

Charles Taylor, Recognition and Agrarian Identity in Western Canada

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to highlight the manner by which current financial challenges facing small-scale farming operations throughout rural Western Canada represent a significant threat to a distinct cultural community and thus requires an immediate response from both levels of government designed to stem this threat and preserve this community. The theoretical framework of this study is provided by the philosophy of Charles Taylor. Specifically, I focus on his work regarding the intrinsic nature of the community in relation to the individual and the subsequent commitment to preserve local or cultural communities in the face of market driven policies within the public sphere. This commitment is founded upon Taylor's specific argument regarding the ontology of the human subject, an argument which makes clear the foundational role the cultural community plays with regard to the identity formation of the individual. Furthermore, it is this foundational role played by the cultural community which often requires recognition from the larger, national community in order to maintain the allegiance of the individual. This is an assertion that clearly has implications for a pluralistic society such as Canada and is often referred to by those, like Taylor, who argue for the need to recognize the distinct cultural communities which make-up Canada, such as the Quebecois, the First Nations and more recently, the various immigrant groups which are dispersed throughout this country. It is through this angle, this commitment to recognize local cultural communities, that I engage Taylor's work and introduce a collective identity not often mentioned within Canadian "recognition" discourse, that of the rural agricultural West. It is my contention that there does exist a distinct agrarian collective identity in Western Canada, and further, such a community is facing economic challenges which are threatening its persistence, perhaps even existence. Not only does the contemporary decline of small-scale rural agriculture represent a significant threat to the foundational community of agrarian individuals, it also highlights the need for this group to be "recognized" in a way that promotes a strengthened attachment to Canada as a whole.

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Introduction

Charles Taylor, in a subtle yet compelling observation, once remarked that “modern society, we might say, is Romantic in its private and imaginative life and utilitarian or instrumentalist in its public, effective life.”¹ Of course, what he was referring to was the manner by which individuals in the modern West seem to have been captured by, and thus structure their personal lives around, romantic notions such as self-fulfillment, self-expression, and perhaps even more so, by the idea of being authentic whereas the public sphere has become dominated by the norms of instrumental rationality whereby public institutions and actions are governed more and more by the utilitarian ideals of efficiency and production. For Taylor, this division between the public and private, especially along the romantic and utilitarian lines, has been a historical progression. Indeed, one of the central themes running throughout all his scholarship has been the importance of understanding modernity through a genealogical framework which makes explicit the ways in which certain ideas have evolved from ancient understandings and have come to constitute, in a significant way, modern life.

The reasons behind this contemporary division, and most importantly for this study, the growth of the utilitarian public sphere, are made clear by Taylor through his work regarding the genealogy of the “self.” Specifically, Taylor traces the manner by which much contemporary liberal political thought has developed a conception of the self that is very individualistic and thus overlooks the intrinsically valuable role played by social attachments in the life of the individual. It is this intellectual foundation that has

¹ Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 71.

spurred the popularity of social theory which treats the community as instrumental rather than intrinsic and hence subtly encourages the individual “freedom” associated with the market economy to override concerns related to the preservation of communities within the political realm. This line of argument has been echoed by a number of intellectuals including Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, Alasdair MacIntyre and Amitai Etzioni, a group now considered the leading voices in a counter-liberal movement dubbed “communitarianism.” However, as Ruth Abbey has argued, it is far too simplistic to label Taylor an “anti-liberal” thinker for much of his philosophy has attempted to push the boundaries of liberal thought, to question “which aspects of this rich and complex tradition are to be preserved and which left behind – and why.”² Thus Taylor’s approach to the modern separation between romantic private and utilitarian public life is not driven by nostalgia nor by a knee-jerk negativity but rather represents a nuanced appreciation of the multitude of ideas that have led to the development of modernity. It is this sensitivity that allows Taylor to criticize certain liberal attempts to downplay the status of the community to the level of instrumentality while, at the same time, devoting a significant portion of his social theory to the problem of maintaining a peaceful coexistence between differing collectivities within society in a manner that agrees with basic liberal notions of human rights. Therefore, as Philip Resnick notes, Taylor’s work as a whole represents a “potential reconciliation” between modernity and traditional notions of community.³

² Ruth Abbey, “Charles Taylor as a Postliberal Theorist of Politics,” in Arto Laitinen and Nicholas H. Smith, ed., *Acta Philosophica Fennica: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Charles Taylor*, Vol. 71, 2002, 151.

³ Philip Resnick, “Charles Taylor and Modernity,” in *Twenty-First Century Democracy*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 138.

As we shall see, implicit in Taylor's view regarding the intrinsic value of the community in relation to the individual is a commitment to preserve local or cultural communities in the face of market driven policies within the public sphere. This commitment is founded upon Taylor's specific argument regarding the ontology of the human subject, an argument which makes clear the foundational role the cultural community plays with regard to the identity formation of the individual. Furthermore, it is this foundational role played by the cultural community which often requires recognition from the larger, national community in order to maintain the allegiance of the individual. This is an assertion that clearly has implications for a pluralistic society such as Canada and is often referred to by those, like Taylor, who argue for the need to recognize the distinct cultural communities which make-up Canada, such as the Quebecois, the First Nations and more recently, the various immigrant groups which are dispersed throughout this country. It is through this angle, this commitment to recognize local cultural communities, that I engage Taylor's work and introduce a collective identity not often mentioned within Canadian "recognition" discourse, that of the rural agricultural West. It is my contention that there does exist a distinct agrarian collective identity in Western Canada, and further, such a community is facing economic challenges which are threatening its persistence, perhaps even existence. Not only does the contemporary decline of small-scale rural agriculture represent a significant threat to the foundational community of agrarian individuals, it also highlights the need for this group to be "recognized" in a way that promotes a strengthened attachment to Canada as a whole.

Within this argument I introduce the term foundational community. It is based largely on Taylor's work regarding the relationship between the community and the individual although he never uses the term directly. As will be greatly expanded upon shortly, a central conclusion Taylor draws is that individuals are introduced to the languages of moral discernment and therefore a sense of "the good," by those around them, their "significant others."⁴ Further, it is the acquisition of this language which enables individuals to interact with the languages of others who have been raised in a different environment. Thus, the articulation of one's own authentic sense of "the good," requires first an introduction to the moral languages of their cultural community and second, a process of moral articulation in light of the eventual encounters one has with the differing languages present in the larger world. However, it is crucial to understand that such a process is dependent on the initial introduction of moral languages offered by the cultural community from which one comes and the manner by which this language engages us in a lifelong dialogue which affects our moral articulations. The source of this language is the foundational community. It is, in the words of Taylor, "where we are coming from. As such it is the background against which our tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations make sense."⁵ Certainly there exists no universal formula which provides the characteristics necessary for a community to be considered foundational for each of us encounters a diverse array of language acquisition sources, each bound up in our memberships in multiple partial communities differentiated by class, gender,

⁴ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 33.

⁵ Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Philosophical Arguments*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 231.

ethnicity or simply taste. However, it remains true “that each (individual) identity is unique and needs to be realized within the horizon of a language, a culture.”⁶

This paper proceeds in two parts. Part one provides an overview of Taylor’s philosophy in regard to the community I describe as foundational. The overall goal is to highlight the vital role foundational communities play in the life of the individual and clarify an implicit argument aimed at preserving said communities. This is accomplished by discussing Taylor’s ontological account of the human subject and further, the manner by which this translates into his political theory, most especially his work regarding the importance of recognizing collective identities in a pluralistic society. The theoretical argument is clarified by discussing Taylor’s views towards the Quebecois within Canada. Part two operates within the theoretical framework provided by the preceding discussion of Taylor’s political theory. Its central purpose is to present the rural agricultural West as a distinct collective identity and thus foundational community. This is done by focusing on the unique nature of the most prevalent occupation, farming, the distinct style of community which has developed and the manner by which the “rural” identity interacts with that of the “urban.” In addition, the paper presents an overview of the current economic threats to agricultural communities and the manner in which they have challenged the persistence of the agrarian identity in a way that has not only lessened the cohesion of local communities but also has led to an increased sense of alienation from the nation as a whole. The section will conclude with a discussion of potential policy options which could assist the preservation of this foundational community. The

⁶Charles Taylor, “From Philosophical Anthropology to the Politics of Recognition: An Interview with Charles Taylor,” in *Thesis Eleven*, Number 52, February 1998, 109.

conclusion of this paper will provide a succinct restatement of the overall argument and briefly consider some critiques aimed at Taylor's work regarding the preservation of cultural communities in light of the specific case I have introduced, that of the rural agricultural West.

Part I: Charles Taylor and the Preservation of “Foundational Communities”

As previously mentioned, the overall goal of this section will be to draw out and make explicit the links between a number of wide ranging philosophical arguments presented over Taylor’s academic career which, when traced to their completion, amount to a significant and impressively thorough account of the role played by foundational communities in the lives of individual human agents. This investigation will proceed in three parts. The first section will provide an overview of what Taylor deems to be the intellectual foundations of modern understandings of the human subject or the “self” and relate them to his own view of human subjectivity. The second section will make clear the manner by which Taylor uses his theory of human subjectivity as a foundation from which he can argue for the intrinsic nature of the community. Further, the political ramifications of such a conclusion will be highlighted in a manner that makes clear the contrast between Taylor’s theory and much modern liberal political thought. It is through this comparison one can truly grasp the nature of Taylor’s theory in regards to the actual preservation of existing local communities. Finally, the third section will briefly examine the concrete case of Quebec as an example of a community in need of preservation in light of Taylor’s writing on the subject. It is my hope that, taken together, these three sections will provide a thorough theoretical foundation from which to argue for the preservation of another specific Canadian community, that of the rural, agricultural West.

Taylor and The Human Subject

Perhaps the most original contention advanced by Taylor regarding the philosophical anthropology of man, his central claim about the human subject, is the

assertion that one's identity, one's self-understanding, is related in an important way to their sense of the good. Although a complex notion in itself, I believe it would be a mistake to overlook the long path Taylor travels upon before reaching this conclusion regarding identity formation. It is clear for Taylor that any political theory of autonomy, of rights, of obligations, must evolve from a substantial theory of the human subject and it is the purpose of this section to outline his theory of human subjectivity. However, such a picture would be incomplete without also highlighting the competing understandings of the human subject present within modernity, which, for Taylor, are inadequate, and ultimately serve as the foil for his own theory of human subjectivity. The inclusion of these opposing understandings is significant because it is Taylor's assertion that they act as the intellectual foundations of much modern liberal political thought which, ultimately, he seeks to critique. Thus, in nearly all his scholarship, Taylor couches his conclusions within a framework of competing notions in such a way that purports both to explain the evolution of modern thought as well as offer alternative theoretical understandings and the political implications of such. This approach "aims to establish, not that some position is correct absolutely, but rather that some position is superior to some other. It is concerned, covertly or openly, implicitly or explicitly, with comparative propositions."⁷ It is by the method that Taylor approaches his most central topic, the philosophical anthropology of humanity and the manner by which contradicting ideas regarding the self have evolved throughout history.

The most enduring critique offered by Taylor within this genealogical and comparative framework is that of the "disengaged self," and the manner by which such a

⁷ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 72.

thesis has become a central pillar within modern thought surrounding human subjectivity. It was Augustine, according to Taylor, who laid the foundations of this thesis by way of his assertion that to know God required a “turn inward.” The implications of this “inwardness” was the introduction of, in Taylor’s words, a stance of radical reflexivity, the belief that we can “become aware of our awareness, try to experience our experiencing, focus on the way the world is *for us*.⁸ This belief was furthered by the philosophy of Rene Descartes. The famous dualist account of man espoused by Descartes demanded the subject “disengage himself or herself from embodied and social thinking, from prejudices and authority, and [thus] is able to think for himself in a disengaged fashion.”⁹ This, philosophically, represented a significant departure from the traditional, platonic inspired understanding of the self as belonging to an order outside of himself or herself. Descartes had introduced the monological subject, the self which was capable of “separation from ourselves through self-objectification.”¹⁰ Running parallel to this strikingly new explanation of self-understanding was a conception of reason or rationality which overtook the traditional. The modern notion of reason, beginning with Descartes, emphasizes procedure: “reason is not the faculty in us which connects us to an order of things in the universe which itself can be called rational. Rather, reason is that faculty whereby we think properly... [it] involves a careful scrutiny by thinking of its own processes.”¹¹ Of course, these changes in understanding, inspired by Descartes, laid the foundation for the European Enlightenment and what we now refer to as the Scientific

⁸ Ibid, 130.

⁹ Charles Taylor, “The Dialogical Self,” in D. Hiley, J. Bohman, and R. Shusterman, ed., *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 304-305.

¹⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 175.

¹¹ Charles Taylor, “Lichtung or Lebensform” Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein,” in *Philosophical Arguments*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 64.

Revolution. The “disengaged self” thesis can, according to Taylor, be traced into modernity through the thought of John Locke and his followers who “develop a view of the subject and his formation in which in principle everything is, as it were, up for grabs, susceptible in principle of being shaped in the direction desired.”¹² Implicit in this modern understanding of the self is an original conception of personal autonomy which conceives the human subject as self-defining, capable of discovering purpose within themselves. Underlying these understandings is a commitment to a certain epistemological theory, either classical Cartesian or empiricist, which, at its foundation, argues “a person is a being with consciousness, where consciousness is seen as a power to frame representations of things.”¹³ In other words, knowledge has its basis in “bits” or “representations” which can be “processed” by the human mind.

Admittedly, the above synthesis is an oversimplification but for our purposes will be sufficient for the reader to grasp two important points Taylor makes regarding the impact this understanding of the self and rationality has had on modernity. First, he claims that such an understanding, along with the corresponding epistemological commitments, have made deep inroads into modern social sciences, resulting in intellectual approaches grounded in:

The ideal of the disengaged self, capable of objectifying not only the surrounding world but also his own emotions and inclinations, fears and compulsions, and achieving thereby a kind of distance and self-possession which allows him to act ‘rationally.’¹⁴

¹² Charles Taylor, “The Moral Topography of the Self,” in S. Messer, L. Sass, and R. Woolfolk, ed., *Hermeneutics and Psychological Theory*, (London: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 309.

¹³ Charles Taylor, “The Concept of a Person,” in *Human Agency and Language*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 98.

¹⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 21.

