From New Peoples to New Nations: Aspects of Métis History and Identity from the Eighteenth to Twenty-First Centuries

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From New Peoples to New Nations: Aspects of Métis History and Identity from the Eighteenth to Twenty-First Centuries by Gerhard J. Ens and Joe Sawchuk. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. xii+687pp. $48.95 paperback.

As a Métis undergraduate student at a large eastern Canadian university in the late 1990s, I would have been enthralled by this book. At a time when the key synthetic history of the Métis in English was George Woodcock's translation of Marcel Giraud's two-volume Le Métis canadien (1986, originally published in 1945) and the most up-to-date historical approach was represented by Gerhard Ens's Homeland to Hinterland (1996), this book would have made a tremendous impact not only in terms of its size but also in terms of its scope and its intent.

One aspect that would have appealed to me is the range and scope of the authors' analysis. Over the five parts of the book, covering eighteen chapters, Ens (a historian) and Sawchuk (an anthropologist) address hybridity, ethnogenesis, the emergence and development of the Métis Nation, the Manitoba Act, scrip, treaty, the impact of the American border, and the emergence of Métis settlements (largely prepared by the former), as well as political developments in Alberta and Saskatchewan, the impacts of social scientific research, the development of political and cultural identities, the Métis of Ontario and the Northwest Territories, and current uses of Métis history (largely prepared by the latter) (9). Their research is extensive and detailed, drawing on primary sources and interviews in addition to secondary sources, although they note that they were unable to address certain issues beyond "origins, changing identities, politics, and the growth of the 'Nation' concept," or to include certain regions, such as British Columbia or Quebec (8).

Another aspect that I would have found fascinating is their combination of detailed historical research with insights drawn from social theory. They have deployed an extensive scholarly apparatus, with 116 pages of notes and a twenty-nine-page bibliography, which includes key theoretical thinkers of the last quarter of the twentieth century (such as Benedict Anderson, Frederick Barth, Jean Baudrillard, Homi Bhabba, Dipesh Chakrabarty, James Clifford, John and Jean Comaroff, Andre Gunder Frank, Ernest Gellner, Ian Hacking, Anthony D. Smith, James Tully, and Robert J. C. Young). Ens and Sawchuk want to write Métis history and historical experiences into broader currents of thought, arguing that Métis experiences can be understood in terms of wider social phenomena, including theoretical approaches to what they see as the flexibility of ethnicity and identity (381), and can be used to "test and illustrate the boundaries of all current theories on ethnicity and nation-building" (382).

However, challenges arise as the specific implications of their analytical framework emerge, as in their discussion of the issue of ethnogenesis, which underlies their approach throughout the book. Writing about their approach to questions of history, nationhood, and nationalism, they state that

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> [o]ur analyses of these phenomena differ from almost all other works of Métis historiography. From the early twentieth century until the very recent past, most historians have adopted a view of Métis ethnicity and nationality that can best be described as "primordialist"—that is, the view that these formations (ethnicity and nation) are determined by prior "givens" such as kinship, descent, language, religion, race, and custom and are "largely immune to rational interest and political calculation" [quoting Anthony D. Smith's *The Nation in History*]. This book is, to a significant degree, a debate with this kind of Métis primordialism, which we feel is unable to account for historical changes in Métis ethnicity and the variability of religious, linguistic, and cultural attributes within Métis communities. (6)

They classify their analysis as instrumentalist (that is, "an approach that sees ethnicity and the rise of nationalism as situational and strategic: a product of politics and the manipulation of resources by individuals and elites" [7]) and constructionist (that is, "an approach that sees the Métis Nation as a social construct rather than as something natural or primordial" [7]).

Ens and Sawchuk justify their focus on labour and economics "not because the cultural or kinship aspects of Métis identity are unimportant, but because it was the fur trade economy that created the social and economic space wherein a distinct culture and identity could develop" (65). Given their assumption that "primordialism" cannot account for change, they identify outside factors that influenced the emergence and development of Métis identity and communities at various points, such as the fur trade (28), scrip (132, 155), the denigration of the French language in the West (113, even if that would be jettisoned after World War II [155]), social scientific research (ch. 13), or constitutional politics (514).

The outcome is a narrative that emphasizes discontinuity, as seen in their assertions that "Métis is very much a modern concept" (380), or that "[e]ach generation recreates what it means to be Métis" (507), or that "the ethnic boundaries of the Métis have shifted considerably in the last fifty years" (361), or that

> [i]t might be assumed that after the constitutional recognition of the Métis as an Aboriginal people in 1982 and the various court decisions that have naturalized and defined the rights of the Métis, the reformulation of Métis identities and ethnicities would coalesce into a more stable essence. Our analysis above suggests the opposite: an *ongoing* Métis ethnogenesis, fuelled by national and global economic and political forces. (514)

On the one hand, there are elements of truth in these statements: Métis identity is a concept that continues to be salient in modern times, identity and belonging need to be revitalized by every new generation, and Métis expressions and understandings of our identity continue to respond to both internal and external factors. The story could just as easily have been one of continuity, if Métis perspectives were taken seriously and allowed to shape the authors' analysis and their narrative, based on questions such as "Who claims you?" and "How will your ancestors recognize you?"

On the other hand, these are not the aspects that Ens and Sawchuk emphasize. Instead, their analysis is constructed to support assertions such as, "[A]lthough today's Métis share the same name as the 'New Nation' of the nineteenth century, have appropriated some of its history, and are at least partially rooted in past conceptions of 'Métisness,' the modern group has a very different make-up and political awareness than the ancestral group it supposedly descended from" (380). While they situate their work by stating that the previous general histories of the Métis, from the middle of the twentieth century, were "rife with ethnocentric judgments and assumptions that the days of the Métis People were in the past" and did not offer "any sustained account of Métis history in the twentieth century" (8), they go on to argue that "the Métis's [*sic*] interpretation of their past and their use of the past to explain their present do not always correspond with historians' or other academics' interpretations, leading to the question of what is or is not an 'authentic' representation of the past" (490), although they do not explicate the implications they ascribe to this assertion. While they argue for the need to uncover the social, political, and economic contexts of historical actions and events, they remain silent about the contexts of their work and their relation both these contexts and to wider discussions about Métis history and identity, whether in communities or in the courts. In the end, they do not explicitly justify why this book needed to be written at this time, and why they needed to be the people to write it.

In the time since I was an undergraduate student, there has been a tremendous growth in Métis scholarship by Métis researchers, in both historical (e.g., Heather Devine, Brenda Macdougall, Nicole St-Onge) and contemporary (e.g., Jennifer Adese, Chris Andersen, Adam Gaudry, Daniel Voth) fields. While Ens and Sawchuk engage with some of these scholars, they do so as historical sources among others, and not as specifically Métis perspectives on Métis experiences and histories. Given the extent and depth of their research, I am left to wonder what such an undertaking would look like written from a Métis perspective, one that starts from and takes seriously Métis perspectives on and representations of our histories and experiences, or even one that does not rule out as a first move the explanatory potential of such factors as "kinship, descent, language, religion … and custom," the very factors that our ancestors and Elders tell us are central to our identity as Métis. In this sense, the work of Ens and Sawchuk has perhaps the most value as a historical artefact—as an example and compendium of the stories Canadians tell about Métis, and as an impetus to Métis scholars to work together, to write more, and to do the hard work of crafting synthetic histories.

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