

THE CANADIAN CENSUS FOR THE COMMON GOOD

I was invited to speak at this workshop primarily because, in my role as a microhistorian, my work is rooted in the description and analysis of individuals within a community over time. Like genealogists, therefore, my work relies heavily on manuscript census information pertaining to individuals, and is therefore particularly vulnerable to the recent suppression of historical evidence about individuals through Bill S18, as Eric Sager outlines in his paper for this panel. My comments today do not, however, address the particular difficulties that this legislation will bring to people within my sub-specialty of microhistory, though they are significant. Instead, I will suggest that the government's decision to destroy or suppress particular kinds of historical evidence has implications that reach far beyond microhistorians', and indeed beyond historians' work, out to the common good of society at large.

We haven't heard much about the public good in recent years. The idea that we should even think about a public good that means more than the sum of individuals' wealth or well-being, let alone that the government should be a steward or custodian of such a thing, has been eroded in the English speaking world by twenty-five years of neo-conservative thinking. Neo-conservative ideology, so familiar to us all, emphasizes individual choices, rights and fears rather than an idea of a common or public good. The idea of a common or public good is not missing from neo-conservative ideology: when asked about the practical social consequences of this ideology, proponents used to argue that indeed the best way to improve the overall welfare of citizens in a democratic society is to provide as wide a range of opportunities and goods as possible, so that people can choose for themselves what they, as individuals, want. The link between individual well-being and the common good is provided by economists' foundational claim that people are rational, and make rational choices about their well-being whenever they are able. The collective effect of individual choices therefore is, naturally and inevitably within this ideological framework, the best solution to the problem of a collective social welfare: "To improve [general] welfare, you must increase freedom of choice, not because increased choice is necessarily good in itself, but because it increases the chances that each individual will be able to find something that serves his or her interests."¹

I say "used to argue" because I seldom see any discussion of the concept of a public good; it has all but disappeared from media coverage of economic and social issues, to be replaced by more simple assertions that the privatization of public utilities, tax cuts, the growth of mega-corporations

and increased GDP should, but in any case must, inevitably, continue. There is little public discussion about, far less evaluation of, the evidence that might be brought forward to support the contention that increased wealth for a few will result in a better world for us all.² This should not surprise us, for the last ten years have witnessed the massive takeover of a variety of media – television, newspapers, and radio – by a few large corporations with an explicitly right wing agenda.³

But the silence that characterizes the media's treatment of the public good has not yet been met by a parallel trend in the Social Science and Humanities departments at Canada's public universities, notwithstanding their increased corporatization. Indeed, rather the opposite has happened. In recent years, not only have academics traced some of the more devastating economic, social and cultural impacts of global capitalism, but, more positively, a spate of sociological studies has demonstrated conclusively that there is such a thing as the public good, that it is more than the sum of individuals' happiness, and, indeed, that individualism, unfettered consumerism and, most measurably, inequality are instead detrimental to the health and well-being of the whole – to the common, public good. Richard Wilkinson and Avner Offer are among those have recently demonstrated that greater inequality throughout society clearly, measurably and quite precisely manifests itself negatively in key indicators of the general well-being of individuals – rich and poor – through entire societies and communities. Some of these include the health (morbidity and infant mortality, most notably), longevity, security (real and perceived) and general sense of wellbeing of *everyone* in society.⁴ The public good – the health and well-being of everyone in a society – it turns out, has a great deal to do with our lives as individuals, whatever our ideologies or our incomes.

As social historians of the nineteenth and twentieth century English-speaking countries will attest, there are some rather strange ironies here. Historians generally agree that when it came to lobbying for the reforms that transformed western societies in the twentieth century, it was middle class fears – fears of the social unrest, the rampant diseases, the crime and the violence that had followed in the wake of laissez-faire capitalism – and not some reformers' vision of a more just and equal society that catalyzed the changes that created a more humane, egalitarian society by the mid-twentieth century. While these reforms did not create an egalitarian society in the English-speaking world, it is now clear that they succeeded, for some decades before the Thatcher/

Reagan years, in reducing inequality and, not co-incidentally, generating unprecedented comfort, better health and more wealth for a larger percentage of people than had previously been possible.

In spite of a surprisingly measurable public good, sustained or diminished by the persistence of a collective phenomenon – equality or its absence – governments in the English-speaking world are now intent, overwhelmingly, on ignoring its existence. Having rejected the principle that governments should be stewarding scarce resources, or arbitrating among competing interests for the benefit of the whole, or building a more healthy society, or creating policies that protect future generations from pollution, climate change or energy shortages, far less removing inequality, governments are now hard pressed to continue to justify their existence. Fortunately for governments, there is still one active social role that they can play to gain the democratic support they need, even within a right-wing, deeply fragmented and unequal society. Their one remaining highly championed social role, the role that ensures their continued existence, is security. Increasingly, we see governments claiming legitimacy by trumpeting their unique ability to give us “national” security, both by protecting us from the fellow citizens whose health and well-being used to be a central concern of government, and from those “others” outside our borders.