The result has been the proliferation of “neutral” explanations of the self based in methodological individualism within the social sciences, including the popular rational choice theory. Second, and perhaps more importantly, this understanding of the self is directly connected to the rise of “atomist” political thought, which Taylor argues, acts as a foundation for much contemporary liberal “procedural” political theory. This point will be addressed more fully in due course but what should be clear is that Taylor traces most modern philosophical and political thought in regards to human subjectivity back to the disengaged self thesis espoused by the epistemological writings of Augustine, Descartes and Locke. The significance of this evolution lies in Taylor’s assertion that the disengaged thesis “stands in the way of a richer and more adequate understanding of what the human sense of self is really like, and hence of a proper understanding of the real variety of human culture, and hence of a knowledge of human beings.”¹⁵ Thus, the actual starting point of Taylor’s own work is the notion that the disengaged self is in some form inadequate as a foundation for understanding the self, and further, modern thought grounded on this mistaken premise has therefore produced inaccurate conclusions regarding the nature of the self and his or her relation to the community in which he or she resides.

What Taylor presents as an alternative to this strain of misguided modern thought is framed within his most basic claim in terms of philosophical anthropology. Specifically, the attempt to explain the human subject in terms of the disengaged view is inaccurate because such an approach fails to grant the “embodied” nature of the human

¹⁵ Taylor, “The Dialogical Self,” 307.

agent. This is an assertion couched within the phenomenological and hermeneutic schools which had such a strong influence on his theory. The primary works he draws upon are those by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, all thinkers who “tried to get out of the cul-de-sac of monological consciousness... [because they viewed] the agent, not primarily as the locus of representations, but as engaged in practices, as beings who act in and on a world.”¹⁶

For Taylor, the most prominent explanation and defense of the human subject as embodied is found within the work of Merleau-Ponty. It was he who stressed “the subject is in a world which is a field of meanings for him, and thus inseparably so, because these meanings are what make him the subject he is.”¹⁷ In other words, the subject’s life is one structured at the ontological level by layers of meaning in such a way that makes the world “non-indifferent” for us. That is, “features of this world have meaning for an agent because he has purposes, goals, aspirations, and because they touch him in various ways.”¹⁸ To assert the world is structured by meaning is at once a simple and complex notion. At the most basic level Taylor, following Merleau-Ponty, is drawing the reader’s attention to the manner by which the actions or thoughts of the human subject, motivated by some desire or purpose, are connected in a fundamental way to what they deem as meaningful or of value. As an agent, the subject, within this world (or field of meaning), is free to act but this is only so because of our capacity for perceiving what is meaningful, or has value, in this world we are engaged in.

¹⁶ Ibid, 308.

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, “Embodied Agency,” in H. Pietersma, ed., *Merleau-Ponty: Critical Essays*, (Washington: University Press of America, 1989), 2.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Clearly, not all actions taken by human subjects are as simple as those motivated by simple biological values, such as our desire for nourishment. In more complex cases, the value in the action may not be as clear therefore it requires an interpretation by the subject to fully understand what is meaningful in this or that action or thought. Thus, it is by way of our perceptive capacities that we engage with this world or, more precisely, it is through perception that we may interpret this world and our potential to act within it. Therefore “we perceive the world...through our capacities to act in it,” and these capacities to act are inseparable from our interpretation of their meaning.¹⁹.

The above synthesis of Merleau-Ponty’s work is certainly somewhat abstract but it becomes far more accessible when the focus is narrowed to this notion of interpreting meaning. The necessity of interpretation in the human life and its subsequent role in framing our own sense of self is the foundation for Taylor’s conclusion, following Heidegger, that humans are self-interpreting animals. That is, as agents engaged in this world, the interpretation of what is meaningful directly motivates our actions and therefore is constitutive of what we, in fact, are. The human subject’s identity is thus interpretation-dependent. However, to truly grasp what is entailed in this practice of interpretation is to understand the vital role of both experience and language. Consider the following statement by Taylor:

If you want to discriminate more finely what it is about human beings that makes them worthy of respect, you have to call to mind what it is to feel the claim of human suffering, or what is repugnant about injustice, or the awe you feel at the fact of human life.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid, 5.

²⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 8.

Of course, the key notion within this passage is the need to recall a “feeling” of human suffering, or the repugnance of justice or the awe of human life. The point Taylor intends to stress is that understanding a “feeling” or an emotion is tied up in our interpretations of what is meaningful and this demands some type of lived experience but also some grasp of the language involved. This sounds simplistic, but it is Taylor’s contention that much modern epistemological thought founded on the “disengaged self” thesis fails to account for the constitutive role played by experience and language in regards to human emotion, or further, understanding meaning as motivation. It is the important role emotions play in the human life that Taylor deems to fall outside of this framework of explanation.

Consider the emotion of shame, a topic Taylor is fond of referring to when seeking to enunciate this point. This is an emotion dependent on experience for “the very account of what shame means involves references to things – like our sense of dignity, of worth, of how we are seen by others – which are essentially bound up in the life of a subject of experience.”²¹ Thus, to “feel” shame in this case would depend on our understanding of human worth, and this understanding only makes sense in a world “in which there is a subject for whom things have certain emotional meanings” and these meanings are not simply implanted in our consciousness but rather require an interpretation through our experience.²² Thus, “we should treat our deepest moral instincts, our ineradicable sense that the human life is to be respected, as our mode of

²¹ Charles Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” in *Human Agency and Language*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 54.

²² Ibid, 53.

access to the world in which ontological claims are discernable and can be rationally argued about and sifted.”²³

Clearly, to understand an emotion is also to grasp the linguistic meaning of the word. While traditional, designative theories of language, which Taylor associates with the Cartesian and empiricist accounts of the human mind, have no trouble conceding this point, they fail to capture the way in which language is not only used by humans to label thoughts but also, in an important sense, actually constitute these thoughts. Taylor draws on the work of Johann Gottfried von Herder, a philosopher who articulates an original way of thinking about language and meaning which moves beyond the designative or instrumental approach, to make this point.²⁴ Specifically, Herder points to a “semantic” dimension of language which operates independent of the more basic “designative” dimension within which words get their meaning when used to designate objects. Within this semantic dimension, one moves beyond simple designation and into the realm of expression by articulating a feeling or evoking the appropriate mood with the use of language. But further, within this dimension, “linguistic beings are capable of new feelings which affectively reflect their richer sense of their world: not just anger, but indignation; not just desire, but love and admiration.”²⁵ This is a crucial point. Language, according to this view, is not simply something that humans use to label things, but more, it is an avenue of expression and when humans *express* they are not only labeling but also articulating and *creating*. This creation through expression is a

²³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 8.

²⁴ See Charles Taylor, “The Importance of Herder,” in *Philosophical Arguments*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 79-99.

²⁵ Charles Taylor, “Heidegger, Language, and Ecology,” in *Philosophical Arguments*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 105.

new feeling, a new understanding of meaning, of the value that exists for us in this world. Thus, as self-interpreting animals, as beings in some sense constituted by our interpretations of the meaning which exists for us in this word, language plays an indispensable role for “one of the principal features of language is that it allows us to be in the world, and engaged with it, in otherwise inaccessible ways.”²⁶

Having established the indispensable role of both experience and language in the practice of interpretation, Taylor’s claim that the human subject is constituted in some way by the interpretation of meaning may still seem unclear. Specifically, this notion of meaning existing in the world which requires interpretation by the subject is, at this point, quite ambiguous. Clarification of this idea requires a discussion of Taylor’s work surrounding “inescapable frameworks” and the practice of making “qualitative distinctions” throughout one’s life time. Quite simply, to interpret meaning is to recognize a framework that human subjects operate within which influences their moral judgments. Taylor writes: “to think, feel, judge within such a framework is to function with a sense that some action, or mode of life, or mode of feeling is incomparably higher than the others which are more readily available to us.”²⁷ That is, all human subjects are guided in their thought and action by a standard outside of themselves which ranks competing ends or goods has higher or lower, as being more or less worthwhile. That is what it means to claim the world is structured by layers of meaning which the human subject is constantly interpreting. Furthermore, the manner by which humans define themselves, how they come to understand their identity, is unequivocally linked to one’s

²⁶ Taylor, “Embodied Agency,” 11.

²⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 19.

sense of this framework of meaning. One's identity is more than a name and genealogy, it is "defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or impose."²⁸ This is one of Taylor's most central claims; one's identity is constituted in important ways by one's own sense of the good, and the act of articulating these frameworks of meaning is that of strong evaluation.

What is most controversial, I think, about Taylor's account of identity formation is certainly not the connection he draws between one's identity and one's sense of what is good or worthwhile. Rather, the disagreement lies within the parallel claim made by Taylor that the individual comes to understand what is good by way of interpreting a framework of meaning which exists outside the human subject. Surely, this is the exact opposite view of those grounded in the modern disengaged thesis. To be disengaged implies the ability of the subject to think independently, rationally, and come to conclusions regarding what is worthy without outside interference, much the same way man is capable of working out his more basic preferences. This understanding corresponds to the conception of autonomy developed in the seventeenth century which conceives of the human subject as self-defining. This divergence of views represents the crux of the issue between those who espouse the disengaged view and those who argue man is embodied. For Taylor, it is impossible to define one's identity without reference to a framework which exists independent of the subject's will for "your feeling a certain way can never be sufficient grounds for respecting your position, because your feeling

²⁸ Ibid, 27.

can't determine what is significant."²⁹ That is, there must exist a background by which we measure our actions. If this does not exist, no action can ever be labeled significant because there exists no yardstick which could be used to compare it against any other action. One choice is as good as any other. The choice to eat ice cream is as worthwhile as the choice to feed those in poverty because each was a choice made by the human subject. The point is:

Unless some options are more significant than others, the very idea of self-choice falls into triviality and hence incoherence. Self-choice as an ideal makes sense only because some issues are more significant than others...Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial.³⁰

To grasp this point is to grasp the existence of frameworks of meaning which are necessarily independent of the will of the human subject. However, Taylor is careful not to imply the existence of one single framework for there can be, as the above passage specifies, a number of different demands or standards one may live by, so long as they are beyond the self. However, this admission does nothing to change the fundamental message: the various actions and thoughts of the human subject are guided by his interpretations of these frameworks. The significance of this conclusion should be clear. If the human subject is embodied, is bound up in this world containing frameworks of meaning which, through our interpretive capacities, guide our thoughts and actions and therefore constitute in some important sense, who and what we are, it is utterly impossible to understand the richness of the human subject when treating the self as

²⁹ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 37.

³⁰ Ibid, 39-40.

disengaged, as an independent object appropriate to study like any other object within the natural world. This is precisely the mistake made by many modern thinkers who have constructed their own images of the self which fail to acknowledge these frameworks of meaning and explain the human subject in ways which do not correspond to either the subjects real experiences or the manner by which the use of language can create new feelings thereby playing a constitutive role in the life of the subject.

Language, Community and Diversity: Taylor's Political Theory

In some pretty explicit ways, the preceding section moved in a direction away from, rather than closer to, the topic of politics. However, one of the most important points Taylor seeks to make throughout his scholarship is that the incoherencies evident in much modern political thought are a result of contemporary thinkers simply taking the disengaged thesis of the self for granted. In other words, having established a picture of the human subject as embodied, as a self-interpreting animal, Taylor has no choice but to approach the issue of politics in a very different manner. It is from this ontological foundation that Taylor's political philosophy proceeds and the most specific difference between Taylor's view of the human subject and those thinkers grounded in the disengaged view is the manner by which the individual is related to the community. In particular, Taylor asserts the community is not simply of instrumental value to the subject but rather it is intrinsic, it constitutes the subject in an important way. The manner by which this claim remains consistent with Taylor's theory of human subjectivity will be the focus of this section.

Having established an argument for the existence of frameworks of meaning, which, by way of interpretation, guide human life, Taylor made clear that this whole notion of interpretation was connected to the use of language in a fundamental way. Not only does one's interpretation of meaning require a theory of language which allows for the labeling of a particular thought or emotion, but further, a proper understanding of language in relation to interpretation requires an acknowledgement of the creative powers of expression made available by language. Thus, not only does language provide a descriptive term for a base emotion, such as desire, but further, it opens an avenue for the subject to articulate more finely about what one is feeling and through the expression of this articulation one may create for themselves a new understanding of this meaning, such as love or admiration, two emotions which perhaps run deeper than the original emotion of desire. Therefore, to attempt to articulate what one feels, an action that we all take part in on one level or another for it is integral to our own self-understanding, we require access to, what Taylor deems, "the rich human languages of expression."³¹

What is of utmost importance in relation to this notion of language being an essential component of interpretation and therefore self-understanding is the recognition of the dialogical nature of the human subject. Taylor writes:

A language only exists and is maintained by a language community. One is only a self among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it. My self-definition is understood as an answer to the question who I am. And this question finds its original sense in the interchange of speakers. This obviously cannot be a contingent matter. There is no way we could be inducted into personhood except by being initiated into a language. We first learn our languages of

³¹ Ibid, 33.

moral and spiritual discernment by being brought into an ongoing conversation by those who bring us up.³²

To stress the dialogical nature of the human subject is to stress the fact we learn through dialogue with those around us, and this is certainly true for the acquisition of languages which, logically, have as their locus, a community which engages in communication. To expand on this point Taylor is fond of pointing to the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and his distinction between *langue* and *parole* within the operation of language. Specifically, *parole* represents the particular act of speech while *langue* represents the code of the language which each act of *parole* draws from. According to Taylor, “acknowledging the independent place of the dimension of *langue* means accepting something into one’s social ontology which can’t be decomposed into individual occurrences.”³³ This is because the existence of *langue* is bound up within the normative practices of the community and is thus independent of the individual’s will: “*langue* can’t be reduced to a set of acts, choices, or indeed other predicates of the individual. Its locus is a society.”³⁴

A second, and clearly more influential thinker, whom Taylor draws upon to make clear the dialogical nature of the human subject and this notion of the community being the locus of the language required to interpret frameworks of meaning was Georg Hegel. Specifically, Taylor was interested in Hegel’s theory of *Sittlichkeit*, the idea that individuals are obliged to further and sustain the community of which they are a part.³⁵

³² Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 35.

³³ Charles Taylor, “Irreducibly Social Goods,” in *Philosophical Arguments*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 135.

³⁴ Ibid, 136.

³⁵ Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 83-84.

