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IN THE SERVICE OF PEACE: THE SYMBOLIC POWER OF PEACEKEEPING IN CANADA

*AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS OF THE CANADIAN
PEACEKEEPING MONUMENT EMBLAZONED ON THE
CANADIAN LOONIE*

SINCE CONFEDERATION, CANADA has had a complicated and, at times, contradictory relationship with the idea of peace. Its founding as a dominion in 1867 is often presented in sharp contrast with how the United States wrested independence from Great Britain. While American revolutionaries took their freedom through force, the more prudent Fathers of Confederation relied on reason, rhetoric and official institutions. These two paths to statehood are often contrasted to explain divergences in national character between the two neighbours. Sociologist Simon Langlois describes the disparate national identities this way; the United States “made a revolution that was liberal, egalitarian, rebel, and whig; the other [Canada] a counterrevolution that was conservative, authoritarian, Loyalist, and tory.”¹ Certainly, Canadians are proud of their performance in the Great Wars of the twentieth century and owe a great deal of their autonomy to how they acquitted themselves in Europe’s trenches, but it is still the idea of peace that has the tightest grasp on the Canadian psyche. In 2002, three in ten Canadians reported “peacekeeping” as the most positive contribution that Canada, as a country, makes to the world.² This national pride manifests itself in the creation and perpetuation of powerful national symbols, including the Canadian Peacekeeping Monument in Ottawa, which was embla-

¹ Simon Langlois, “Canadian Identity: A Francophone Perspective,” *Encyclopedia of Canada’s Peoples*, ed. Paul Robert Magosci (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) 327.

² Lane Anker, “Peacekeeping and Public Opinion,” *National Defense and the Canadian Forces*. National Defense, 14 July 2008. Accessed 26 September 2010 @ <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vo6/no2/public-eng.asp>

zoned on a commemorative loonie in 1995 by the Royal Canadian Mint. This loonie is the focus of my microanalysis of Canadian identity. Peacekeeping remains important to Canadians despite the declining involvement of Canada in peacekeeping operations and the fact that it continues to engage in a war in Afghanistan. Peacekeeping, for Canadians, has gained mythic status. Is the imaginative power of peacekeeping in Canadian culture anachronistic? How “Canadian” is the commemorative peacekeeping loonie really? The answer to these questions requires an interdisciplinary analysis of the power of symbols in the formation of identity. This analysis is illuminated by the work of Louis Althusser on ideology, Benedict Anderson on community, and the poet A.M Klein on identity.

The collective Canadian pride in peacekeeping no doubt stems from its involvement in the creation of the initial United Nations peacekeeping force. It was Lester B. Pearson who, during the Suez Crisis in 1956, first proposed the United Nations force from which peacekeeping evolved. The images of blue-helmeted forces monitoring international hot spots and buffer zones populated military advertising and were even featured in a once-ubiquitous “Canadian Heritage Moment.” The image most Canadians have of peacekeeping, however, is largely out of step with the shifting nature of peacekeeping. A military report attributes the psychic distinction to “an anachronistic understanding of peacekeeping [that] influences public opinion: UN missions involving blue-bereted troops monitoring buffer zones. The quandary is that the days when peacekeeping operations meant deploying static observers wearing blue berets along a cease-fire line have, for the most part, passed.”³ The image stamped on the back of the loonie of the peacekeeping monument features the typical outdated perception of international peacekeeping; three UN peacekeepers, one with binoculars monitoring some far-off situation, another attending to a communication device and another standing by. There is only one firearm on the monument. At the end of the twentieth century, Canadian forces transformed themselves from peacekeepers into warriors by necessity. A sequence of peacekeeping scandals and failures in Somalia, Rwanda, and Yugoslavia in the early nineties “cut Canadians close to the bone.”⁴ The disparity between the Canadian perception of peacekeeping and its reality is only exacerbated by the contradiction between the national pride Canadians hold for peacekeeping and its actual contribution.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Noah Richler, “And Now We Are Warriors,” *Macleans*, May 14, 2008. http://www.macleans.ca/canada/national/article.jsp?content=20080514_88208_88208

