The Surface of Things: The Impossibility of George Grant's Conservatism and the Possibility of Canada

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Abstract: This essay's contribution to the symposium dedicated to the anniversary of *Lament for a Nation* explores how George Grant's neglect of the question of the regime engenders a reductionist and, at times, misguided interpretation of political philosophy and politics by examining the fundamentally flawed understanding of Canada's origins advanced in *Lament for a Nation*. At a time when Canadian sovereignty is under greater threat than at any point in the last century, it behooves us to return to the roots of our political tradition to decide if the Founders' intention is valuable and worth preserving. Grant's analysis is an obstacle to this enterprise because his failure to grasp the significance of the political not only precludes him from recognizing the full complexity of modernity, but also from understanding the intention of the Canadian Founding and the vitality of the Canadian regime.

Keywords: George Grant, Canadian Confederation, Political liberty, Parliamentarianism, Modernity

It is one of those curious twists of fate that in 2025, we find ourselves commemorating the 60th anniversary of George Grant's *Lament for a Nation*. As a scholar who has been critical of Grant's presentation of the American postwar order, modernity, and the philosophical foundations upon which it rests, recent political events have prompted a reevaluation of my earlier reproval—an act encouraged by the fruitful commentary offered by Tyler Chamberlain (McKinnell 2024; Chamberlain 2025). Chamberlain contends that I overstate the problems with Grant's political teaching by not adequately recognizing that Grant's criticism of modernity is primarily aimed at its ontological foundations, not the political principles of liberty and equality. Consequently, I exaggerate the extent to which Grant downplays the differences between liberal democracy and totalitarianism (Chamberlain 2025, p. 80, 85-86). However, despite further reflection, my criticism of Grant remains unchanged. Indeed, in my view, Chamberlain's analysis only further confirms that Grant does not appreciate the full significance of the political dimension. As this symposium is dedicated to the anniversary of *Lament for a Nation*, this essay intends to explore how Grant's neglect of the question of the regime engenders a reductionist and, at times, misguided interpretation of political philosophy and politics by examining the fundamentally flawed understanding of Canada's origins advanced in *Lament for a Nation*. At a time when Canadian sovereignty is under

greater threat than at any point in the last century, it behooves us to return to the roots of our political tradition to decide if the Founders' intention is valuable and worth preserving. Grant's analysis is an obstacle to this enterprise because his failure to grasp the significance of the political not only precludes him from recognizing the full complexity of modernity, but also from understanding the intention of the Canadian Founding and the vitality of the Canadian regime.

I agree with Chamberlain that the primary aim of Grant's political teaching was to show that the traditional basis of liberty, equality, and human excellence cannot be sustained in a society determined by the technological impulse, which culminates in the Universal Homogenous State (UHS), not that liberty itself is unvaluable (Grant 2005, p. 62). After all, Grant criticizes American conservatives not for their adherence to constitutional government but for their epistemological commitment to the dynamism of a technological society. Further, Grant states that it is preferable to live in the West because it is still formally constitutional. Chamberlain takes this as evidence of Grant's appreciation of liberal democracy and contends that his intention was only to highlight that both desired the UHS, not that their institutional arrangements were the same (Chamberlain 2025, p. 81).[1] But, therein lies the rub. Grant depreciates the difference between the American and Soviet systems *because* he assumes both have the same basis and objective, the UHS. As Chamberlain points out, for Grant, the crucial factor is not the "political *superstructures* which we live in" but what he sees as the ontological "*substructure*" (Chamberlain 2025, p. 81). Like Marx and Heidegger, Grant views political life as epiphenomenal or subservient to an underlying social reality. Convinced that the underlying logic of technology ultimately shapes the character of modern political life, Grant fails to consider whether the fact that the Soviet regime produced the Gulag and Western liberal democracies did not, demonstrates that they were not politically, ontologically, or metaphysically the same. Moreover, he does not consider the significance of the differences between liberal regimes themselves. By seeking the hidden depths of the substructure, Grant forgets that "the problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things" (Strauss 1978, p. 13). Grant does not take the regime seriously and therefore misreads the depths.

