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Regionalism in a Flat World

IN HIS RECENT BOOK ENTITLED *The World is Flat*, New York journalist Thomas L. Friedman offers a clarifying metaphor for the dramatic acceleration of economic globalization. He argues that the emerging Web-based playing field allows for multiple forms of collaboration around knowledge and work in real time without regard to geography, distance or even language.[1] As the new disruptive communications technology works its way instantaneously around the increasingly flat world, old verities are seriously tested and discomfort levels heighten.

The question before us in this session is the relevance of Canadian regionalism in the flat world of the 21st century. This question, in turn, begs another question – relevant to what? To our economic well-being? To our political power? To our social identity? I was prompted to ask the question of relevance when I was appointed to the Canada Research Chair in Atlantic Canada Studies at the University of New Brunswick in 2002. Why "Atlantic Canada?" I asked the same question when contracted by Oxford University Press to write a history of the Atlantic region. Canada is the only country in the world where Oxford decided to do a national history though the prism of its separate parts. "What other country's historians would conceive of creating a comprehensive narrative of their nation-state by chopping it up into its subnational components?" ask Patricia Roy and John Thompson, the authors of the Oxford volume devoted exclusively to British Columbia.[2] We need also to ask whether the regions identified by Toronto-based presses are the ones that now matter.

As free-trade agreements and political uncertainty prompt speculation about cross-border regions,[3] we bump up against the flat world that Thomas Friedman argues is upon us. Is there a regional space between the global and the "glocal" that has relevance? Our regional economic and political structures – including the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council, the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, the Council of Atlantic Premiers and the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission – have been constructed in historical time and will survive or not depending how we position them in the changing world order. We can abandon them for structures that serve us better or adapt them to meet new realities. Only someone who has been asleep for the past decade can imagine that change is unnecessary. As early as 1989, historian Ernie Forbes warned that free trade would severely strain Canada's constitutional arrangements. He noted:

1 Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York, 2005), p 8.
2 Patricia Roy and John Herd Thompson, *British Columbia: Land of Promises* (Toronto, 2005), p. 1.
3 Brian Lee Crawley, *Plugging Atlantica into the Emerging Global Network: Why the International Northeast Economic Region is the Way of the Future*, 29 May 2004, http://www.aims.ca/library/apccpei.pdf (accessed 13 July 2006); Jeremy Rifkin, "Continentalism of a Different Stripe", *The Walrus* (March 2005), pp. 37-41.

Margaret Conrad, "Regionalism in a Flat World", *Acadiensis,* XXXV, 2 (Spring 2006), pp. 138-143.

> Campaigns by regional leaders for constitutional reform succeeded only after the metropolises began to identify their economic interests with those of the hinterlands with which they were increasingly integrated. Fiscal transfers to the Atlantic Provinces dramatically improved the quality of life for the people in that region while returning benefits to the metropolises through the expanded purchase of goods and services. The question raised here is whether or not the metropolises can be expected to continue such transfers if their economic dominance is effectively challenged under free trade.[4]

The commentary from other parts of Canada in response to the recently negotiated Atlantic accords with Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador testifies to the fragility of east-west economic ties and the resultant questioning that Forbes predicted of hard-won constitutional concessions.

Despite the contention in some circles that province now means everything and that region is losing some of its relevance, political scientist Donald Savoie suggests otherwise. He stated unequivocally in 2000: "All things Canadian are now regional".[5] The June 2004 election seems to have confirmed this claim. Quebec voters favoured the Bloc Quebecois, a party dedicated to seeking national independence for their province, while the four Western provinces awarded most of their seats to a re-invented Conservative party that combines a rhetoric of Western alienation with a neo-liberal economic agenda and a neo-conservative social policy. The majority of voters in Ontario and the Atlantic provinces opted to stay with the Liberals, whose leaders moved clumsily from the centre right to the centre left in time to sustain a minority government. Nothing, if seems, foregrounds our regional identities as much as federal elections.[6]

Although Canada's physical boundaries have remained more or less firmly fixed over the past century, the contours of its geopolitical regions have shifted considerably over time. The geographically defined Prairie Provinces have recently been incorporated into a politically defined West that includes British Columbia.[7] When Newfoundland and Labrador joined Confederation in 1949, the Maritimes evolved into Atlantic Canada.[8] The empire provinces, Ontario and Quebec, differ greatly in history and culture and operate as regions in their own right, but they also constitute the region of "Central Canada" that, since 1867, has dominated the development of the nation-state. Now the largest provinces in Canada, Ontario and Quebec achieved their current boundaries only in 1912 when they doubled in size by incorporating large sections of the Northwest Territories (one need only read the

4 E.R. Forbes, "The Atlantic Provinces, Free Trade, and the Canadian Constitution", in E.R. Forbes, *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton, 1989), p. 201.

5 Donald J. Savoie, "All Things Canadian Are Now Regional", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 35, 1 (Spring 2000), pp. 203-17.

