure of indigenous peoples’ lands, the curbing of their rights, and the restriction of their movements to the point of mass captivity.

Settler syndrome is a culture-bound psychosis so deeply rooted in Canada’s mainstream identity, that it remains difficult to remedy. Like psychoses found in individuals, diffuse social disorders are marked by a loss of contact with reality. Being irrational, such belief systems are highly resistant to reason and fact. For example, the narratives used to bolster Canadian exceptionalism, gloss over or deny responsibility for genocide and are out of touch with historic and present-day realities of abuse.

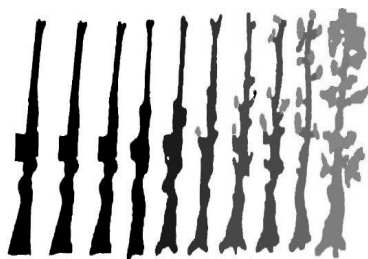
The Canada Syndrome also includes fantasies that parallel the delusions of grandeur found among megalomaniacs. Individuals who overestimate their power and selfworth have grandiose beliefs, often involving spiritual themes. Mass pathologies may similarly be marked by social complexes that rely on exaggerated tales of racial, national and/or religious superiority.

Cultures that overvalue themselves, typically devalue others, treating them with suspicion and fear. Like other settler states, Canada has endured prolonged episodes of mass paranoia that were deeply rooted in racism and classism. These social outbreaks of political and religious xenophobia have been driven by deluded, self-righteous missions that cloaked abusive behaviour behind lofty-sounding pretexts, like the protection of Canada’s civilised, Christian culture. Such collective obsessions are spread with fearmongering narratives that can reach fruition in pandemics of mass hysteria, moral panic and war fever. In Canada, settler psychosis painted First Nations, nonWestern Europeans, and radical leftists as foes to be contained, physically and otherwise.

The Canada Syndrome is a cultural malady that closely parallels what psychiatrists have labelled “Antisocial Personality Disorder.” The American Psychiatric Association (APA) has described this mental illness as “a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others...as indicated” by such anti-social behaviours as “deceitfulness,...repeated lying,...or conning others for personal profit,” “aggressiveness” and “lack of remorse” and “being indifferent to or rationalizing having hurt, mistreated, or stolen” from others.² Health Canada’s official *Report on Mental Illnesses in Canada* relies on this US definition.³

Besides relying on the APA, the Canadian Psychiatric Association also uses the World Health Organization (WHO) as a reference for pigeonholing mental illnesses. Both sources define psychiatric disorders as being outside the boundaries of accepted “social norms.” For example, the WHO defines “Dissocial Personality Disorder” in terms of a “gross disparity” between the individual’s “behaviour and the prevailing social norms.”⁴ Similarly, the APA’s criteria for “Antisocial Personality Disorder” includes “failure to conform to social norms.” This focus fails to recognise psychopathic individuals whose delusions and behaviour *do* conform to the broadly-accepted norms of society at large.

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When Social Norms are AntiSocial

Forty five years ago, a group of Black psychiatrists asked the APA to recognise “extreme bigotry...as a mental disorder.” APA officials rejected the idea, says Harvard psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint, “because so many Americans are racist, even extreme racism in this country is normative—a cultural problem rather than an indication of psychopathology.” Poussaint has continued to argue that the APA should “designate extreme racism as a mental health problem by recognizing it as a delusional psychotic symptom.”⁵ Racism, like other forms of chauvinism, is a delusion that is symptomatic of both individual *and* mass psychosis. Neither form of pathology should be accepted or rationalised away.

Just as those with antisocial disorders justify their abusive behaviour, captive institutions also create narratives to cover their crimes. Predatory, state bodies survive by disguising structural violence behind stories that legitimise their malevolent programs as if they were beneficial to victims. This process rewards those who are able to create and disseminate progressive-sounding narratives that will soothe society’s collective conscience.

While individuals seized by psychosis may remain completely unaware of their illness, those spellbound by a mass psychosis find it as impossible to perceive as their own accent or ethnicity. Captives of Canada’s settler syndrome may become unsettled if the sweet rhetoric of their myths clashes with bitter reality. To retain a sense of normalcy within a fictive state founded on blissful ignorance, many Canadians cling to the national faith with poetic folktales about our wondrous “Peaceable Kingdom.”

When poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined the phrase “willing suspension of disbelief” in 1817, he was describing literary devices that use mundane, natural, real-world imagery to create a “semblance of truth” in order to instill “poetic faith” in an imaginary world.⁶ People willingly accept unreal premises of imagination so that they can be carried away by their momentary indulgence in an artform. But what of citizens who suspend their disbelief for prolonged periods by putting blind faith in state narratives? Consumers of such political artifice are like unwitting subjects trapped in a lifelong, nationwide PR experiment without having given prior or informed consent. Suspending disbelief in order to enjoy a contrivance, also exists in law. “Legal fictions”

are lies that are accepted as truth in order to gain some benefit. A key example of this is “terra nullius” (“empty land”), which has long been used to justify the seizure and occupation of Aboriginal territories by Canada, the US, Australia and other settler states.

Captives of culture-bound psychoses like the Canada Syndrome are ardent nationalists who remain blind to the official myths that have abducted them. This parallels a psychological phenomenon in which kidnap victims adopt favourable attitudes toward their captors and promote their interests and narratives. The Canada Syndrome is the Stockholm Syndrome on steroids.

The term Stockholm Syndrome was coined by a Swedish, police psychologist when hostages identified with their captors during a 1973 bank heist. A few months later, this made-to-order syndrome, now called capture bonding, made headlines with the kidnapping of American media heiress Patty Hearst. After conspiring with her captors in various felonies—including armed robbery, bomb making, hijacking, assault and kidnapping—Hearst was arrested and put on trial. Saying she had been brainwashed, Hearst’s lawyer used the Stockholm Syndrome as a defence. Thanks to President Carter, Hearst served only two of her seven-year jail sentence. She was later pardoned by President Clinton.

Hearst’s grandfather, William Randolph Hearst, was a corporate tycoon and a Democratic Congressman for New York. As the “Father of Yellow Journalism,” and the hegemon of a newspaper empire, he fabricated vast webs of deceit to perpetuate mass psychoses like the “war fever” that fuelled the highly-profitable Spanish-American war of 1898. The Hearst-family story reminds us that while individuals may at times be kidnapped by the narratives of their hostage takers, masses of people are captured heart and mind every day by the crime-promoting myths of news companies owned by “law-abiding,” billionaire media moguls.

Although carefully-crafted narratives are key to seizing the public mind, one should not imagine that everyone who creates and spreads these poetic myths are necessarily intent on deception. Propagandists are often captivated by the narratives that they are diffusing. In fact, the most eloquent and convincing champions of farfetched narratives are those true believers who blindly see their enslaving delusions as if they were liberating ideas that must be spread far and wide in order to make others free.

Renditions: From Extraordinary to Banal

In studying the captivating power of myths, we inevitably invoke different meanings of the word “rendition.” Narrative renditions of history capture and organise diverse versions of past events. They can also seize and express feelings of identity based on cultural constructs like race, ethnicity, nationality and ideology. “Rendition” also refers to the act of taking prisoners, including covert abductions that spirit away alleged enemies of the state.

While secret CIA teams use “extraordinary rendition” to illegally grab victims under cover of darkness, the widespread popular narratives that abduct people *en masse*, and in broad daylight, are considered legal. Carried away in plain sight by delusional beliefs, victims of “ordinary rendition” can be moved to profess anything as the truth, from false histories to utopian fantasies. In contrast, victims of torture will soon confess to anything just to free themselves. But those rendered captive by myths are blissfully unaware of their captivity and cannot even imagine their need to escape. As such, no chains, fences, walls or bars are needed to immobilise them. Held hostage by false narratives, some quietly acquiesce to abetting harmful programs, while others take active roles in grave crimes—even kidnapping and torture—because they truly believe they are aiding the greater good.

The official narratives used to capture hearts and minds are as mundane and prosaic as the well-respected institutions that fabricate and distribute them. State bureaucracies, political parties, the mass media, corporations, NGOs, churches, the family and other ubiquitous institutions of culture, are the chief purveyors of Canada’s prevailing mythos. Speeches, sermons, lectures, news items, novels and bedtime stories serve as common delivery systems for the memes that have coddled Canadians into complicity. Using hackneyed clichés and platitudes, beguiling myths are conjured up to render state crimes as if they were noble efforts to protect our ever-precious “Canadian values.”