The justification behind this obligation was, for Hegel, connected to his complex ontological account of the human subject and his belief that society should be founded on the *Idea*, which, for a variety of reasons, has been largely discredited. However, Taylor still believes there are two significant points which can be drawn from Hegel's work in this regard. The first is Hegel's recognition that to sustain a community is, at the same time, to sustain a language. Taylor writes, in reference to Hegel's work:

A language, and the related set of distinctions underlying our experience and interpretation, is something that can only grow in and be sustained by a community. In that sense, what we are as human beings, we are only in a cultural community. The life of language and culture is one whose locus is larger than that of the individual. It happens in the community.³⁶

Thus, this first point is a re-statement of the argument made by Taylor regarding the locus of language being in the community. Importantly, language in the sense Taylor (or Hegel) is referring to is not simply the words one speaks but includes all the manners by which one expresses herself. This may include simple words but also one's work, one's art, one's spirituality, one's philosophy. The significance of such a broad definition of language is that, while being crucially important, the immediate family cannot provide instruction in all these modes of expression. It is only the larger community, society, which can provide access to the language required for rich interpretation; hence, the community is an indispensable factor in the moral evaluations individuals make thereby becoming an indispensable factor in the formation of individual identity. This is the manifestation of the thesis Taylor wishes to present; the community is of intrinsic value and thus requires a sustained effort on the part of its members to ensure its persistence

³⁶ Charles Taylor, "Hegel: History and Politics," in Michael Sandel, ed., *Liberalism and its Critics*, (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 182.

because “the identity of the autonomous, self-determining individual requires a social matrix.”³⁷ Of course, implicit within this thesis is the acknowledgment that “the emotional lives of human beings from different cultures, who have been brought up with very different import vocabularies, differ very greatly.”³⁸ It is this qualification which makes clear the “foundational” nature of the distinct cultural communities from which one comes.

The second point which must be stressed in relation to Hegel’s understanding of *Sittlichkeit*, the obligation to sustain the community, is made by Taylor within his assessment of what he has deemed atomist political thought. This is a term Taylor uses to refer to a variety of liberal political thought which “inherited a vision of society as in some sense constituted by individuals for the fulfillment of ends which were primarily individual...or which tries to defend in some sense the priority of the individual and his rights over society, or which presents a purely instrumental view of society.”³⁹ Clearly, this represents a very broad collection of liberal views toward the community, from Robert Nozick’s rather extreme defense of individual rights, to contemporary conceptions of utilitarianism, to the more tempered versions of “procedural” liberalism associated with Immanuel Kant, such as the theories espoused by John Rawls or Ronald Dworkin. However, the general point Taylor seeks to stress is that each of these theories, in one way or another, can be traced back to the disengaged view of man which, as we have seen, is inadequate according to Taylor. Because of this mistaken foundation, each of

³⁷ Charles Taylor, “Atomism,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 209.

³⁸ Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” 71.

³⁹ Taylor, “Atomism,” 187.

these political conceptions fails to identify the community as intrinsic, a failure which subsequently results in policies that are unable to sustain a political community which is capable of bonding people together, a failure which threatens the very existence of the community itself. Taylor writes:

Since the free individual can only maintain his identity within a society/culture of a certain kind, he has to be concerned about the shape of this society/culture as a whole. He cannot...be concerned purely with his individual choices and the associations formed from such choices to the neglect of the matrix in which such choices can be open or closed, rich or meager. It is important for him that certain activities and institutions flourish in society.⁴⁰

Taylor's argument is grounded in a different ontological account of man than Hegel's but the notion of *Sittlichkeit*, the obligation to sustain the community is of critical importance. Within this argument he has waded into a conception of civic republicanism and its demand for spirited political participation as a method to ensure and maintain the community and thus freedom in the republican sense, the freedom associated with political self-rule. However, as Rawls has argued, the republican thesis can be engaged in two distinct ways. Specifically, he contrast's "classical republicanism," the notion that significant public participation is necessary to protect basic rights and liberties with "civic humanism," the notion that the human is a political animal "whose essential nature is most fully achieved in a democratic society... because political participation in democratic politics is viewed as the privileged locus of the good life."⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid, 207.

⁴¹ John Rawls, "The Priority of the Right and Ideas of the Good," in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Autumn 1998, 272-273.

In other words, those who advocate the spirited political participation of the republican tradition can fall back on one of two arguments: the political is instrumental in the sense participation serves as a means to the end of preserving liberty or the political is intrinsic in the sense that the good for man is achieved in political participation itself. A number of liberals have maintained that the instrumental version of republicanism is quite compatible with their commitment to neutrality and, to the extent that they view political participation as a positive occurrence, they are correct. However, it is Taylor's contention that the instrumental view advanced by procedural liberals is not strong enough to sustain a political society with which the human subject can identify. This lack of identification results in political alienation or fragmentation.

Taylor, again under the influence of Hegel, defines political alienation as the situation whereby "people come to see themselves more and more atomistically, as less bound to their fellow citizens in common projects and allegiances...people no longer identify with their political community, their sense of corporate belonging is transferred elsewhere or atrophies all together."⁴² The connection Taylor draws between political alienation and modernity is bound up in the procedural liberal's strict adherence to individual rights and the subsequent insistence that competing conceptions of the "good" be held outside of political debate within the public sphere in the interests of neutrality. Taylor argues that the procedural, or rights model, "goes very well with a more atomist consciousness, where I understand my dignity as that of an individual bearer of rights," a situation that subtly encourages the individual to move "some distance from the

⁴² Taylor, *The Ethics Of Authenticity*, 112-118.

community” which articulates collective goods.⁴³ There is clearly a reduction of direct conflict within the political realm as a result of prioritizing the “right over the good,” but this comes at a very high price. To bar talk of the good from political debate, from conceptions of what is just, is to bar what is most meaningful in an individual’s life. As Taylor has argued, humans are strong evaluators, what we deem as good is what guides our actions; it is that which we interpret, through communal languages, from the frameworks of meaning which structure our lives. Nicholas Smith has noted the procedural liberal commitment to neutrality in relation to the good equates to a neutral policy towards identity.⁴⁴ To ask someone to conceive of a conception of justice without access to their own conception of good, a central foundation of their identity is, for Taylor, incoherent. This incoherency is a manifestation of the intellectual foundation of procedural liberal thought, the disengaged thesis which stresses the capacities of the self to draw distance from himself and his surroundings and think in an “objective” sense.⁴⁵ The result is a public realm which becomes largely irrelevant to the individual. The political institutions and common practices of the society no longer express the norms or ends implicit in the common language of moral discernment and a meaningful sense of political efficacy often withers allowing for the encroachment of utilitarian or instrumental ideals associated with the economic market into the public realm, a situation which often encourages a focus to be placed on *individual* attitudes and outcomes. The result, for Hegel as well as Taylor, is clear:

⁴³ Charles Taylor, “Alternative Futures: Legitimacy, Identity and Alienation in Late Twentieth Century Canada,” in Alan Cairns and Cynthia Williams, ed., *Constitutionalism, Citizenship and Society in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 211.

⁴⁴ Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning Morals and Modernity*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 155.

⁴⁵ A similar argument, raised in relation to the work of John Rawls, has been authored by Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

Norms as expressed in public practices cease to hold our allegiance. When this happens men have to turn elsewhere to define what is centrally important to them. Sometimes they turn to another society, for instance a smaller, more intense religious community. But another possibility...is that they strike out on their own and define their identity as individuals.⁴⁶

Why is this threat to meaningful political participation within the community viewed as a negative occurrence? There are two inter-related reasons that respond to this question. First, recall the discussion regarding the acquisition of the “rich languages of human expression” required to interpret and articulate meaning. Because Taylor provides such a broad definition of what counts as such language (linguistics, art, spirituality, philosophy, for example), small, single issue groups, regardless of what holds them together, cannot provide access to all these diverse “languages.” To restrict oneself from the larger society by turning completely inward, or immersing yourself in an intense religious community, is to block important avenues of language acquisition required for self-understanding in a rich way. Of course, this conclusion equates with one of Aristotle’s most fundamental assertions: “The man who is isolated – who is unable to share in the benefits of political association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient – is no part of the polis, and must therefore be either a beast or a god.”⁴⁷

It is worth noting at this point that the importance of experiencing diversity is not a point unique to Taylor’s work, for a number of liberal thinkers have commented on its value in this regard. However, it is Taylor’s belief that the political realm espoused by procedural liberalism is unable to stave off such political alienation because of its

⁴⁶ Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 91.

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *The Politics*, edited and translated by E. Barker, (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 6.

insistence that public debate must remain free of competing conceptions of the good, a policy founded upon the disengaged thesis. Implicit in this understanding is a subtle acquiescence to the increasing legitimacy of instrumental, market-driven ideals overtaking the public sphere and influencing state direction. Not only does this lead to general political alienation, it encourages citizens to see themselves as individuals within a marketplace, fuelling economic competition rather than cooperation. The result is individual interaction within the marketplace rather than cultural group interaction within a genuine public realm which invites cross-cultural exchange.

The second reason Taylor believes political alienation is a negative occurrence requires a small preface. Within a pluralistic nation, one made up of a number of distinct collective identities, there must also exist a plurality of ways of belonging or connecting to the larger society as a whole. This is a crucial point in Taylor's political theory. An example he cites runs as follows:

Someone of, say, Italian extraction in Toronto or Ukrainian extraction in Edmonton might indeed feel Canadian as a bearer of rights in a multicultural mosaic. His or her belonging would not "pass through" some other community, although the ethnic identity might be important to him or her in various ways. But this person might nevertheless accept that a Quebecois or a Cree or a Dene might belong in a very different way, that these people were Canadian through being members of their national communities.⁴⁸

That is, it must be acknowledged that there are different ways to "be" Canadian, some of which "pass through" our membership in a local or cultural community. To recognize

⁴⁸ Charles Taylor, "Shared and Divergent Values," in Guy Laforest, ed., *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1993), 183.

this is to recognize what Taylor deems “deep” or “second-level” diversity. Thus, when one turns away or becomes alienated from the local community of which he or she is a part because the communal practices no longer express distinct collective goods, one may also sever ties with the larger political community. Therefore, in certain cases, political fragmentation takes place not only between individuals but also between communities. Clearly such a result jeopardizes the entire national project.

It is in light of these concerns regarding alienation Taylor emphasizes the need to allow local communities to congregate around conceptions of the good in order to maintain the allegiance of its members. He writes:

One of the great needs of the modern polity is to recover a sense of significant differentiation, so that its partial communities, be they geographical, or cultural, or occupational, can become again important centres of concern and activity for its members in a way that connects them to the whole.⁴⁹

Implicit in this demand for “significant differentiation” is Taylor’s response to the two inter-related reasons for fearing political alienation and subsequent fragmentation. First, this demand speaks to the view that partial communities are not only intrinsically important, but more, because of this importance, should be given every opportunity to survive. To allow such communities, those which I want to call foundational communities, to wither away, to lose any sense of distinctiveness, in the face of utilitarian political ideals encouraging economic production and efficiency, is to allow irreversible harm to be inflicted upon the members of these communities. It is this foundational community which provides the most basic of languages required for meaningful self-

⁴⁹ Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 118.

interpretation, for meaningful identity formation. Furthermore, it is only through these most basic languages that one can approach more sophisticated levels of language which may exist outside of this foundational community. As Taylor notes, the opportunity to “develop an original way of understanding myself and human life...which is in sharp disagreement with my family and background,” a standard demand of liberal thinkers, exists, but “can only take place from the base in our common language.”⁵⁰ Thus, it is of incredible importance that such communities prosper.

Second, it is through this engaged participation within the local or cultural community that allows for a meaningful connection to the larger political society. The precise manner by which this is made possible requires a discussion of what Taylor has called “the politics of difference” and the manner by which it is differentiated from the “politics of universalism,” an approach he equates with the procedural liberal or rights-based model. Underlying both of these notions is the modern understanding of “recognition” which frames respect for individual dignity as a vital human need.⁵¹ However, the politics of universalism or equal dignity promotes “an identical basket of rights and immunities,” whereas the politics of difference seeks:

To recognize the unique identity of this individual or group, its distinctness from everyone else. The idea is that it is precisely this distinctiveness that has been ignored, glossed over, assimilated to a dominant or majority identity. And this assimilation is the cardinal sin against the idea of authenticity....the (modern) idea that each of us has an original way of being human.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 35-36.

⁵¹ Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Philosophical Arguments*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 234, 228.

The central complaint Taylor launches against the politics of universalism is that such a “procedural” view, founded upon an affirmation of difference-blind equality and a strict policy of individual rights, unintentionally negates certain identities “by forcing people into a homogenous mold that is untrue to them....that is [procedural liberals are] inhospitable to difference because they insist on a uniform application of the rules defining these rights... [and they] are suspicious of collective goals.”⁵² By advocating a politics of difference, that which remains open to differential treatment and certain collective goals, Taylor has committed himself to a state designed to recognize the multitude of collective identities present within and the resulting array of beliefs with regards to notions of the good life. This commitment is the foundation of Taylor’s conception of deep toleration or deep diversity, the notion that distinct communities must remain valuable centres of collective action in such a way that connects them to the whole.

Theoretically, this conception represents a commitment to a pluralist society whereby “we learn to move in a broader horizon, where what we once took for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of an unfamiliar culture.”⁵³ Taylor is once again drawing us back to his notion of the dialogical nature of the human agent and its ability to engage in a narrative with the “other,” in such away that allows us to understand more fully the incommensurable moral frameworks of meaning which constitute various communities and the manner by which these different frameworks shape the opposing viewpoints we

⁵² Ibid, 236, 248.

⁵³ Ibid, 252.

express. Taylor is quite aware of the incompatibility of viewpoints which impedes uncompromising agreement on all kinds of issues but argues “we can and should struggle for a ‘transvaluation’ which could open the way to a mode of life, individual and social, in which these demands could be reconciled.”⁵⁴ Again, this is not to erase difference but to better understand it and it is this understanding which Taylor believes can act as a national unifying principle for distinct collective identities. Indeed, as Mark Redhead has argued, such an approach “promotes the common purposes among these diverse groups of citizens by developing and accentuating points of overlap (shared values) between the cultural horizons of these groups.”⁵⁵

A fundamental motivation behind the politics of difference is for Taylor the “crucial moral interest that each one of us has in the authentic development of the other. We can only benefit from the full range of human achievement and capacity if we live in close association with people who have taken other paths.”⁵⁶ In other words, the acquisition and development of moral languages required for individual moral evaluations requires not only the participatory political community of intrinsic republican theory but also the interaction of peoples bound to different frameworks of meaning within the political sphere, an interaction procedural liberalism seeks to avoid. Furthermore, it is through such interaction that shared values may be isolated and built upon in a way that binds the local foundational communities to the whole of the nation.

⁵⁴ Charles Taylor, “Reply and Re-Articulation,” in J. Tully, ed., *Philosophy in an age of Pluralism*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 214.

⁵⁵ Mark Redhead, *Charles Taylor: Thinking and Living Deep Diversity*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 111.