6 Lisa Young and Keith Archer, eds., *Regionalism and Party Politics in Canada* (Toronto, 2002).

7 Gerald Friesen, "Defining the Prairies: Or why the prairies don't exist", in Robert Wardhaugh, ed., *Toward Defining the Prairies: Region, Culture, History* (Winnipeg, 2001), pp. 13-28.

8 Margaret R. Conrad and James K. Hiller. *Atlantic Canada: A Region in the Making* (Toronto, 2001).

editorial pages of the *Globe* in the early months of 1912 to find that Ontario once had another perspective on the federal government sharing national resources with the provinces). The territorial North, meanwhile, was gradually whittled away after it was acquired in 1869 and was recently reconfigured with the creation of Nunavut in 1999.

Rather than calling into question the notion of region as a functional and imaginative entity, these transitions underscore the resilience of region as a bracketed space between nation and province. Regions serve an important role in the Canadian federation where powers are continuously negotiated. Without a shifting regional stage on which to play out dreams and frustrations, to forge alliances and to plot strategies, our constitutional structures would experience even more pressures than they do. Ultimately, if regional pressures become too great, the centre may not hold. In such a case, the notion of an Atlantic region, which is now defined exclusively in the context of Canada, would be up for serious negotiation. What definition of region would suit us in a world where Canada as we know it today no longer exists?

For the courageous among us, the complex and indeterminate definition of region is not a cause for alarm. Rather, it offers potential for imaginative thinking in this liminal moment in our development. Regions can be as narrowly defined as a metropolis and its immediate hinterland or as broadly defined as Atlantica (the name given to the space occupied by Newfoundland, the Maritime Provinces and the northeastern United States), North America and the North Atlantic. Theoretically, in this age of Internet communications, there is no reason for geographic regions to be defined narrowly by location. The major islands in the Atlantic region – Cape Breton, Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island – could decide to throw in their lot with the island nations of the world that currently make up over 20 per cent of the United Nation membership and are exerting their muscle in the General Assembly through the Association of Small Island States.[9] The Centre for Island Studies, located at the University of Prince Edward Island, may well be on to something important.

Clearly, regions offer a creative space in which to accommodate, contest and shape a changing world. And the phenomenon of regional initiative is not new. Take, for example, the Thirteen Colonies on the Atlantic seaboard, which, in 1763, were just a region of Great Britain's expanding North American empire. Twenty years later they were the nucleus of a nation that now dominates the world. I hasten to add that I am not counselling separation from Canada here but offering a simple reminder that nation-states are constructed in time and space and there is every reason to believe that they will continue to evolve in ways that can be shaped by human agency. Just think of what has happened in Europe in recent years. What courage it must take to throw one's lot into the European Union. And, as the foregoing suggests, change can happen very fast. In the future, Atlantic Canadians will almost certainly be required to adapt quickly to transformations in national and global templates.

The strength of Canadian regionalism is especially obvious in the Atlantic and Western provinces, both of which have a long history of intra-regional collaboration and a sturdy institutional base to support regional networking. In Atlantic Canada, the Maritime Rights movement of the 1920s served as a foundation for the post-Second

9 Godfrey Baldacchino and David Milne, eds., *Lessons from the Political Economy of Small Islands* (New York and Charlottetown, 2000).

World War collaborative effort to halt regional economic decline. The creation of the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council (APEC) in 1954 marked the beginning of an Atlantic Revolution that helped to secure a number of policy breakthroughs, including equalization formulas and various regional granting agencies – the most recent manifestation of which is the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA).[10] Interprovincial cooperation currently takes place on a broad range of policy issues, including education, procurement and transportation. In 2000 the Council of Maritime Premiers evolved into the Council of Atlantic Premiers with a renewed mandate for regional cooperation.

The Western provinces have been more successful than Atlantic Canada in giving political expression to their collaborations. In the early-20th century, Western alienation, centring around issues of tariffs, trade and resource ownership, laid the foundations for the Progressive Party that made a spectacular debut in the 1921 federal election. While interprovincial economic cooperation among the Western provinces was rare before 1960, it was encouraged by the Atlantic example and led to the creation of the Prairie Economic Council in 1965. The council was succeeded in 1973 by the Western Premiers Conference, which included British Columbia. Although provincial issues were sometimes on the agenda, the major function of the Western Premiers Conference has been to coordinate interactions with the federal government. Nevertheless, the four Western provinces have quietly negotiated interprovincial agreements on everything from Aboriginal affairs to transportation.[11] Like their Atlantic counterparts, the Western provinces have their own federal economic development fund (Western Economic Diversification Canada). The Canada West Foundation, under the presidency of Roger Gibbins, has recently launched an ambitious Building the New West project, designed to position Western Canada within the global economy.[12] If anything testifies to the power of regionalism to make a difference, it is the success of the Reform/Alliance/Conservative Party in Western Canada over the past two decades.