It is time to bring this discussion back to the Census of Canada. I would like to suggest that the censorship of information contained in Bill S58, where individuals have the right to block access to information about themselves contained in the census after 92 years, falls inside this new pattern of fear, distrust and secrecy that is now increasingly defining public discourse in English-speaking countries. It represents a particular historical moment, one characterized by a politically popular *general* fear and distrust of everybody by everybody, and a particular *general* denial of a collective, public good. Without this historically contingent set of circumstances, it is difficult to understand what, exactly, Bill S58 is protecting us from. As Eric Sager has already argued, the information on the census is, first of all, available elsewhere, most of it as part of the generally accessible public record. Secondly, it is not clear what kinds of knowledge people want to protect themselves from after 92 years. Finally, if, as I suspect, the real issue at stake here is that people really do not want information about them known by anyone, ever, the problem is surely the *gathering* and *recording* of such information, not the use of it by historians and genealogists 92 years in the future.

But once the information has been gathered, which it surely has and will be by governments and interested corporations, it is precisely historians’ eventual access to this information that provides the real contribution to the common good.

There are two ways in which individual census information can do this, through time. The first has to do with the concept of our collective rights and freedoms. The very existence of public records is rooted in the idea that ‘the people’ have a right to see and understand what the government is doing with information about them. The Public Record exists not only to let us know about ourselves, but, in the process, it protects us from the kinds of totalitarian and repressive states imagined by George Orwell in *1984*, where the idea of a collectivity or common good comprised of individuals has been dissolved and replaced with propaganda in the present, and the restriction of reliable information about people in the past. It may seem paradoxical, but the largest guarantor of our individual rights and freedoms is our collective understanding of ‘society’. Our need to see and understand the information, and kinds of information, that the government is gathering about us must be balanced with our concerns about privacy and security in the present, but there is a point where our rights and needs for privacy as individuals will be compromised if we cannot, collectively, know about society in the past, and the individuals who comprised it. This point has been named as 92 years, and it includes our collective right to know just what kinds of information governments have been gathering about individuals. If governments are gathering detailed information at the level of named individuals, as they certainly are with the census of Canada, then historians of the future need to have access to this information so as to understand the relationships between particular individuals and the government. This is the best way of protecting our collective rights and freedoms, in the interests of a non-totalitarian and democratic future – for the public good.

A second way in which individual information in the hands of future historians can lead to the common good is related to the very existence of the notion of a public good itself. Historians of the future need to know about individuals in order to understand what the relationship is between individuals and a variety of collectivities, or communities, or society as a whole; for it is now clear that there is a relationship, and that it is complex and multifaceted. Historians of the future will be able to have a much better understanding of just how individuals are connected to the whole when they are able to trace individuals through time and space. A deeper and broader understanding of the relationship amongst people, and between people and the collectivities to which they belong, therefore, has greater potential for improving those relationships than the suppression of this information does. The more information that individuals in the future can have about those in their past (like us), the greater the likelihood that they will be able to improve their common good in their present and future.

If historians are going to fight back effectively against the suppression of historical evidence for future historians that is

so potentially harmful to the common good, I would suggest that we need to provide Canadians with a new discourse with which to combat the increasing censorship and secrecy that threatens our public good, present and future. We need to give back to people a language where the opposite of 'right to privacy' is not ONLY identity theft, credit card fraud, stalking, violence, and unimagined humiliation of public exposure (though about what, exactly, is often unclear). We need to demonstrate to people that it is essential to the collective, public good to allow Canadians of the future to see just what information governments were gathering about individuals in the twenty-first century. And we need to create a discursive space where we can argue that the right to privacy, happiness and liberty in the present, with our privacy and rights protected, is secured and enhanced, at least in part, by the ability of people in the future to gain a deep and broad understanding of "what happened" to individuals within a collectivity in the past. Finally, we need to convince people that our ability to live in an open and democratic society in the present, where people can work to improve the common good in spite of powers working against it, is dependent on

our ability to see and therefore understand the relationships amongst individuals, between governments and individuals, and amongst individuals and various collectivities, and through time. For it is our collective right to know about society – our collective as well as our individual selves – in the past, to gain a better understanding of the present, and perhaps even some direction for the future.

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This paper was presented at the CHA 2007 meeting as part of a panel on the census and revised for the Bulletin in September 2007.

¹ Barry Schwartz, "Stop the Treadmill!" *London Review of Books* Vol. 29, no 5, March 8, 2007, 32.

² There are some important exceptions to this. I have just heard on our public broadcasting system this morning, for example, an interview with Naomi Klein, who has published a number of books, including *No Logo*, and her latest *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, explicitly challenging the claims of right wing economists like Milton Friedman that 'extreme' capitalism benefits anyone but a tiny rich majority.

³ A number of recent, highly popular film documentaries, including Klein's *The Take*, Michael Moore's *Sicko*, and Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbot, and Joel Bakan's *The Corporation* and Chris Paine's *Who Killed the Electric Car* are taking up the role of serious social criticism that used to be filled by newspapers, television and radio.

⁴ Richard Wilkinson, *The Impact of Inequality: How to make Sick Societies Healthier* (New York: The New Press, 2005); Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence: Self-Control and Well-Being in the United States and Britain Since 1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). For a serious discussion of the social and cultural import of the 'common good' for history educators, see also Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).