This problem is on full display in the presentation of Canada in *Lament for a Nation*. Grant claims that "the impossibility of conservatism in our era is the impossibility of Canada" (Grant 2005, p. 67). Conservatism is impossible because pre-modern or authentic conservatism puts virtue before freedom and situates human action within a divine or natural order incompatible with the progressive spirit of modernity oriented by human autonomy. Canada's existence as a sovereign political community was only sustainable and worth being sustained so long as its guiding intention reflected this pre-modern conservatism in contrast to the progressive modernity embodied by the United States. However, once Canadians fully embraced liberal modernity, the moral-philosophical rationale for Canada's independence disappeared, necessitating the country's eventual disappearance. Yet, this account of Canada's origins ignores what Canada's Founders believed. From the beginning, the intention of the Canadian political project was to establish a regime where constitutional liberty would be more secure than under American republicanism (McKinnell 2023). If Canada is impossible because its *raison d'être* is no longer sustainable or adhered to, at the very least, one should offer an analysis of Canada's Founders that seeks to understand them as they understood themselves. Grant cannot do this because, unlike the Founders, he does not assign central importance to the nature of the regime. If Grant's overarching premise prevents him from understanding the political philosophy that influenced the formation of his own political community, what does this say about his analysis of modernity itself?

Therefore, this essay reiterates my contention that Grant's failure to understand the regime results in a defective political teaching by examining his analysis of the Canadian regime. I first consider why Grant's approach to the history of political philosophy is reductionist. I then show how this oversimplified approach leads to a misleading and detrimental interpretation of the origins of the Canadian regime. The essay then concludes by considering the possibility and value of revitalizing Canada's founding principles in light of a re-evaluation of Grant's work.

GRANT'S CONSERVATISM AND THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

While most readers come away from *Lament for a Nation* with Grant's claim that Canada's continued existence as a sovereign, independent nation has come to an end foremost in their minds, often overlooked is the far more radical philosophical assertion that precedes it. Namely, that conservatism is impossible in the modern era. On the surface, this seems as strange as Grant's insistence that Canada no longer exists. After all, there are plenty of self-described conservative politicians, political parties, and thinkers. Yet for Grant, these self-described conservatives are not adherents to an authentic conservatism, but proponents of an older version of liberalism. Grant defines true conservatism as the social doctrine that public order and tradition, rather than freedom and experiment, are essential to a good life, undergirded by the view that "virtue must be prior to freedom," and the "conception of an eternal order by which human actions are measured and defined" (Grant 2005, pp. 69, 71,74). On the other hand, for Grant, the core of liberalism is the assumption that the essence of human beings is freedom, or autonomy. Since liberalism assumes that human beings are autonomous, it must reject anything that limits human freedom, meaning that any claims of divine or natural authority are denied. In effect, human autonomy entails the complete emancipation of the passions. An "open ended progression in which men will be endlessly free to make the world as they want it" (Grant 2005, p. 55; Forbes 2007, pp. 46-47). While traditional, "organic" conservatives asserted the right of the political community to restrain freedom in the name of the common good, today's conservatives celebrate freedom from the State. Indeed, Grant goes so far as to claim that socialism, by insisting on restraining greed for the sake of the community, demonstrates a closer adherence to this pre-modern ideal than the self-described conservatives of the twentieth century (Grant 2005, p. 57).