The Canada Research Chair that I hold is devoted to improving the capacity of the Atlantic Provinces to meet the challenges of the 21st century. What can a historian bring to such a discussion? James Miller argued persuasively in 1997 that historians need to reinsert themselves into the public policy debate and I agree with him.[13] History not only offers the perspective of the *longue durée*, but it also reminds us of values that have stood the test of time and that should not be jettisoned to satisfy the narrow interests of the moment. In his provocative book, *Age of Extremes*, Eric Hobsbawm argues that the Industrial Age was only made to serve human ends by the survival and reassertion of pre-industrial values relating to community and social cohesion, values that are again being undermined in our transition to the Information

10 Margaret Conrad, "The Atlantic Revolution of the 1950s", in Berkeley Fleming, ed., *Beyond Anger and Longing: Community and Development in Atlantic Canada* (Sackville and Fredericton, 1988), pp. 55-96.

11 Lisa Fox and Robert Roach, *Good Neighbours: An Inventory of Interprovincial Cooperation in Western Canada, 1990-2002* (Calgary, 2003).

12 Robert Roach, *Under Construction: Western Canada and the Global Economy* (Calgary, 2005).

13 J. R. Miller, "The Invisible Historian", *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* (1997), pp. 3-18.

Age.[14] Can our regional structures – and our national institutions as well – meet the current challenge of showing the world how important it is that small jurisdictions not be trampled on the road to economic globalization?

I argue that they can and that it is important, even essential, that they do. The real questions in the 21st century are not how we can keep the stock market spiralling upward or how rich we can get individually, but rather how we can sustain cooperative and healthy communities everywhere around the world. Our experience of working together in Atlantic Canada to address the inequities of an unrestrained liberal order, historian Ian McKay tells us, is one of "the region's defining historical characteristics".[15] Such a perspective is no less needed today than it was a century ago.

Canada's east-west ties, organized around the land and climate, the fur trade and railroad, and, for the last 138 years, federal-provincial relations, may well be weakening, but our need for social cohesion and sustainable communities is as strong as ever. Since some of the greatest challenges to regional well-being come from a collective failure to achieve integration across social, economic and environmental dimensions, it is important that we continue to build on our regional institutional collaborations. On matters as diverse as Aboriginal policy, anglophone-francophone relations, economic development, environmental integrity, gender equality, workplace policies, immigration, legislative democracy and social welfare, closer collaboration among the Atlantic provinces could well yield important benefits.

In a recent article in the *Literary Review of Canada,* Roger Gibbins argued that it was time for Alberta to "abandon the litany of regional discontent, putting aside the past grievances and turning resolutely to the future, perhaps in partnership with other Western Canadian and territorial governments" and "get on with building the best place to live and prosper in North America".[16] People in Western Canada may well bring to this project more population, wealth and resources than we do in Atlantic Canada, but the same challenge lies before us and, if we find the right solution, it could well serve as a model for areas of the world that cannot easily aspire to being another Western Canada.

Shortly before his death in 1980, David Alexander wrote an important article entitled "New Notions of Happiness: Nationalism, Regionalism, and Atlantic Canada". In it he offered a stinging critique of the emerging neo-liberal agenda and Ottawa's reluctance to take responsibility for regional underdevelopment and sustainable economic activity. For Alexander, the best way to address the economic and social challenges facing Canadian citizens was a national strategy – *not* a provincial or regional one.[17] Although his arguments fell largely on deaf ears, his comments are still pertinent. In our globalized society we are all in it together, but the way we position ourselves in the new world order is indeed up for negotiation. The critical question before Atlantic Canadians now, as it has been in the past, is this: How

14 Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London, 1995).

15 Ian McKay, "A Note on 'Region' in Writing the History of Atlantic Canada", *Acadiensis*, XXIX, 2 (Spring 2000), p. 100.

16 Roger Gibbins, "The Rich Kid: Where does Alberta fit in the Canadian family now", *Literary Review of Canada*, 13, 4 (May 2005), pp. 3-5.

17 David G. Alexander, "New Notions of Happiness: Nationalism, Regionalism, and Atlantic Canada", in Eric W. Sager, Lewis R. Fischer and Stuart O. Pierson, eds., *Atlantic Canada and Confederation: Essays in Canadian Political Economy* (Toronto, 1983), pp. 79-100.

do we balance the often conflicting and ever-evolving geopolitical contexts – individual, local, provincial, regional, national, imperial, continental and global – that inform our condition with our social identities, including those built on understandings of class, ethnicity, gender and race? And how do we bring the economic and social networks that operate outside of the formal ones, what Rosemary Ommer and Nancy Turner describe as the practices developed in our "informal rural economies", back into the mainstream in both rural and urban as well as developed and underdeveloped areas of our region, our nation and our world?[18]

Living on the edge of a great country and a great continent, people in the Atlantic Provinces have developed a deep longing for economic justice and a growing capacity for interprovincial collaboration. Our voluntary collaborations remind us, perhaps even more than formal federal-provincial arrangements do, that we have agency. In the past, the loose-jointed nature of the Canadian federal system offered us spaces to imagine and negotiate better futures. It is time, once more, to bring our imaginations and negotiating skills to the table.

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18 Rosemary Ommer and Nancy J. Turner, "Informal Rural Economies in History", *Labour/Le travail*, 53 (Spring 2004), pp. 127-57.