When a psychopathy like the Canada Syndrome becomes normalised, decent ordinary people may feel a disturbing sense that the cultural system they inhabit is mad. To suppress such qualms of cultural dissonance, captives of a mass psychosis reach out for any kind of rational-sounding justification to help suspend their disbelief, keep calm and carry on. The talking points supplied by their pious narratives allow people to maintain a blissful ignorance of state crimes, and their role in supporting them.

Are hostages of official myths culpable for their wrongdoing? Should such captives be held accountable, if they meant no harm, but were only trying to do good? In law, liability rests on whether reasonable care was taken to avoid actions or omissions that could reasonably have been foreseen as likely to harm others. So, yes, they *are* guilty, if they should have known better.

“Plausible deniability” is usually applied to figures in spy agencies, or corporate and political bureaucracies, who are trying to hide their guilt from the public eye. The term is also useful in seeing how captives of mass psychoses cover up the truth, not from others, but from themselves. It is a mental alibi. By avoiding facts that conflict with their false narratives, individuals can retain a studied ignorance that keeps them happily unaware of their own guilt. This careful inattention to facts may become such a reckless disregard for the truth as to cause gross negligence.

In law, wilful blindness and contrived ignorance refer to the deliberate avoidance of facts. The very act of looking away confirms that one *did* have a blind-eye knowledge of the denied fact, or at least some good reason to suspect its existence. This awareness, known in British courts as “Nelsonian knowledge,” is

named after the Admiral who put a telescope to his blind eye and then honestly said he did not see what he knew was there.

A Theory of Social Control & Social Change

Canadians should not overlook their country’s longlived tradition of using mass confinement to enforce social control. Examples include slavery, reserves, WWI/WWII internment, 1930s “Relief Camps” and Cold-War plans to jail thousands of radical leftists. From the “Red Man” to “Reds,” those found literally or metaphorically “off the reservation,” have been forced into captivity. Even those going “beyond the pale” by merely *thinking* “outside the box” of acceptable political discourse, have been caged—physically and otherwise. The mere threat of detention has also served to scare whole communities into staying in line.

This issue of *Press for Conversion!* looks at WWI labour camps and the narratives that justified them. Using the pretext of foreign war to wage a domestic crack down, Canadian authorities interned 8000 single, poor, urban men—mostly east Europeans. These men had, not coincidentally, already been profiled as a grave threat to the political, economic and religious status quo.

For decades before WWI, reform-minded Christians of the Social Gospel movement demonised Aboriginals, and non-western Europeans who they saw as fearsome, radicalised aliens. Social Gospellers not only supported keeping “heathens” on reserves, they ran genocidal residential schools, and rallied their flocks around Britain’s imperial wars, at home and abroad. These progressives also turned a blind eye to the political witch hunts that targeting godless socialists during Canada’s “Red Scares.”

Looking back on the mistakes of our forebears, some progressives are quick to absolve heroic activists of the past by saying that we should not use hindsight to judge history. However, there were many people in *those* times who *did* see and oppose these injustices. Even a century ago—besides the Aboriginal, Asian and African victims of the Canada Syndrome—there was a powerful movement of radical socialists, of largely Ukrainian, Finnish and Jewish heritage, who were not penned into place by the blind faith that Canada is a righteous, “Peaceable Kingdom.”

This publication explores a history of progressives who unwittingly abetted imperial programs. *Understanding and stopping such collaboration is still absolutely central to the global struggle for genuine social progress.* For example, many good well-meaning activists and NGOs are now cheerleading the UN’s “Responsibility to Protect.” Like unwitting shills building public confidence in a deadly shellgame, these progressives are helping craft humanitarian excuses for US/NATO-led wars. Backing this muscular creed, aids in formalising the age-old ploy of using fictive pretext narratives to legitimise the greedy exploits of empire. Someday, people will look back on this shameful history and say: “They should have known better.” By then it may be too late.

References/Notes

1. In a 1961 speech to Parliament about “peace-loving” NATO’s moral struggle against the evils of communism, JFK falsely attributed this quote to Edmund Burke (1729-1797). John Stuart Mill came closer to these words in 1867, saying: “Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing.”
2. *Textbook of Personality Disorders*, 2005, p.687.
3. *Report on Mental Illnesses in Canada*, Health Canada, 2002, p.71.
4. *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*, 2015, F60.2.
5. Alvin F. Poussaint, “Is Extreme Racism a Mental Illness?” *Western Journal of Medicine*, January 2002, p.4
6. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Vol.2, 1817, p.2.