Most contemporary conservatives and classical liberals would reject the idea that they endorse the progressive doctrine of the perfectibility of man, understanding themselves as defenders of the constitutionalism of Locke, Montesquieu, and Smith in contrast to the heirs of Rousseau and Marx. Grant acknowledges this argument and at times appears to sympathize with it. However, in Grant's telling, the more extreme forms of progressive modernity manifesting in the political movements deriving from Rousseau, Marx, and Nietzsche are already implicit in Lockean liberalism. The historical unfolding of liberal modernity unleashes an inherent relativism that leads to a negation of nature as the drive for human autonomy seeks to overcome any limitations it imposes (Grant 2005, p. 52). As overcoming limitations requires the technological mastery of nature, liberalism must be understood as dependent on technology and cannot transcend it (Grant 1998, p. 85-86). Instead of remaining an instrument of liberal values of liberty and equality, technology possesses a logic of its own, the freedom to "negate nature endlessly to produce more power with which to go on negating nature," which swallows up justice in "an irresistibly more comprehensive global 'destiny'" (Newell 2021, p. 182). Ultimately, this progressive drive for mastery must culminate in establishing the UHS, a universal (worldwide), egalitarian society that achieves full autonomy for the human will. In a reversal of Hegel, who held that the establishment of the rational society entailed the full realization of human freedom, the hegemony of technology ends in human degradation. According to Grant, modern conservatives, like liberals and socialists, are striving (whether knowingly or unknowingly) for its establishment. Conservatism is impossible in the modern era because this would require rejecting the progressive spirit, placing virtue prior to freedom.

The interpretation of modernity presented here is similar in many respects to that of Leo Strauss. Indeed, Grant acknowledges his debt to and cites Strauss' "The Three Waves of Modernity." However, what is missing in Grant's analysis is what, for Strauss, is the guiding theme of political philosophy, the question of the *politeia* or the regime. Every society is a partnership directed towards some principle or purpose. For example, Montesquieu observes in the *Spirit of the Laws* that Rome's principle was expansion, Sparta's war, and England's political liberty. The regime is the form or order that constitutes or organizes a society according to its purpose or goal. It gives the community its specific character (Strauss 1959, p. 34). The Spartan and English regimes are not only distinguished by their form of government, but by the character of their laws, morals, manners, and rulers. Furthermore, every regime implicitly or explicitly grounds

the claim regarding its principle or purpose on an assertion about the best way of life for human beings: liberty, honour, piety, etc. Any claim about the best way of life for human beings and what type of regime engenders it is ultimately an ontological claim, an assertion about human nature and its relationship with the whole. To put it another way, what we see on the surface, the political dimension, is representative of this wider trans-political claim. To respond to Chamberlain, the substructure is revealed in the superstructure. Because various regimes are constituted in accordance with conflicting principles, we are compelled to evaluate the contradictory claims and ask which regime best conforms to the perfection of human nature. According to Strauss, this question of the best regime is the guiding theme of political philosophy. However, while the best regime is superior to all other regimes, classical political philosophy also teaches that its actualization relies on chance; its coming into being is outside human control (Strauss 1959, pp. 35-36). Indeed, attempting to overcome chance to actualize perfection will likely result in the destruction of humanity. The task of political philosophy, political science in its original sense, is to assess historical regimes compared to the best regime. Which offers the best approximation, or, depending on the circumstances, is the least destructive of humanity?

Therefore, while Strauss faults modern liberalism for corrupting human beings by lowering the standard of morality by advancing a doctrine aimed at self-preservation instead of virtue, this critique is qualified. Modern liberal regimes have liberty as their principle. Though lacking in virtue, they are gentle or moderate. While the permissiveness of liberal gentleness creates moral and political problems, liberal regimes retain "the old and eternal ideal of decency, the rule of law, and of that liberty which is not license, to changed circumstances" (Strauss 1999, p. 372). Moreover, despite narrowing the gap between the Is and Ought, modern liberalism still retains the appeal to the natural or moral standard against the established order (Strauss 1975, p. 91). In contrast, communist and other totalitarian regimes have the realization of a utopian society, or the Kingdom of God on earth, as their purpose. This is expressed in the form of the regime. Their institutions, laws, and mores leave no room for the toleration of dissent, brook no limitations on interfering in the private lives of citizens, and reject the practice of parliamentary politics because they are guided by a millenarian principle to, in a Voegelinian twist, immanentize the eschaton. Not only are liberal and communist regimes formally different, but they are also grounded on different philosophical principles. Moreover, as Aristotle observed regarding ancient democracies, there are variations within modern regime types. While all communist regimes are millenarian, Stalinism and Maoism are far more eschatological in their form than Castroism (see Service 2007). Similarly, although all liberal constitutional regimes have liberty as their political principle, how they are constituted is decisive in determining which come closer to achieving their intention and how well they can resist degeneration. Again, for the classical political scientist, even these more minor distinctions in the character of liberal regimes indicate deeper roots.