⁵⁶ Taylor, “Living with Difference,” in A. Allen and M. Regan, ed., *Debating Democracy’s Discontent*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 214.

Thus, it is Taylor's contention that the complete autonomous agent requires a national political community open to understanding, as opposed to merely tolerating, different conceptions of the good. The foundation for such a modern political community is the direct recognition by the national community of the distinct culture of the local community in such a way that allows for it to flourish, a circumstance which provides individuals access to both basic and sophisticated levels of languages required for self-understanding and moral discernment through which a sense of meaningful national belonging may develop.

Policy and Preservation: The Case of Quebec

The most glaring case of a collective identity seeking such recognition in Canada has of course been that of the Quebecois. Taylor, a citizen of Quebec himself, has written widely on this issue and it is through an examination of this scholarship one may come to see the practical applications of his political theory founded upon his ontological account of the human subject. As the preceding section highlights, the local cultural community is of extreme importance to the human subject within Taylor's theory, thus it should come as no surprise that he has been a vocal supporter of the Quebecois and their demand for asymmetrical federal powers in the name of preserving their community. Indeed, his assessment and subsequent recommendations are heavily indebted to his theoretical work we have just examined, beginning with his frank contention that the root of the fracture between Quebec and Canada "can be put in one word: recognition."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Charles Taylor, "Impediments to a Canadian Future," in G. Laforest, ed., *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1993), 188.

Specifically, the Quebecois seek to have their distinct way of being recognized by English Canada. Once this recognition takes place, the asymmetrical status, in the form of an enlarged jurisdiction of political powers, sought by the province of Quebec would be legitimized. The reason such additional political power is sought is premised on the notion that the Quebecois represent a “people” bound together by a common language and culture which is under constant threat from the overwhelming English majority residing over the rest of the North American continent. By enabling the provincial government extended control over a variety of social and fiscal areas, it is argued, the francophone nation would have a significantly higher potential success rate in terms of sustaining and promoting this distinct language and culture. Alternatively, without such control, the Quebecois culture faces inevitable decline, perhaps to the point of extinction. The essential conflict, according to Taylor, is driven by English Canada’s insistence on difference-blind equality. To provide special powers to one province at the expense of the others stands in contrast to the principle of universal individual equality, a notion Taylor argues is prominent outside of Quebec. He writes: “if the principle of the equality of individuals is taken as ruling out such a recognition of distinct societies, then in effect the answer to the aspirations of some groups is being denied so as to exclude others – in this case the Quebecois. We are at an impasse.”⁵⁸

The confrontation between much of English Canada and the province of Quebec regarding the latter’s demand for recognition and asymmetrical status within the federation represents for Taylor a manifestation of the conflict previously discussed between procedural liberals who espouse the politics of universalism and those who favor

⁵⁸ Ibid, 194.

the politics of difference. Taylor is convinced much of English Canada's opposition to the demands made by Quebec in the name of survival can be attributed to the popularity of the politics of universalism outside Quebec. Such a philosophy makes a clear distinction between procedural and substantive commitments wherein the procedural liberal encourages just procedures while remaining neutral on substantive issues concerning the good. However:

A society like Quebec violates this model. It is axiomatic for Quebec governments that the survival and flourishing of French culture is a good. Political society is not neutral between those who value remaining true to the culture of our ancestors and those who might want to cut loose in the name of some individual goal of self-development. [This requires]...policies designed for cultural survival... [and] policies aimed at survival actively seek to create members of the community.⁵⁹

In other words, accepting the notion that Quebec is somewhat distinct compared to the other nine Canadian provinces is incompatible with the procedural liberalism favoured by Canadians outside Quebec. English Canada and French Canada are speaking to each other in quite different languages, both literally and figuratively. The challenge Taylor poses for both sides is to "allow for second-level or 'deep' diversity in which a plurality of ways of belonging would be acknowledged and accepted."⁶⁰ At the heart of this recommendation is Taylor's assertion that the survival of the Quebecois community is of intrinsic value as it is through this collectivity Quebecois are introduced to the basic but foundational languages of moral discernment and further, it is through this distinct community they may develop a connection to the Canadian nation as a whole. Thus, policies designed to protect this community, regardless of there asymmetrical nature,

⁵⁹ Taylor, "Shared and Divergent Values," 175-176.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 183.

must be allowed to be executed. However, a commitment by Canada as a whole to recognize and encourage the distinct culture of the Quebecois must be accompanied by a parallel commitment to furthering an understanding of those shared values that will bond the parts to the whole, something Canada has thus far failed to do.⁶¹

Importantly, Taylor is not advocating the recognition of any group or association that seeks it. For instance, a demand for recognition, and therefore a larger share of public funding by, say, a soccer team, or more seriously, a political interest group would not qualify under Taylor's model. Rather, the Quebecois nation deserves to be recognized and protected because it represents, for individual Quebecois, the community by which their moral evaluations are framed through the acquisition of cultural languages. It is, in short, a vital avenue through which individuals access the framework of meanings which subsequently defines what is good and orients himself in such a direction. Taylor writes:

For each individual to discover in himself what his humanity consists in, he needs a horizon of meaning, which can only be provided by some allegiance, group membership, cultural tradition. He needs, in the broadest sense, a language in which to ask and answer the questions of ultimate significance... This language comes to us within a society... (thus) it is natural that the community defined by natural language should become one of the most important poles of identification.⁶²

That is to say, the cultural community of Quebec is one that is vital to the identity formation hence flourishing of the individual Quebecois and further, the community

⁶¹ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 119.

⁶² Charles Taylor, "Why do Nations Have to Become States?" in G. Laforest, ed., *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1993), 46-47.

“through which” one may “connect” to the Canadian nation. Neither the soccer team nor the narrow political interest group perform this function in the same manner as a complete local community.

Finally, it would be unfair to portray procedural liberals as being completely insensitive to this issue. In a significant work of scholarship, Canadian liberal theorist Will Kymlicka attempts to portray a Rawls/Dworkin paradigm which does, in fact, recognize, to some degree, the value of cultural membership and thereby defends current language-protection policies within Quebec.⁶³ However, Taylor argues that such a defense is limited in that its treats the French language as a “collective goal that individuals might want to make use of...but this cannot capture the full thrust of policies designed for cultural survival.”⁶⁴ That is, despite this goal of language protection, Kymlicka’s theory fails to address the key issue of cultural survival; that of ensuring the existence of a group of people which prefers to identify itself with the Quebecois community. Without this desire to identify with the community, individuals will come to experience the same political alienation described above. The result is a turn inward thereby limiting their individual opportunities to access the richer echelons of languages of expression made available by the larger political society and failing to develop a meaningful connection with the larger Canadian nation.⁶⁵

⁶³ See Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), especially chapter 8. These views have been furthered by Kymlicka in *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), and *Finding our Way: Rethinking Ethnocultural Relations in Canada*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁶⁴ Taylor, “Shared and Divergent Values,” 176.

⁶⁵ Kymlicka’s work has also been criticized for failing to seriously acknowledge similar claims for recognition made by groups other than the Quebecois or Aboriginal Canadians, notably immigrant groups. See: Joseph H. Carens, “Liberalism and Culture,” in *Constellations*, Vol. 4 Iss. 1, April 1997, 35-47, and

Conclusion

For Taylor, the self is an embodied agent, constantly engaged in a world in which we have concerns, in which our actions are structured by the way things within this world have meaning for us. The interpretation of this meaning and the subsequent structuring of our lives around this sense of “good” requires language in the broad sense which is made available to us within our cultural community. Taylor’s work in this regard owes much to the thought of Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Hegel and Herder, all thinkers immersed in the romantic hermeneutics. This foundation allows Taylor to provide a phenomenological account of identity. Who we are is bound up in our experiences in this world and the languages we require to access meaning. Thus, the community is integral to our identity. It is this argument, operating on the ontological level, which fuels Taylor’s support for the preservation of local or cultural communities. As has been discussed, the value of cultural membership is a concern for certain procedural liberal thinkers as well. However, the ontology of the self supposed by these theories does not treat the community in the intrinsic sense which, in subtle but significant ways, undermines their goal of preserving particular cultures in the face of an ever growing insistence that communities be measured by the utilitarian calculus of efficiency and production in light of the most recent economic climate.

One issue I have thus far failed to mention is the existence of a number of theoretical challenges to Taylor’s desire to recognize and subsequently preserve foundational communities, especially in relation to the concrete case of Quebec.

Shiraz Dossa, “Liberal Posturing: Multiculturalism’s Discreet Charms, in *Journal of Multicultural and Multilingual Development*, Vol. 22, No. 5, 2001, 447-452. 452.

However, I delay this discussion briefly for I would like now to introduce another specific Canadian cultural community which faces the threat of serious decline and thus, in my view, requires a similar recognition and subsequent political action designed to protect it; the rural, agricultural West. It is my hope that a sufficient response to Taylor's most convincing critics can be made in relation to the specific issue of cultural survival I now address.

Part II: Recognition and Agrarian Identity in Western Canada

In the fall of 2002, a group of thirteen grain farmers from Alberta were jailed for refusing to pay fines assessed after being convicted of breaking the Canada Customs Act by circumventing the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) and selling their product directly to a United States elevator company.⁶⁶ The incarceration was the culmination of a planned act of civil disobedience by a group unhappy with current federal legislation which requires all cereal grains destined for export to be sold to the CWB. On the day of their arrest, a few hundred protestors gathered at a rally in support of the farmers' cause, including Alberta premier Ralph Klein, whose Conservative government has spent over \$650 000 in the preceding two years on a campaign urging grain farmers to fight the CWB monopoly.⁶⁷ I open with this anecdote because it illustrates, I think, two very important trends occurring across the rural Canadian Prairies.

First, the popularity of this protest represents a significant shift in strategy for grain farmers concerned with ever-shrinking returns from produce sales. The unfamiliar observer may be surprised to learn that, despite the rhetoric on display at the aforementioned rally, the CWB was not the creation of a heavy-handed, out of touch Federal government seeking to drain agricultural wealth back East. Rather, the CWB is the manifestation of the co-operative tradition of the rural West which dates back to the days of settlement. As we will see in more detail, early Canadian farmers recognized very quickly the economic clout available to them in terms of both purchasing supplies and marketing produce, when they cooperated in joint ventures. The CWB, officially

⁶⁶ "Alberta Farmers Jailed over Wheat Exports," *CBC Online News Service*, October 31, 2002, available at: http://www.cbc.ca/stories/2002/10/31/farmers_021031, accessed November 2, 2005.

⁶⁷ Hanneke Brooymans, "Going by the Board," in *Alberta Views*, January/February 2005, 24.

created in 1935, was the legislated formalization of this cooperation in terms of cereal grain sales. By pooling the grain into one, "single-desk" organization, Canadian farmers were assured higher returns because the CWB was able to operate as a powerful entity on the international market. In effect, this ensured that international grain buyers would be unable to bargain with individual farmers, thereby restricting their ability to "bid-down" the price. However, by advocating an end to this "monopoly," the dissenting Canadian farmers are essentially turning away from this tradition of cooperation. By demanding the capacity to sell their grain on the world market independently, in the hopes of returning the best possible price for themselves, the farmer is opening the door to direct competition between neighbours as they approach international grain-buying companies. This represents a significant change in attitude towards the well-being of the agricultural community as a whole in relation to the well-being of the individual farm family, an attitude that is becoming more and more prevalent across the Prairies as agriculture producers face increasing economic hardships.⁶⁸

Second, the campaign by the Conservative government of Alberta against the CWB represents a definite policy divergence in relation to agriculture. Buried beneath the official campaign slogan which urges farmers to fight for "free choice," lies a neo-liberal, free trade ideology which shuns protective economic measures in an effort to allow the market to alleviate practices deemed inefficient. This approach, which has become evident in all levels of government not simply the Conservatives of Alberta, stands in vivid contrast to the traditional role of government, that of protecting the

⁶⁸ Don and Norma Connick, "The Family Farm: Farming as a Way of Life," in Jerome Martin, ed., *Alternative Futures for Prairie Agricultural Communities*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Faculty of Extension, 1991), 243.

interests of its citizens from external threats, including a long-standing commitment to assist small-scale farmers in times of peril. In July 2004, the World Trade Organization (WTO), grand promoter of economic liberalization, declared the CWB represents an unfair subsidy to Canadian grain growers, agreeing with calls from large multinational grain companies who seek an end to the export monopoly. As Bob Friesen, president of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, notes, “some of the largest grain companies in the world are just poised and ready to move into Canada, and we know that if that happens, any extra profits will not accrue at the farm gate.”⁶⁹ The point here is simple. The CWB was organized around the principles of grain-grower protection, of ensuring better than average returns for *all* grain growers while at the same time blocking the avenues available for globalized “middle-men” to extract wealth from local economies. While the removal of the CWB may allow certain grain-growers to strike slightly more lucrative contracts for their product on the world market, the bulk of small-scale family farms will face increased downward price pressure as multinational grain-buying firms pit farmer against farmer in the proverbial “race to the bottom.” Furthermore, the avenues of wealth-extraction would be blown open as multinationals set up shop and slowly drain profits to corporate headquarters thousands of miles away. Yet, in the face of these warnings, the Conservative Government of Alberta has sided with the WTO and stands opposed to the CWB in the name of “fundamental freedoms that other businesses take for granted.”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Brooymans, “Going by the Board,” 26.

⁷⁰ “Alberta Farmers Jailed over Wheat Exports.”

I draw out these two points because I feel they are very indicative of what is now occurring across the rural Prairies; a general shift in attitude among many farm families facing financial ruin and a general shift in agricultural policy by both levels of government. There are a number of complexities I have chosen not to mention in relation to the CWB controversy, for I do not intend to focus on the CWB or even economic issues in general in this study. Rather, I use this introduction as a glimpse into a way of life under threat, a community of small-scale farmers struggling to deal with economic uncertainties while coming to grips with new approaches to its governance, a change due in large part to the emerging ethos of global trade liberalization and restricted state interference. Of course, agricultural production is not at risk. In fact, between 1981 and 2001 the amount of land farmed has increased ensuring a rise in total agricultural production in Canada.⁷¹ However, such data masks the reality that, over the same time period, the number of farms in Canada has decreased by over 20 percent.⁷² Furthermore, the fact that the percentage of Canadians employed in sectors associated with agriculture has remained relatively unchanged over the past 15 years conceals the significant decrease, nearly ten percent, of those employed directly in farming operations and the corresponding increase in the number of Canadians employed in the corporate owned agri-food industry.⁷³

⁷¹ See: "Total area of Farms, Land Tenure and Land in Crops (1981-2001 Censuses of Agriculture)," in *Statistics Canada, Census of Agriculture*, available at www40.statcan.ca/101/cst01/agrc25a.htm, accessed November 6, 2005.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Barbara Keith, "More than just Farming: Employment in Agriculture and Agri-food in Rural and Urban Canada," in *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin*, Statistics Canada, Vol. 4, No. 8, December 2003, 2-5. Within this study the author differentiates between those employed directly in primary agriculture or businesses which provide direct services to primary farming operations and those employed in food-processing and agricultural product sales.