Prior to his ill-fated re-entry into Canadian politics, Michael Ignatieff did not have the most flattering things to say about Canadian peacekeeping efforts. At a speech in Ireland, Ignatieff criticized Canadians for trading on Canada's "entirely bogus reputation as peacekeepers" for forty years.⁵ Ignatieff continued to lambaste Canadians for continuing to take pride in peacekeeping: "It's disgusting in my own country, and I love my country, Canada, but they would rather bitch about their rich neighbour to the south than actually pay the note To pay the bill to be an international citizen is not something that they want to do."⁶ Ignatieff is not entirely wrong for criticizing Canada for trading on its "bogus" reputation as peacekeepers. Despite their initial role in the creation of the UN peacekeeping force, Canadian involvement with peacekeeping has dropped steadily over the decades, especially when it comes to army and police personnel. Canada now ranks fifty-fourth in the world when it comes to personnel contributions to peacekeeping; "We used to be peacekeepers, we used to have the capabilities [but] we gave them away, because people wanted hospitals and schools and roads. And God bless them, but the costs are coming in," lamented Ignatieff in 2005.⁷ It is fitting that the peacekeeping monument is stamped on a unit of currency because, despite its declining military involvement, Canada remains the eighth-largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping. Ignatieff's anger at Canadian ignorance of its actual peacekeeping contributions is palpable, but he fails to take into account the power that symbols have in creating identity and the way in which ideology manifests itself in ritual. The symbolic power of cultural touchstones is evident in the representation of coins and identity in A.M. Klein's novel *The Second Scroll*, especially when read through the lens of Louis Althusser.

The Second Scroll is a complex exploration of identity formation. The protagonist wrestles with the twin pull of his Jewish and Canadian identity. The difficult representation of identity in *The Second Scroll* is clarified by the French theorist Louis Althusser's theory of ideology and how it functions in society. Namely, that ideology is omnipresent; it exists in every representation of reality and every social practice, and all of these qualities inevitably confirm or contest a particular construction of reality. For Althusser, "all

⁵ Martin Patriquin, "'Bogus' Peacekeeping?" *Maclean's*, July 17, 2009. <http://www.macleans.ca/2009/07/17/%E2%80%98bogus%E2%80%99-peacekeeping/>

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

*ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects.*⁸ Essentially, subjects do not choose their ideology; it chooses them through the hail of ideological institutions. Klein demonstrates, in Althusserian terms, how one is hailed by ideology and incorporated into Canadian ideology. The primary way this is achieved is through imperial semiotics, especially coins. Klein's representation of coins is useful for determining how peacekeeping continues to be so important to Canadian identity despite diminishing international involvement.

Klein's novel is a quest narrative in which the young protagonist searches for his elusive Uncle Melech. The name "Melech" is, in fact, the Hebrew word for king, a moniker to which the narrator's Uncle does justice, at least at first; "the most venerable scholars, men as full of Torah as is the pomegranate of seeds, declaring that he was indeed as his name indicated, Melech, king."⁹ Meanwhile, in Canada, Melech's nephew and brother-in-law are concerned with an entirely different king, George V. Uncle Melech, at this point a Talmudic scholar, is described as apolitical and "removed from worldly matters," so much so that "he knew not to identify the countenances on coins,"¹⁰ meaning that Melech was unable to identify the faces on the official currency of the state. Coins, however, and especially the faces that appear on them are of the utmost importance to the protagonist's father. Whenever someone derides Canada or even capitalism, the country of his choice but not his birth, the narrator's father would "withdraw a coin from his pocket and point to the image thereon engraved: 'See this man, this is King George V. He looks like Czar Nicholas II. They are cousins. They wear the same beards. They have similar faces. But the one is to the other like day is to night After Nikolaichek you shouldn't even so much as whisper a complaint against this country!'"¹¹ For the narrator's father, the coin featuring the image of George V embodies his gratitude for his adopted nation and symbolizes what it has given him; "this was no cliché to my father—freedom."¹² In Althusserian terms, the coin calls out to the narrator's father and hails him; the coin says "freedom" and affirms his ideology. The same dynamic is present

⁸ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy, and other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001) 115.

⁹ A.M. Klein, *The Second Scroll* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982) 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

in the Canadian loonie emblazoned with the peace monument. Coins, like all manifestations of ideology, engineer identity as much as they reflect it.