Thus, the issue is not declining agricultural production but rather the auspices under which production will continue. Specifically, what are the ramifications of an agriculture industry increasingly controlled by large, capital-intensive farming operations and corporate owned agri-food businesses rather than a community of traditional, small-scale, family farms? While I think there is a certain value in both an economic analysis of the industry in relation to Canada's overall economic goals as well as a scientific investigation into this trend in relation to the environmental impact or the implications for consumer health, neither approach considers the vast cultural wealth layered throughout this region. That is, despite the fact that the general threat to the persistence of small-scale agriculture enterprises is largely economic, any study on Prairie agriculture which proceeds only on the economic or scientific level paints an incomplete picture. Furthermore, a regional analysis, often the tool of choice for Canadian thinkers, fails to draw key differentiations between urban and rural locations in terms of both income and culture. In light of these methodological deficiencies, I intend to demonstrate the manner by which rural agricultural communities in Western Canada, that is, family-owned and operated farms and the surrounding towns and villages that service them, exist as very real cultural communities bound together by a strong collective agrarian identity yet face an uncertain future due the increasing influence of instrumental rationality within the public sphere, as articulated by Taylor.

Admittedly, it may appear unusual to locate a community bonded together by an economic activity on an equal scale with other more commonly mentioned minority groups held together by ethnicity, religion or language, a difficulty which I believe has

led to a general avoidance of examining the rural West through the lens of cultural studies in contemporary, mainstream academia. This belief is echoed by Gerald Creed and Barbara Ching, who note “it is remarkable that the explosion of scholarly interest in identity politics has generally failed to address the rural/urban axis.”⁷⁴ This is an academic gap I hope to address by illustrating the manner by which rural agricultural communities across the Prairies represent a distinct cultural grouping, a foundational community, in the words of the previous section, within which thousands of rural inhabitants not only actualize their potential as human subjects but further, through which they generate a meaningful attachment to the Canadian nation as a whole. Thus, the economic challenges facing rural agricultural communities represent a situation which requires immediate attention. Although it is clear that specific policy prescriptions are in order, this study will make the more general demand for “recognition” of this collective agrarian identity which binds these family-farms and surrounding communities together. It is only by way of this recognition that one can seriously engage in meaningful policy prescriptions.

Prairie Agricultural Communities as Foundational

Because perceptions of uniqueness play a central role in understanding collective identities, and thus foundational communities, isolating perceived differences expressed by agrarian individuals must be the starting point for our investigation. Romanticized generalizations about “farm life” are dangerous in that they can often overlook important realities and become nothing more than that which fuels nostalgic calls to return to the

⁷⁴ Gerald W. Creed and Barbara Ching, “Recognizing Rusticity: Identity and the Power of Place,” in Gerald Creed and Barbara Ching, ed., *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.

“good old days,” a desire which, in the end, serves no realistic purpose. However, it is also in these generalized notions that one can begin to see the perceptions of distinctiveness that are so crucial to identifying cultural communities. Consider Saskatchewan writer Sharon Butala’s rather poetic description of the community she is a part of when she argues that, to live the life of a farmer, surrounded by your family and friends in the midst of nature represents “something that is both beautiful and good...where interdependence is clear and co-operation thus a way of life”⁷⁵ Of course, this is not a rigorous, scientific statement about rural life but that in no way means such a statement is devoid of value. Rather, it is from such a general understanding that one may begin to draw out what makes these rural communities unique in the cultural sense.

Perhaps the most basic aspect of agricultural communities which speaks to their uniqueness is located at the occupational level. Those making a living on the rural Prairies are almost exclusively farmers or individuals involved in sectors which provide services for farm families, thereby making agriculture the central bond between rural inhabitants. As historian Gerald Friesen has argued, within “the identity created by occupational and romantic definitions of their life, all Canadian farmers could find common ground.”⁷⁶ That is, despite a number of differences, be they ethnic or religious, or even related to the type of agriculture practiced, Prairie farmers still find significant similarities between themselves. For instance, since the settlement of Western Canada by aspiring immigrants, there has always been a great source of pride among all farmers, a strong sense that their work was intrinsically meaningful because, through their labour,

⁷⁵ Sharon Butala, “The Myth of the Family Farm,” in Harry P. Diaz, Joann Jaffe and Robert Stirling, ed., *Farm Communities at the Crossroads*, (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2003), 70.

⁷⁶ Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 368.

the very nourishment of the nation was being provided. Indeed, this was an understanding that led farmers to be very conscious of the distinctiveness of their occupation but also aware of their "role" as Canadians. This indispensable task of producing the nation's food was also one which required an intimate technical knowledge in a wide variety of areas, something which differentiated their occupation from many jobs in urban centres which stressed narrow technical specialization. The farmer required an understanding of the appropriate growing conditions for a multitude of crops, the needs of various livestock, the mechanical workings of numerous pieces of machinery as well as the structural prowess to construct a barn or string together a fence. This was in addition to the need to mind the seasons of Mother Nature as well as the international markets and the most recent policies enacted by governments, for farmers were labourers but also businessmen. A miscalculation in any of these areas could spell financial ruin for the Prairie farm. Thus, being, for the most part, owners of capital as well as suppliers of labour, in addition to possessing a wide variety of physical and mental skills, the family farm stood in contrast to most of the common industrial, specialized occupations found in urban centres.

Of course, the term "family farm" also implies something unique about agriculture as an occupation. The average farm throughout the Prairies has always been an operation which was family oriented. The husband and wife of a farm family are often described as being life *as well as* business partners, each devoting the bulk of their talents to the operation of the farm, most being quite aware that they have sacrificed certain economic benefits in exchange for the way of life the farm provided. The

children also play remarkably important roles, providing valuable labour assisting with daily chores and seasonal work. Of course, this labour is in addition to the invaluable opportunity to spend countless hours engaged with family members through collective farm work. Furthermore, while it is certainly not the case that family farms represent the only examples of family-oriented businesses in Canada, it has been found that farms are five times more likely to be passed down to children than other family businesses.⁷⁷ This is a significant point as it directs one's attention towards the distinctively intergenerational nature of a number of farming operations. Cameron Harder, after conducting hundreds of interviews with Western Canadian farmers on the topic of financial hardship, concludes:

The farm often represents the collective effort and wisdom of several generations working on a particular piece of land; the wisdom of managing it is part and parcel of the family's identity and its legacy for the future. To lose it is to lose one's past and future simultaneously.⁷⁸

Implicit in this description of the intergenerational nature of many farms is another distinct aspect of rural or farm life; the dependence on, and subsequent stubborn attachment to, particular spatial locations, most notably, the land on which their lives play out. Prairie agriculture is not a nomadic occupation. It relies on the maintenance of particular physical spaces which, in many cases, have been owned by the family for generations. Thus, a nuanced view of a unique agrarian identity requires an understanding of the important connections farm families developed with specific physical location, a connection induced by activity and affective meaning of one's

⁷⁷ Norah C. Keating, "The Future of the Farm Family in Prairie Agricultural Communities," in Jerome Martin, ed., *Alternative Futures for Prairie Agricultural Communities*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Faculty of Extension, 1991), 66.

⁷⁸ Cameron Harder, "Overcoming Cultural and Spiritual Obstacles to Rural Revitalization," in Roger Epp and Dave Whitson, ed., *Writing off the Rural West*, (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 2001), 226.

location in the rural landscape. Janet Fitchen, commenting on the importance of “space” in people’s lives writes, the rural landscape is “a backdrop against which the activities of daily life are carried out, a space that is both setting and symbol of rural life... [and] also the space in which social relationships are grounded.”⁷⁹ The country-side, too often glamorized by suburban dwellers seeking to “experience nature” for the weekend, is, for the rural individual, quite literally “where they come from.” Although tied up in the economic activity of agriculture, Roger Epp adds:

Land means much more than a commodity for exploitation or recreation. Land and the human marks made on it – even abandoned houses, halls, and churches – are repositories of intergenerational family identity and community memory. Land is where ancestors are buried. Land is the site of good work that feeds people, that engages parents meaningfully with their children. Land, in combination with Prairie sky, light, and quiet represents an aesthetic sense of space that is not willingly abandoned even in hard times for the prospect of urban wage labour.⁸⁰

To view agriculture in this light, as a unique occupation which requires a multitude of skills to provide a vital resource as well as being immensely family-oriented but also dependent on particular pieces of land, is to begin to see agricultural as something beyond a simple nine-to-five job which pays the bills. It is, of course, not simply a job but a lifestyle. As Bob Stirling has remarked, it was through this unique agricultural lifestyle that rural individuals “developed society, their consciousness, and, indeed, themselves as social beings...engaged in thoughtful, purposive action.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Janet M. Fitchen, *Endangered Spaces, Enduring Places*, (Boulder: Westview Press. 1991), 251.

⁸⁰ Roger Epp, “The Political De-Skilling of Rural Communities,” in Roger Epp and Dave Whitson, ed., *Writing off the Rural West*, (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 2001), 318.

⁸¹ Bob Stirling, “Work, Knowledge, and the Direction of Farm Life,” in Roger Epp and Dave Whitson, ed., *Writing off the Rural West*, (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 2001), 249.

However, this occupation is also one which has become dependent on a certain type of community, one built on cooperation between farm families.

Although such a notion has become somewhat of a cliché, there remains a need to consider the importance of cooperation in rural settings. In the specific case of Western Canada, the origins of the rural co-operative community can be traced back to the days of settlement. As economist Vernon Fowke has demonstrated, a central component of the National Policy implemented by the Canadian government in the decade following Confederation was the establishment of a “wheat economy” throughout the Prairies which would stave off American expansionism but also provide a market for industrial products manufactured in Eastern Canada. This was ensured by the Dominion Lands Act of 1872 which offered quarter-sections of land for the nominal fee of \$10 but also the infamous protective tariff of 1879 and the construction of the national railway. According to Fowke, the National Policy ensured “the prairie economy grew up within a pre-established framework of tariffs which shaped, limited, and curtailed its development.”⁸² Although there has been considerable debate throughout Canada as to the intentions of the National Policy relative to its disparate economic effects across different regions, it is absolutely crucial to grasp the perceptions held by the Prairie population toward this initiative. Specifically, for the vast majority of Western farmers, the policy represented “the Canadian state’s desire to impose its sovereignty over the vast western Prairies, to develop a market for eastern industry, and (feed) the railway

⁸² Vernon C. Fowke, *The National Policy and the Wheat Economy*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 67.

companies' insatiable hunger for profits.⁸³ Indeed, the legacy of the National Policy implemented on the heels of the settlement of the West has risen to the status of folklore for many farm families, a status which is continually fuelled by the re-occurring publication of a number of cartoon's from the early days of settlement which, in different ways, portray the industrialists of Eastern Canada and the national railway companies as profiting from the intense labour of the financially insecure Western Farmer.⁸⁴

Many of these perceptions were driven, of course, by the very real economic hardships endured in the rural West under the National Policy, a situation which led to a definite regional awareness and a variety of "anti-Eastern" sentiments which persist even today. However, the hardships faced also led to a situation in which settlers were required to work together to overcome, what became to be understood as, common problems. One byproduct of this realization was the incredible growth of democratic-populist movements throughout the Prairies which sought solutions to political and financial problems, but more importantly, had the effect of forging a familiar community in which daily life would now take place. In a thorough and engaging study of this populist tradition, David Laycock makes clear that, despite the different strands of democratic thought in each of the Prairie provinces, cooperation was a "democratic reflex action," as the rural inhabitants "came to feel themselves part of a community that shared not only occupations but also externally imposed hardships and impediments to self-

⁸³ Polo Diaz and Paul Gingrich, "Crisis and Community in Rural Saskatchewan," in David Hay and Gurcharn Basran, ed., *Rural Sociology in Canada*, (Toronto: Oxford, 1992), 38.

⁸⁴ See, for example, Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 187, or the cover page of David Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies, 1910 to 1945*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

rule.”⁸⁵ Thus, the populist politics practiced “were tied to the larger goal of establishing a political community closer to their visions of the good society than to the lands left behind.”⁸⁶ The passion with which Prairie farmers of the early twentieth century tackled issues of the common good through town hall meetings and radical party politics spoke to this sense of community. This was also evident in the high rate of participation, both male and female, in a wide variety of community organizations, church functions and sporting events throughout the twentieth century.⁸⁷

This communal spirit, however, was actualized in a second manner as well, beyond populist politics, town-hall style denunciations of the “East” or Church pot-lucks. The early twentieth century also produced perhaps the most impressive display of local economic cooperation anywhere in Canada. This was the Prairie co-operative movement. As Friesen has noted, the beginnings of this co-operative movement can be traced to a number of local grain-pooling initiatives. Although the financial return on these early “pools” were largely unsatisfactory, that which had been learned from the experience would fuel a number of subsequent successful co-operatives, including a variety of organizations which would eventually evolve into the Canadian Wheat Board.⁸⁸ However, as Brett Fairbairn has made clear through a study of three highly successful rural Prairie co-operatives, the movement spread beyond grain-marketing organizations with the formation of local consumer co-operatives which focused on lowering the costs

⁸⁵ David Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies, 1910 to 1945*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 9.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 14.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 385-388 for a general description of this participation. More specific records of this participation can be found in the hundreds of Prairie district histories which have been written since, including *Harvest of Memories: History of Kingman and District*, (Edmonton: Friesen Printing, 1981).

⁸⁸ Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 334.

of farm inputs by purchasing in bulk as well as community credit unions which challenged the supremacy of big-city banking institutions. This movement swept through the rural Prairies and the results could not solely be measured in terms of finances.

Indeed, Fairbairn writes:

This was community development in the strictest sense – adult education, town hall meetings, groups of local citizens learning to see their problems in new ways, mobilization of farmers and townspeople who were outside of positions of power, and taking responsibility for local solutions to global problems.⁸⁹

What is perhaps most interesting about this movement is not necessarily its success but rather the intellectual assumptions behind it. As popular Alberta politician William Irvine has argued, the very nature of agriculture as an occupation allowed for a unique perspective in terms of cooperation:

Although fathered by oppression, the farmers' movement has escaped that bitterness of feeling against capital... [for] the farmer, in reality, combines in his own profession, the two antagonists. He is both capitalist and laborer. He knows that production is not furthered when war is going on between the two...and is thus led to the discovery of cooperation as the synthesis without which progress cannot be made.⁹⁰

Within this observation Irvine has articulated an attitude distinct to the Prairie co-operative movement which placed a strong emphasis on both private property and economic cooperation, a markedly different approach from urban Canadian socialist organizations who often positioned themselves, to some degree, in opposition to private ownership. That is, within the Prairie co-operative movement one could locate both a

⁸⁹ Brett Fairbairn, "Visions of Alternative Futures: Three Cases from the Prairie Consumer Co-operative Movement, 1914-1945," in Jerome Martin, ed., *Alternative Futures for Prairie Agricultural Communities*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Faculty of Extension, 1991), 136.

⁹⁰ Quote taken from Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 372.

communal attitude as well as significant strain of individualism, a combination which spoke to the unique brand of politics practiced throughout the Prairies.

Certainly most of what has been said in relation to the widespread cooperation across the rural Prairies has been historical, but it is important to understand that these experiences, although representing the pinnacle of a movement, have imprinted a communal attitude throughout the rural West which persists today. Although rates of community participation and solidarity are somewhat lower today (for reasons discussed later), and internal conflict has certainly been present at times, a large number of rural organizations still thrive thanks to the sizable network of individuals who remain active within the local community. A recent study confirms this continuity: rural Canadians still remain more likely to attend public meetings, trust their neighbours, provide volunteer services and assist neighbours and friends with domestic work, child care or general errands than their urban counterparts.⁹¹ In addition, beyond the rural organizations and successful co-operative business enterprises which continue to operate throughout the Prairies, is the behavior of the modern farmer who is often found assisting his neighbour with a variety of tasks. Interestingly, Stirling has documented this phenomenon in relation to the contemporary Prairie farmer's attempt to retain control of the knowledge required to maintain a profitable operation. One example he mentions is the on-going practice of modifying a piece of farm machinery in such a way that allows for it to serve the farm in a more purposeful manner. The important point for Stirling is that, rather than seeking a patent for this "invention," it is often the case that this knowledge is

⁹¹ Martin Turcotte, "Social Engagement and Civic Participation: Are Rural and Small Town Populations Really at an Advantage?" in *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin*, Statistics Canada, Vol. 6, No. 4, June 2005.

simply relayed to other farmers who are then free to modify their equipment in the same way.⁹²

Perhaps I have belaboured this point but, in an effort to understand rural Western agricultural communities as culturally unique, it is of crucial importance to understand this communal attitude. To view Prairie agrarian society in this way allows one to see the manner by which a specific model of community, one which was built on intense cooperation required to overcome a variety of obstacles imposed from outside, developed and continues to play a vital role within the collective agrarian identity. As Stirling notes:

Farms and communities became established because of the formation of intricate helping patterns, systems of knowledge-sharing and reciprocity, and trust between farm families – all leading to the legendary growth of local ‘social capital.’⁹³

To appreciate this statement is to appreciate a distinct element of agrarian cultural identity which persists today.

Thus far, the argument for a Western Canadian agrarian identity which binds agricultural communities together has been founded on the description of a particular occupation, agriculture, and the manner by which it may be labeled distinct, based on the variety of skills required, its orientation towards family participation and its strict attachment to nature generally and pieces of land in particular. Further, it has been demonstrated how such an operation, the family farm, has been dependent on a particular

⁹² Stirling, “Work, Knowledge and the Direction of Farm Life,” 253-254.

⁹³ Ibid, 251.

type of community, one based on intense cooperation. However, there is an important additional distinction to consider. The presence of a distinct agrarian identity is perhaps most evident when located in relation to the “other,” in this case, the urban. That is, as with the persistence of other communal identities, the collective agrarian identity is often felt and expressed most strongly in relation to the majority urban culture in Canada, particularly in relation to the needs for recognition and preservation as articulated by Taylor’s theory. Indeed, this interaction often works to shape the collective identities in question.

Butala follows her poetic depiction of farm life as both “beautiful and good.” with the observation that “farm people who have been rural for generations...view urban life as a kind of madness, as unnatural, deprived, as stunted and pitiful.”⁹⁴ Again, I must stress the obvious danger of citing generalized notions such as these as evidence that a great divide exists between rural and urban ways of life, for it has certainly been the case that the rural and urban have grown closer thanks to technological improvements and general attitude shifts. Further, this binary understanding fails to highlight the fact that there is more than one single way of life in either rural or urban settings. However, there has always been a recognition by both rural and urban inhabitants that there does exist a significant difference between the country and the city. With this in mind, I proceed to discuss the relationship between the rural and the urban as it relates to the existence of a distinct agrarian identity which acts as a foundation for a unique cultural community in Canada.

⁹⁴ Butala, “The Myth of the Family Farm,” 70.

Examining the differences between rural and urban has always been a fascination for sociology. The groundbreaking work in this regard was German sociologist Ferdinand Toennies book *Community and Society*, which made a distinction between pre-industrial and industrial European cultures by contrasting *gemeinschaft*, roughly translated to community, and *gesellschaft*, or society. Of importance for Toennies was the social relations existing within these alternate forms of association. In settings which he would refer to as *gemeinschaft*, often less sophisticated and dependent on agriculture, relations between individuals were very much personal or intimate, but also exclusive and organic. *Gesellschaft*, or the emerging modern society, was the result of free association and contract in which relations tended to be impersonal, indifferent, temporary, and often dominated by logic and rationality. More recent studies into the rural/urban divide have probed this perception of “tight-knit” relations between those living in rural settings compared to those of the urban. Kieran Bonner, in an examination of a specific rural setting in Western Canada, points to the “enforced politeness” implicit in rural living. He notes that because rural inhabitants are very aware that a public action can quickly reverberate throughout such a small community, it is often the case that rural individuals will respond to a conflict in a manner that agrees with the community’s norms, leading to passivity and conformity. Further, such an understanding may impart a sense of responsibility distinct from that of the city-dweller because “smallness makes it harder to hide from the consequences of one’s deeds, and thus, when the condition of smallness is befriended, the understanding of actions in terms of such history is nurtured.”⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Kieran Bonner, *A Great Place to Raise Kids: Interpretation, Science, and the Urban-Rural Debate*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 183.

While there is certainly a large degree of truth present in sociological approaches such as those mentioned, it is my contention that such an analysis fails to grasp the complete difference between rural and urban experience. Specifically, such an explanation does not fully account for the cultural implications of a community built upon intense co-operative interactions between rural inhabitants as discussed above. In the interests of clarifying this point consider an example provided by Daniel Kemmis who seeks to contrast the rural area in which he was raised and the urban centre in which he now resides. Specifically, he compares the co-operative tradition of rural agricultural communities to an urban organization he is a member of which decides to abandon a group fundraising effort because someone points out that there exists the possibility of a lawsuit should something go wrong. For Kemmis, this is a difference which goes beyond simple “enforced politeness” in rural as opposed to urban areas.⁹⁶ Rather, this contrast between the rural and the urban represents a distinction between “the politics of cooperation [which] gave people a robust sense of their capacity to get big, tough jobs done...[and] the politics of alienation, separation, and blocked initiatives” he associates with modern city life.⁹⁷

Alex Sim articulates a similar position to Kemmis by arguing that increased urbanization has weakened “positive ruralization forces... (such as) respect for nature, sensitivity to the presence of others and their needs, and an organic sense of total

⁹⁶ Daniel Kemmis, *Community and the Politics of Place*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 71-74.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 72-73.

systems, in nature and in social relationships”⁹⁸ Like Kemmis, Sim is emphasizing a rural/urban distinction which moves beyond the sociological approach which, in my opinion, treats communal attitudes present in rural areas as a simple by-product of population density and thus downplays their cultural importance. Certainly the size of the rural community in relation to the urban centre plays a role in the type of relationships present within it, but the failure to grasp the cultural implications of such a distinction misses what rural inhabitants perceive to be a significant difference between rural and urban life. This perceived difference is encapsulated by the examples provided by both Kemmis and Sim and represent, in my opinion, that of a *cultural* difference. Phrases like “the politics of cooperation” and “positive ruralization forces,” are definitely not quantitatively based accounts of rural life but the inability to quantify aspects of rural life that are perceived to be distinct, and perhaps beneficial, by rural inhabitants in relation to life in the city does not, in any way, make them less valuable when seeking to understand the distinction between city and country. This is a crucial step in the argument I am presenting, that rural agricultural communities across the Prairies are distinct cultural, thus foundational, communities bound together by an agrarian identity. To grasp this argument requires an appreciation of the cultural distinctions made by Kemmis and Sim in relation to rural and urban life.

A much clearer picture of this cultural distinction becomes apparent when considering a concrete example. In a study on education in rural locations, Walter Archer argues that the consolidation of hundreds of small Prairie schools in rural settings

⁹⁸ R. Alex Sim, *Land and Community: Crisis in Canada's Countryside*, (Guelph: University of Guelph Press, 1988), 23.

coincided with a shift from rural to urban-based curriculums. That is, as governments sought increased efficiency and coordination of standards throughout provincial schooling systems, rural schools not only grew in size but were also inundated with an influx of urban-born teachers and a curriculum which was authored from an urban perspective which, for example, presented arguments and ideas in an urban context and tended to favour the liberal arts over the technical “know-how” which played such a large role in agricultural communities. The result, Archer concludes:

Was that children from rural areas could preserve their cultural identity only by doing poorly in school or dropping out, for to succeed in school required assimilation into the majority urban culture. Those children who did well in school tended to abandon rural culture and move to the cities, thereby weakening the culture of the communities in which they had been raised.⁹⁹

In a more recent study, Harry Diaz has confirmed this trend by arguing the “urban-bias” of contemporary curriculums “neglects the rural dimension of our society” and is thereby playing a central role in leading rural youth into the urban work force, “taking away from the rural community resources that are important to its development.”¹⁰⁰ This distinction between rural and urban educational curricula is a further indication of the existence of two distinct cultural communities and, in addition, a clear case of the more prominent culture overwhelming the weaker. Importantly, Diaz makes the further point that the knowledge and skills learnt in contemporary “urban-biased” schools provide students with “the possibility to escape from a community that is unable to offer them a viable and

⁹⁹ Walter Archer, “Education in Prairie Agricultural Communities,” in Jerome Martin, ed., *Alternative Futures for Prairie Agricultural Communities*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Faculty of Extension, 1991), 149.

¹⁰⁰ Harry P. Diaz, “School, Knowledge and Skills in the Farm Community,” in Harry P. Diaz, Joann Jaffe and Robert Stirling, ed., *Farm Communities at the Crossroads*, (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2003), 104.

solid future.”¹⁰¹ The growing inability of rural communities to provide quality employment opportunities for youth is a significant issue which speaks to the decline of rural life as a whole. However, I delay a discussion of this issue briefly for it is crucial that one does not overlook the initial point made in regard to rural education, that agrarian culture faces a threat from that of the urban.

Having established a distinction between rural and urban life based on occupational differences and patterns of social interaction, and the culture that has emerged out of such distinctions, it remains to be seen how the interaction of these cultures affects each other. As Creed and Ching have argued, it is often the case that “the manifestation of rustic identities is...a clear attempt on the part of rustic people to assert their value and place in a world dominated by the urban other.”¹⁰² Thus, much of the current impetus behind the expression of a rural identity in an outward manner is to be understood in relation to “omnipresent cultural hierarchies...in which rustic people are marginalized and their culture devalued vis a vis urban culture.”¹⁰³ That is to say, rural identity founded upon a particular cultural community is shaped to some degree by this interaction of cultures, and is often expressed in relation to the general urban view that rural life is unsophisticated, is lacking in value culturally. A simple but telling example of this view may be found in Karl Marx’s candid observation that urbanization driven by

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 104.

¹⁰² Creed and Ching, “Recognizing Rusticity: Identity and the Power of Place,” 28.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 5.

capitalist production “has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life.”¹⁰⁴

Certainly it would be a mistake to consider such a view to be universally accepted among urban inhabitants for there are a number of examples of “city folk” embracing romantic images of country living. However, urban appreciations, despite their intentions, are often expressed “without undermining their own cultural superiority” because rural people “lack the power to define what is attractive or valuable about the places they live.”¹⁰⁵ Consider the popular Canadian television show *Corner Gas*, a comedy program following the lives of a tight-knit cast of characters living in a fictitious rural Saskatchewan community. I admit to finding this program outrageously funny but much of the humour relies on portraying the characters as content in their boredom, terrified of technology and astoundingly ignorant of the outside world. Surely the show is a satirical take on stereotypical views of the rural community but the point remains, to gain an audience in an urban world, one is required to portray the rural in a way that does not challenge the superiority of the urban majority; a formula that has been used repeatedly with respect to other minority groups in North American society more broadly.

It is clear that technology has played a significant role in closing the gap between rural and urban communities and many younger rural people have developed a more extensive relationship with urban society than rural ancestors. However, this has not

¹⁰⁴ Karl Marx, “The Communist Manifesto,” in Lawrence H. Simon, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 162.

¹⁰⁵ Creed and Ching, “Recognizing Rusticity: Identity and the Power of Place,” 20-21.

erased the understanding by both rural and urban individuals that there does exist between each association some difference in terms of internal social relations and the subsequent communal culture. It is this difference, in effect, which acts to differentiate the rural identity from the urban identity in a substantial way. Once differentiated, the sheer size of the urban entity allows for easy marginalization of the rural other. Like most forms of marginalization, a cultural hierarchy is established which acts to subordinate the values of the rural. This represents what Taylor has labeled “misrecognition,” a situation wherein “a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.”¹⁰⁶ As Creed and Ching acknowledge, this corresponds to an emerging sense among some rural inhabitants that understands “themselves in dire need of what [urban] intellectuals provide.”¹⁰⁷ Alternatively, it is often the case that much of the rural identity that is now expressed outwardly, think pick-up trucks, shot-guns and loud country music, is a deliberate act designed to establish their identity in spite of its devaluation, intentional or otherwise, by urban bystanders.

Much terrain has been covered in the preceding section, some points perhaps more controversial than others. However, what I hope is now clear is the manner by which a distinct agrarian collective identity has formed in Western Canada based largely on perceptions of cultural uniqueness. This identity has been partially obscured, I think, because it has not generally been held together by ethnicity or language or religion but by an occupation, something that is often deemed to be the proper subject matter of

¹⁰⁶ Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” 225.