Althusser makes the argument that “an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices.”¹³ Therefore, the performative rituals of coins and flags continually manifest ideology through action. Jacques Lacan describes this relationship between action and ideology as imaginary using Pascal’s formula for belief: “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe.”¹⁴ Ideologies are lived, as much as they are known.¹⁵ As Canadians continue to use the peacekeeping loonies in circulation, the semiotics of the coin interpellates or “hails” them into the dominant state ideology. It is no coincidence that the loonie in question was introduced in 1995 under the Liberal regime of Jean Chrétien. Given its Pearsonian origins, peacekeeping is the stuff of lore in the Liberal party and it behooved Chrétien to subtly associate himself and his party with a past glory, especially one that still carries a great deal of weight in the hearts and minds of Canadians. Whereas Klein’s characters are hailed into imperial ideology by the ideologically loaded image of King George V, present-day Canadians are interpellated in the same fashion but it is national sentiment that is entrenched and not the Empire. In short, currency has a currency beyond currency.

Given the problematic nature of Canadian peacekeeping, one might ask why Canadians would allow themselves to be perpetuators of such a hollow myth. National identity and myth are closely intertwined and national symbols assure their conveyance. It is no longer controversial in historical circles to say, as Simon Langlois does, “National identity is above all a construct.”¹⁶ Fernand Dumont defines the nation as “a grouping by reference: people are brought together in a nation through common symbolism and ideological discourse.”¹⁷ For Dumont, society is largely constructed by what it interprets itself to be. The veracity of a nation’s symbols and other points of reference are secondary to their prevalence and power. Dumont’s view of identity is enhanced by Benedict Anderson’s work on the imaginative nature of communities. Anderson writes that the nation “is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives

¹³ Althusser, 112.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (New York: Norton, 2006) 114.

¹⁵ Steven B. Smith, *Reading Althusser* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984) 129.

¹⁶ Langlois, 323.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the image of their communion Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”¹⁸ The peacekeeping loonie helps to perpetuate the image of Canada as a force for peace in the world and foster a sense of community within the nation. The truth behind that sentiment is secondary to the sense of communion created by seeing that image emblazoned on the national currency. The coin is part of a larger tapestry of shared symbolism that “is the basis for a sense of belonging that transcends divisions of class, religion, region, age, or sex and takes the form of national sentiment.”¹⁹ So, how “Canadian” is the peacekeeping loonie? Its “Canadianness” is tied to its ability to evoke national sentiment. As long as it fosters the same sense of belonging and national sentiment as that polls indicate that it does, it is as Canadian as any other image. Or, for that matter, it is as valid as the French notion of “Liberté, Égalité, et Fraternité” or the “American dream.”

On the side of the peacekeeping monument in Ottawa is the word “Reconciliation.” Even the most cursory examination of Canadian peacekeeping reveals that some kind of reconciliation between the Canadian perception of peacekeeping and its reality is necessary. Yet, perhaps peacekeeping, its monument, and its commemorative loonie have a role that transcends objectivity. Canada’s ideological discourse, like any nation, depends on its symbols—real or imagined. Without common touchstones, an identity vacuum emerges which is potentially more harmful than the half-truths told in the name of Canadian peacekeeping. Despite the anachronistic opinion Canadians hold about peacekeeping and the disparity between national pride in peacekeeping operations and Canada’s actual involvement, the peacekeeping loonie serves the higher purpose of hailing Canadians to a common ideology.

Even Canadian peacekeeping’s harshest critics recognize the importance of common reference to identity. When Michael Ignatieff became leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, his acceptance speech featured an anecdote detailing how he was saved by a Canadian peacekeeper in the former Yugoslavia. He praised Canada for being “a light unto nations ... in a world ravaged by hatred.” “The Canadian way,” he continued “[was] a way for the whole world.”²⁰ Whatever intellectual misgivings Ignatieff may have

¹⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006) 6.

¹⁹ Langlois, 323.

²⁰ Patriquin.

had in regards to Canadian peacekeeping are outweighed by the necessity of preserving the symbolic logic of Canadian identity. Identity needs symbols as much as symbols need identity. The loonie emblazoned with the peacekeeping monument remains a distinctly Canadian symbol and continues to foster a sense of belonging. While the peacekeeping monument explicitly claims to be “In the Service of Peace,” in reality, its symbolic power assures that it is, in fact, in the service of peace of mind.