¹⁰⁷ Creed and Ching, “Recognizing Rusticity: Identity and the Power of Place,” 11.

economic rather than cultural studies. Nevertheless, it has been demonstrated that the agrarian collective identity is one based not simply on a traditional job but a very distinct way of life oriented towards family, nature, co-operative community and of course, a non-urban life, all aspects one may rightly label cultural. Following Taylor, I assert that such a cultural collectivity plays a foundational role in the acquisition of the “rich languages of expression,” for the agrarian individual. Furthermore, it is through this identity that many develop a sense of belonging to Canada as a whole. These people are not simply Canadians but Canadian farmers, producers of that upon which we all rely.

The Threat to Prairie Agricultural Communities

At the most fundamental level, that which threatens the persistence of family farming operations, and the subsequent cultural communities surrounding them, is the issue of profitability. Quite simply, small-scale farming is becoming less and less of an economically viable option for those seeking to make a living in rural areas. That being said, it would be a mistake to assume that there exists no profits to be made in rural Western Canada. In fact, the growing corporate presence in rural areas suggests there is a great deal of wealth to be had. However, government encouraged re-structuring of the agricultural industry has led to a situation wherein survival for farmers requires a substantial increase in farm size and scope, a situation which is often referred to throughout the Prairies with the common slogan “get big or get out.” As indicated earlier, this study is not one with an intense economic focus regarding the rural West for such work already exists in a number of quality investigations.¹⁰⁸ However, I must

¹⁰⁸ For example see: Roger Epp and Dave Whitson, ed., *Writing off the Rural West*, (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 2001). Harry P. Diaz, Joann Jaffe and Robert Stirling, ed., *Farm Communities at the*

provide an overview of the issue for it plays such a significant role in the overall argument I present in favour of preserving a specific cultural community.

Agriculturally produced goods have always faced an uncertain return based on the instability of the international market. Rising input costs, the chance of unfortunate weather, or the spread of disease to crop or livestock are also dangers to profitability which are not new for Prairie farmers, nor is the continuing trend of urbanization, which has seen hundreds of thousands of Canadians opt for the luxuries and security offered by city life. However, one result of urbanization has been the introduction of a new “social risk” to agriculture, in a somewhat ironic fashion, as described by Ronald Wimberley:

The irony lies in the fact that few consumers in the general public produce many of the agricultural goods they consume. While the public – the total society of consumers and voters – has become proportionately more dependent on a smaller percentage who farm, agricultural interests have become more dependent upon favorable public perceptions and support from the non-farm electorate. (Therefore), the general society gains more clout – economically and politically – to socially control agriculture.¹⁰⁹

The most significant result of this new “social risk” has been the general acquiescence of the urban electorate in relation to the Canadian government’s recent strategy to restructure Prairie agriculture in light of the evolving logic of neo-liberal economics and global trade liberalization. As Murray Knuttila argues, “the past two

Crossroads, (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2003). G.S Basran and D.A. Hay, ed., *The Political Economy of Agriculture in Western Canada*, (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1988). Jerome Martin, ed., *Alternative Futures for Prairie Agricultural Communities*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Faculty of Extension, 1991). Christopher Lind, *Something’s Wrong Somewhere: Globalization, Community and the Moral Economy of the Farm Crisis*, (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1995).

¹⁰⁹ Ronald C. Wimberley, “Social, Agricultural, and Environmental Interdependence,” in Ronald C. Wimberley, Craig K. Harris, Joseph J. Molnar, and Terry J. Tomazic, ed., *The Social Risks of Agriculture*, (Westport: Praeger Publishing, 2002), 3.

decades represent a virtual revolution in Canadian agricultural policy” which has featured “a propensity to move away from supporting and encouraging agricultural production.”¹¹⁰ This shift has included a decline in support for agricultural research, the end of a number of income support programs, faltering support of the aforementioned Canadian Wheat Board in the face of criticism from the WTO and the demise of the infamous Crow Rate Benefit which protected Prairie grain growers from the highly expensive task of transporting their crops to sea-ports for export. This fundamental change in approach has been clothed in the standard language of neo-liberal economics which now refers to farming as “agri-business,” a term which ensures that the success of farming operations is measured strictly by economic indicators. Weak international produce prices combined with the end of government assistance programs, most notably the Crow Rate Benefit, have narrowed profit margins substantially which means to remain profitable, the family farm must increase in size, invest in larger equipment and spend thousands annually on the latest chemical applications. The result has been an astronomical rise in the amount of debt incurred by farm families as well as general input costs while financial returns remain dependent on uncontrollable world markets, or, quite simply, bad luck, such as inclement weather or the unfortunate case of BSE-infected cattle in Alberta.

These changes have been inflicted in coordination with the additional market friendly adjustments sought throughout all levels of government which have demanded the consolidation and deregulation on a number of services, often resulting in the closure of rural government offices, hospitals, post offices and schools, all in the name of

¹¹⁰ Murray Knuttila, “Globalization, Economic Development and Canadian Agricultural Policy,” in Harry P. Diaz, Joann Jaffe and Robert Stirling, ed., *Farm Communities at the Crossroads*, (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2003), 300.

efficiency. Thus, rural communities have been hit from two sides. Not only are family-run farms facing financial ruin in record numbers, the services which stabilized rural centres for decades are now disappearing. In an effort to slow this rural decline, provincial and local politicians have sought out corporate investment in rural areas as a means to stimulate the economy by providing much needed employment for those wishing to remain.

The most prominent example of this approach has been the introduction of the corporate intensive livestock operation, often lured to specific rural locations with government sanctioned tax breaks and relaxed environmental and labour standards. Darren Qualman, outlining the growth of corporate hog farming throughout the Prairies, has noted that, in addition to blocking market access for smaller farmers and causing immense environmental damage, the corporate owned operation “facilitates and accelerates the extraction of wealth and capital” from rural areas.¹¹¹ In other words, downtrodden rural communities faced with a crisis in family farming and a severe decline in rural services also face something akin to the “Wal-Mart syndrome,” wherein well-meaning local officials, acting on the advice of Provincial and Federal governments, seek the “opportunities” offered by large-scale corporate investment, often overlooking the fact that such a policy only furthers local wealth extraction.

While the above clearly represents a simplification of the economics involved, the fact remains, rural communities are being transformed, or more accurately devastated, in

¹¹¹ Darren Qualman, “Corporate Hog Farming: The View From the Family Farm,” in Roger Epp and Dave Whitson, ed., *Writing off the Rural West*, (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 2001), 37.

ways never before seen. Stress, desperation and hopelessness are now common throughout western rural Canada. Consider the comments of a former Prairie farmer and community leader:

The people I associate with are confused, depressed and apprehensive. They feel betrayed, used, and abused. They find it difficult to trust anyone, even themselves. These attitudes and beliefs permeate every level of the community. The truth of the matter is that there is no longer in the agrarian fabric, trust, spirit or the practice of cooperation. We now find only competition which is negative in nature.¹¹²

It is this attitude, becoming prevalent throughout rural Prairie communities, which explains so well the story told in the introduction of this section. It is this sense of betrayal, of hopelessness, that has Prairie farmers suddenly turning away from a rich, co-operative history by protesting against the CWB, an organization their ancestors strove to create in an effort to ensure the good of the community as a whole. It is this sense of desperation that motivates well-meaning rural parents to demand for their youth a style of education that will lead to opportunities in urban centres rather than protesting the loss of curricula presented within a rural context. But most importantly, the demise of family farming and the accompanying attitude throughout the community has furthered a sense of shame in relation to the knowledge a cultural community is dying. As one farmer states, "my kids won't have an opportunity to be on the land. We're the ones that broke the chain, passing the farm from generation to generation."¹¹³

¹¹² Quote by anonymous farmer taken from: Roger Epp and Dave Whitson, "Writing Off Rural Communities?", in Roger Epp and Dave Whitson, ed., *Writing off the Rural West*, (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 2001), xxviii.

¹¹³ Harder, "'Overcoming Cultural and Spiritual Obstacles to Rural Revitalization,'" 226.

Not only has this general process shattered agricultural communities and thus threatened the existence of a collective cultural identity, the subsequent result has been a growing sense of alienation from both provincial and national identities. The relationship between the Federal government and Prairie agricultural communities has always been one built upon an unstable foundation, due largely to agrarian perceptions regarding the National Policy and subsequent political decisions emanating out of Ottawa. However, these negative perceptions were never enough to seriously endanger the manner by which agrarian individuals understood their own “connection” to Canada, a connection filtered through their own collective identity. Yet, as Epp argues, the current feelings of impotency as well as betrayal have produced an “anti-political oscillation between passivity and resentment – the latter still sustaining the Canadian Alliance Party [now Conservative Party] now that its Reform predecessor’s more interesting Jeffersonian-populist strands have been set aside in the quest for corporate campaign financing.”¹¹⁴ That is, despite political participation at the national level, rural inhabitants are distancing themselves more and more from meaningful contact with Canada as a whole, allowing bitterness and resentment to fill this void.

Recognition and the Rural West

As previously mentioned, the basic issue facing agricultural communities across the Prairies is one of profitability. The production of cereal grains, that which the Prairies have been geared towards since settlement, no longer brings in an adequate financial return now that the Federal government has discontinued the rail transportation subsidy known as the Crow Rate. The international price of cereal grains is an issue

¹¹⁴ Epp, “The Political De-Skilling of Rural Communities,” 317.

currently facing the WTO as developing nations strive to end agricultural subsidies which encourage “dumping” on the world market, thereby endangering the price stability of cereal grain. While much of the fate of Western Canadian farmers realistically relies on the European Union and the United States agreeing to lower such subsidies, advocates have noted that the Canadian government still controls a number of policy instruments which could enhance the livelihood of rural Prairie communities. Ken Jensen has argued that governments at each level must move beyond agricultural initiatives which seek “enhanced efficiency” and instead focus on policies which encourage new entrants into agriculture.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, the lack of opportunities for youth in rural communities is routinely mentioned as one of the problems that requires immediate attention.¹¹⁶ Restricting corporate ownership of large-scale farms or intensive livestock operations, returning important services such as post offices, hospitals or schools to rural settings as well as allowing for a rural focus to become part of a rural education curriculum are also ideas commonly discussed. Taken together, these notions are directed towards re-building rural communities in such a way that, in the words of Taylor, they “can become again important centres of concern and activity for its members in a way that connects them to the whole.”¹¹⁷

Surely each of these policy prescriptions requires much more analysis in terms of their potential impact or cost than I have provided. However, it is my contention that

¹¹⁵ Ken Jensen, “Farm Income Support Systems – In Whose Interest?” in Harry P. Diaz, Joann Jaffe and Robert Stirling, ed., *Farm Communities at the Crossroads*, (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2003), 330-334.

¹¹⁶ See “Section 2.3: Opportunities for Youth,” in *Canadian Rural Partnership – National Rural Workshop – Final Report*, October 2-4, 1998, www.rural.gc.ca/nrw/final_e.pthml#2.5, accessed November 27, 2004.

¹¹⁷ Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 118.

before any such action can be taken which aims at producing meaningful, long-term results, the largest theoretical obstacle which Taylor has highlighted must be overcome. This is the obstacle of recognition. Like the conflict between Quebec and the rest of Canada, or even that of First Nations, the first step involved in approaching the problems facing rural agricultural communities is a recognition of the collective agrarian identity present and the value such an identity has in the lives of rural Prairie inhabitants. As one Western Canadian farmer has lamented, “the land and the community are part of us. You can’t just put your hearts in a suitcase and move.”¹¹⁸ Without recognizing the existence of a valuable agrarian identity, a plea such as this one amounts to little more than someone demanding a handout after losing his job. As I hope to have demonstrated, the challenges facing the rural West go far beyond simple occupational change. Rather, an entire culture is being threatened, a unique way of life allowed to disintegrate in light of the cold logic of market efficiency, and, as the above plea suggests, Prairie farm families are facing the prospect of losing that which has become so central to their identity, both personally and as Canadians. Thus, as Bikkar Randhawa has argued, “these communities have to be seen as valuable and deserving of support for the ultimate equal and equitable distribution and provision of services.”¹¹⁹

Of course, a recognition of the value of this way of life to rural inhabitants requires first a recognition of the cultural hierarchies operating in relation to this issue which, intentionally or otherwise, marginalize the cultural value of rural life in relation to urban living. As suggested earlier, agricultural policy is now extremely dependent on the

¹¹⁸ Quote taken from: Herder, “Overcoming Cultural and Spiritual Obstacles to Rural Revitalization,” 234.

¹¹⁹ Bikkar S. Randhawa, “Rural Education: Opportunities and Issues,” in David Hay and Gurcharn Basran, ed., *Rural Sociology in Canada*, (Toronto: Oxford, 1992), 111-112.

views of the largely urban electorate. Therefore, any meaningful shift in the approaches of government depends on the willingness of the urban electorate to recognize the preservation of agricultural communities and small-scale farming as an important policy goal, something which requires overcoming stereotypical views. Clearly, this is a shift which relates to Taylor's notion of the dialogical self and the potential for cultural interaction and "transvaluation." However, Taylor is aware that "misrecognition" is not simply an issue of cultural hierarchies. He writes, in reference to the issue of language preservation in Quebec:

Since English is virtually the world hegemonic language today, it is difficult for those who speak it even to understand what it could be to live under linguistic threat. Rather than seeing language as the indispensable basis of self-expression and self-realization, anglophone North Americans tend to see it as an unproblematic medium of communication.¹²⁰

Once drawn out, the parallels between Quebec-Canada relations and those of rural and urban, in this context of "misrecognition," are striking. Within urban Canada it most likely seems odd that such dust should be stirred up surrounding the decline of an occupation given that very few urban careers, despite being personally valuable, are so closely linked to a collective cultural identity as agriculture clearly is in rural areas. Thus, like the divergent understandings of language between Quebec and the rest of Canada, the issue between rural and urban areas is not simply reducible to the cultural hierarchies operating which often marginalize rural culture, but more so, the urban reluctance to recognize the cultural value within the occupation of agriculture for rural communities. Following Taylor, I assert that only a genuine, open dialogue between

¹²⁰ Taylor, "Alternative Futures: Legitimacy, Identity and Alienation in Late Twentieth Century Canada," 216.

these distinct cultural communities will provide the proper foundation on which to move forward in the interests of a suitable cultural recognition required for the survival of the agrarian identity.

Of course, it must be noted that rural inhabitants also have a significant role to play in regards to their own future. This begins by acknowledging the impressive results produced throughout their communal history by various co-operative ventures. As Fairbairn has argued in relation to this impressive history, “Prairie people worried today by globalization, resources and world markets, urbanization, and geographic inequalities of wealth and power, need to be reminded that they have faced these same problems repeatedly, and won victories.”¹²¹ Only such recognition will counter the growing sense of competitiveness one sees manifesting itself throughout rural communities between family farms and instead propel the creation of local organizational forces which themselves can become key elements in terms of rural revitalization which move beyond simple nostalgic calls for a return to the “good old days.” However, these considerations do not, in any way, lessen the immediate need for a genuine interaction between rural and urban cultures which could allow for a recognition and acceptance of distinctiveness in such a way that allows each to flourish.

¹²¹ Fairbairn, “Visions of Alternative Futures: Three Cases from the Prairie Consumer Co-operative Movement, 1914-1945,” 98.

Conclusion: The Critics of Preservation and the Implications for Agrarian Communities

The argument thus far presented has been one framed within the philosophy of Charles Taylor, a collection of ideas I admit to being sympathetic towards. Specifically, it has been demonstrated that there exists a collective rural agrarian identity in Western Canada based on the perceptions of cultural uniqueness. Following Taylor, I have argued that such a cultural community is foundational in the sense it has constituted, in important ways, the identity of the agrarian individual by way of introducing languages of moral discernment. Furthermore, such an identity plays a large role in how agrarian individuals associate themselves with Canada as a whole, an association understood through the lens of their own cultural community. Thus, a recognition of the value of this cultural community and subsequent public policy directed towards its survival is justified.

However, the philosophy of Taylor is not without its critics. Due to the limited size and scope of this project, it is within the final pages of this study that I briefly address a small selection of these critiques expressed toward Taylor's philosophical ruminations surrounding the politics of recognition as well as its practical application. My responses to these challenges will consider both Taylor's reply in terms of the Quebec issue and my own judgments surrounding the issue of preserving the Western Canadian agrarian cultural community.

I begin by outlining three critiques of Taylor's work relating to the issue of cultural preservation within Quebec. The first, articulated by Andy Lamey, centers around his contention that cultural preservation policies implicit in Taylor's argument

contain the potential to “imprison” communities. Sighting the Quiet Revolution in Quebec he argues “a culture’s self-understanding can change, and efforts to force a contemporary understanding on the future seem hardly immune to the problems around imposed identities.”¹²² The second critique, also provided by Lamey, argues language legislation in Quebec which is supported by Taylor’s philosophy equates to a “silent privileging of the majority [French] culture.”¹²³ In other words, there appears to be a contradiction between Taylor’s support for specific language legislation designed to protect the French majority in Quebec and his general demand for the recognition of the value of all cultural groups, including the minority groups in Quebec who face the prospect of linguistic assimilation because of said policy. Finally, a third critique is offered by Steven Rockefeller who laments “I am uneasy about the danger of an erosion over time of fundamental human rights growing out of a separatist mentality that elevates ethnic identity over universal human identity.”¹²⁴

Together, these three critiques represent a formidable theoretical challenge to any cultural preservation project. However, within Taylor’s more recent work one can find a general response to each of these concerns. First, in response to Lamey’s initial concern regarding the potential to “imprison” an imposed identity on future members of the culture in question, it can be argued that this perhaps misses the mark in regards to Taylor’s writings on Quebec. That is, nowhere in his writing have I found arguments which favour the legislated preservation of anything outside of the French language nor

¹²² Andy Lamey, “Francophonia Forever: The Contradictions of Charles Taylor’s ‘Politics of Recognition’,” in *Times Literary Supplement*, July 23, 1999, 14.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Steven Rockefeller, “Comment,” in Amy Gutmann, ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 89.

do I believe Taylor has any interest maintaining a frozen notion of Quebecois identity. This seems especially true considering Taylor's work regarding the dialogical nature of identity and his hope that cultural understandings may shift in ways that allow for a peaceful coexistence between distinct cultural communities. Further, it is worth noting that, in response to Lamey's second concern, regarding the collective rights of minorities within Quebec, Taylor, when called before the Commission on the Political and Constitutional Future of Quebec in 1990, stressed the need to combine the communitarian vision of Quebec with a "code for minorities" which would ensure the fundamental rights of minorities and further recognize that, although "French will dominate in Quebec and English elsewhere, linguistic minorities will not simply be crushed....but will enjoy a special status."¹²⁵ The final critique articulated by Rockefeller represents a standard liberal concern for the protection of individual rights which are seemingly threatened by the introduction of collective rights. Yet Taylor is surely sensitive to this issue and has argued that it is possible to:

distinguish between, on the one hand, the fundamental liberties – those that should never at any time be infringed upon – (and those) privileges and immunities which are important but can be revoked or restricted for reasons of public policy, although one needs a strong reason to do so.¹²⁶

However, despite this commitment to ensure that both the individual and collective rights of minorities will be protected within Quebec, it remains clear, I think, that there still exists a theoretical problem here, both in terms of distinguishing fundamental liberties from "privileges and immunities" and guaranteeing this "code for

¹²⁵ Charles Taylor, "The Stakes of Constitutional Reform," in *Reconciling the Solitudes*, edited by G. Laforest, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1993), 152.

¹²⁶ Taylor, "Shared and Divergent Values," 176-177.

minorities.” That is, regardless of this commitment, it appears that Taylor, or the communitarian argument more generally, is prepared to encroach upon certain individual and collective rights in order to preserve a community, an encroachment which clearly makes procedural liberals nervous. Yet, Taylor argues, although remaining a very important principle, liberal demands for state neutrality and respect for individual liberties cannot be the only consideration. He writes:

There are always a plurality of goods, vying for our allegiance, and one of the most difficult issues is how to combine them, how to adjudicate at the places they come into conflict, or mutually restrict each other. I have no difficulty with the idea that offering the greatest scope for different modes of life and conceptions of the good is *an* important goal. I cavil at the idea that it can be *the* goal; that is, that is doesn’t have at certain points to compose¹²⁷ with other ends, which will require its limitation.

This argument is a crucial step within Taylor’s philosophy. He is asserting that respect for individual rights represents only one of a number of incompatible and incommensurable goods which, when in conflict, require a careful, case-by-case analysis to ascertain which will take precedence over the other. With regard to Quebec, the good of cultural survival must be weighed against the costs of encroaching upon both individual and collective minority rights. This is not an easy calculation nor is there a universal equation which will guide modern societies facing these predicaments. Thus, as Guy Laforest has argued, Taylor’s work regarding the Quebec-Canada issue is, in many ways, very Aristotelian in the sense that Taylor is drawing on Aristotle’s nuanced approach to the complexities of real life and his judgment that “what is just in a particular society involves combining mutually irreducible principles in a weighting that is

¹²⁷ Charles Taylor, “Reply and Re-Articulation,” 250.

appropriate for the particular society, given its history, economy, degree of integration.”¹²⁸ It is this nuanced appreciation of the complexities of modern, pluralist democracies which allows Taylor to maneuver around the concerns emphasized by procedural liberals who express legitimate concern for the individual and collective minorities “within” a community seeking cultural protection. As Taylor freely admits, if one “set aside everything that derives from identity and the troubles and conflicts related to it, the world would seem more simple and manageable,” but this is no reason to abandon the recognition project because “those whose identity is precarious will see this as another way not to take them seriously.”¹²⁹

Clearly, Taylor’s assertion that individual rights, representing one of the many incommensurable goods available to us, must be weighed in proper relation to the good of cultural survival is one that is applicable to my own argument for the preservation of the collective agrarian identity. There is one specific policy option which was mentioned briefly in regards to preserving rural culture that would need to be examined in accordance with this commitment to consider carefully the implications of allowing one good to take precedent over another. Specifically, the argument could be made that any attempt to modify the educational curriculum of rural schools, a policy idea which was mentioned briefly in an effort to counter an “urban-bias,” would involve subjecting rural youth to a particular notion of what it means to be part of an agrarian community. Clearly, this policy option may be open to the charge of “imprisoning” the agrarian

¹²⁸ Guy Laforest, “Philosophy in a Multinational Federation,” in J. Tully ed., *Philosophy in an age of Pluralism*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 207.

¹²⁹ Taylor, “From Philosophical Anthropology to the Politics of Recognition: An Interview with Charles Taylor,” 108.

community within a static notion of rural culture yet could also be justified when considered in relation to the alternative, that being the demise of the rural cultural community. This justification stems from Taylor's assertion that there exists a plurality of conflicting and incommensurable goods creating a difficult situation wherein one must be allowed to overtake the other. In this case, cultural preservation may be deemed the more important consideration.

However, there is a more pressing issue at hand when considering public policy aimed at preserving the agrarian community throughout the Prairies. Clearly, one glaring difference between the crisis facing family farms and that facing the Quebecois is that the former is not a challenge contained within one province, a fact that obviously complicates the administration of certain policies. This is also a fact that seemingly takes the issue of "minorities within" out of the picture. However, I am hesitant to accept that view outright. It is not a stretch to argue that the social conservatism present within a number of rural Western communities acts as a significant conductor for racist, homophobic and patriarchal attitudes throughout the region.¹³⁰ Indeed, Paul Cloke and Jo Little have documented the nature of the small, intimate rural community and the manner by which it tends to operate in an exclusionary manner, reinforcing conservative norms and marginalizing the "other," in this case the ethnic minority, the homosexual and to some extent, women who challenge the patriarchal model , all understood, at times, as

¹³⁰ See: Fred Cutler and Richard W. Jenkins, "Where one lives and What one Thinks: Implications of Rural-Urban Opinion Cleavages for Canadian Federalism," unpublished paper presented to *The Transformation of Canadian Political Culture and the State of the Federation Conference*, Queen's University, October 13-14, 2000, available at: <http://www.politics.ubc.ca/index.php?id=2451>, accessed November 28, 2005. Within this article it is made clear that although the "intolerant rural hick" is an overused and incorrect stereotype, rural Canadians do express negative reactions toward homo-sexuality and feminism more frequently than their urban counterparts.

representing a threat to “the moral security of the rural community and the order and control of established rural society.”¹³¹ This certainly signifies a similar problem as to that of the minorities within Quebec. Thus, it could be argued that any attempt to preserve the agricultural communities of which I speak will only further this marginalization of the “other” within farming communities, surely an illiberal outcome that must be considered.

In contrast to the potential dangers associated with a “rural” education curriculum, the persistence of intolerant attitudes towards, perhaps even persecution of, those promoting feminist ideals or homosexual marriage, for example, represents a danger to fundamental human rights which cannot be glossed over with the overriding concern for cultural preservation. These attitudes, in my opinion, represent and evil which must be addressed by rural communities for they are clearly an attack on individual rights yet not something that can be condoned in the interests of cultural preservation. In fact, the culture I have described throughout this paper, one held together by a unique occupation, oriented towards the family, appreciative of nature, build upon a certain sense of community and defined in opposition to the “urban,” stands independent of these discriminatory views. That is, unlike the English language in Quebec, homosexuality or feminism in no way threaten the persistence of the Western agrarian culture I have described, therefore such intolerant attitudes within rural communities are not, in any way, justifiable and any policy designed to protect such communities must be constructed in such a way that makes such a message clear.

¹³¹ Paul Cloke and Jo Little, “Marginality and Rural Others,” in Paul Cloke and Jo Little, ed., *Contested Countryside Cultures*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 276.

There is one substantial objection that may be raised in relation to this argument. Specifically, does not the structure of the Western Canadian family farm, or the community of which it is a part, implicitly rely on such intolerant beliefs, either in the form of a general patriarchal attitude or an anti-homosexual sentiment, perhaps drawn from interpretations of the Christian Bible? And further, if this is true, is such an intolerant community one worth preserving within a country committed to preserving fundamental human rights? This is a particularly intriguing issue but also one which certainly requires further research regarding the influence of the Christian religion upon this cultural community. However, I respond with a short example with respect to gender which, I think, points to the potential for such communities to overcome this intolerance while maintaining the central pillars of their cultural identity.

It has been argued that farm-families tend to be “honour-based” in the sense that men, acting as the head of the farming operation, often believe the act of confession, the admittance that their farm requires financial assistance, was dishonourable.¹³² The result, in many cases, has been that rural women, apparently free from this male-based honour system, have been required to come forward as the family representative and request help, thereby encouraging community discussion revolving around the current crisis facing family farms to take place. Somewhat paradoxically, the “honour” of rural males has opened important avenues through which rural women have been playing a more significant role within the community. In other words, it was in an effort to *sustain* this

¹³² See: Harder, “Overcoming Cultural and Spiritual Obstacles to Rural Revitalization,” 233-235, and Mary Van Hook, “Family Response to the Farm Crisis: A Study in Coping,” in *Social Work*, Vol. 35, No. 5, September 1990, 425.

collective identity rather than to *escape* from it that has shaken conservative foundations in some respects and allowed for the inclusion of women in community leadership roles. Certainly this represents only one example but it is important because it challenges a common notion that collectivities deemed oppressive are unable to re-assess their own illiberal values without threatening their cultural identity as a whole. It remains unclear how this potential for attitude change precisely translates to the issue of anti-homosexual sentiment in rural communities but it does provide hope for those who believe, like myself, that a dynamic Western Canadian agrarian identity can persist in a way that sheds such intolerant attitudes.

In fact, drawing again on Taylor's notion of a dialogical self, it may very well be the case that only a genuine interaction between the rural and the urban will propel the rural community to overcome these intolerant views in such a way that does not challenge the central foundations of their own identity. However, a genuine interaction of cultural communities is only possible when each participant has acknowledged the value of that which differentiates one cultural community from another, in Taylor's words, the varying moral frameworks operating in the background of each culture. Of course, it is this recognition which is also required for the challenges facing family farming to be taken seriously by the urban electorate in Canada. Without it, agrarian communities throughout the Prairies face an uncertain, and most likely dim, future. It is this uncertain future that challenges the foundational community of thousands of rural inhabitants throughout the rural West, a challenge which I have argued requires immediate attention. To appreciate the value of any culture, however, first requires a

philosophical understanding of the human subject and the manner by which it is intrinsically tied to its foundational community. By overlooking this connection, much modern liberal political thought founded upon the “disengaged self” thesis has, subtly or otherwise, encouraged the growth of an instrumental public sphere which fails to take the preservation of cultural communities seriously. Therefore, as Taylor’s theory has made clear, a proper philosophical defense of the community begins at the ontological level and the acceptance that the human subject is an embodied, self-interpreting animal who is dependent upon the cultural community from which he or she comes.

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