Though commentators such as H. D. Forbes argue that Grant's political analysis maintains the classical position that a political community is a partnership directed at a conception of the good life, this is true only in a diminished sense (Forbes 2007, p. 23; Grant 2005, p. 67). Grant reduces the various regime types to an opposition between organic political communities "rooted" in a particular moral-political tradition and homogenizing technological societies. For Strauss, the central political question of the twentieth century was the crisis of totalitarianism. In contrast, for Grant, it was a contest between localist or nationalist movements that seek to protect their traditions and identity from the homogenizing forces of technological modernity (Grant 2005, pp. 56-67; 2005a, p. 213). In this, the thinker who Grant most resembles is Martin Heidegger. In Heidegger's view, the technological impulse to turn humanity into standing reserve leads to a totalitarian organization that is so all-encompassing that it renders all political distinctions irrelevant. Thus, Heidegger claims that Americanism and Communism are metaphysically the same. Or, more infamously, Auschwitz is indistinguishable from a chemical plant (Heidegger 1977; Gillespie 1990, pp. 135-146). Though to his credit, Grant does not go as far as Heidegger and conclude that all moral differences are insignificant, he shares the judgement that the technological drive is so all-encompassing that contemporary political life becomes fully determined by it. Thus, contra Chamberlain, Grant depreciates

the political because he does not adequately reflect on whether the distinctions between the character of the American and Soviet regimes—the surface differences—indicate a deeper philosophical (dare I say, ontological?) divergence. Instead, Grant sees them both as manifestations of global technology and, convinced they share the same substructure, assumes both are metaphysically the same. Consequently, if the underlying logic of technology ultimately shapes the character of the political, then differences between capitalism and socialism or constitutionalism and totalitarianism become epiphenomenal. Therefore, like Heidegger and Jacques Ellul, Grant turns to the local community or the love of one's own tradition. The fundamental alternative lies between the modern understanding of politics and the traditional conception, which Grant refers to as "the organic conservatism that predated the age of progress" (Grant 2005, p. 64; see also Grant 1969, p. 30).[2]

From the perspective of classical political science, Grant's reduction of all modern regimes to the UHS is a consequence of the depreciation of the regime. His neglect of the regime causes him to overestimate the power of technology to subvert political life. Grant's response (and perhaps Chamberlain's), no doubt, would be that Strauss and other adherents of classical political science have failed to appreciate the power of technology. While this is ultimately a disagreement of first principles, an excellent way to evaluate this is to examine whether *Lament for a Nation* offers a veridical account of the Canadian regime and its origins. For if Grant's philosophical presumptions result in a fundamentally flawed political analysis, this is evidence of how failing to understand the surface leads to a misinterpretation of the depths.

GRANT AND THE CANADIAN REGIME

As the late Janet Ajzenstat once observed, the incredible power of *Lament for a Nation* is that it places Canadian politics within the context of great philosophical debates while expressing a profound love for Canada (Ajzenstat 2003, pp. 109-111). Nevertheless, Grant's love is dedicated to a particular idea of Canada. In Grant's dichotomy of rooted organic communities versus homogenizing universalism, Canada originates in a "genuine" conservative rejection of American liberalism. Thus, the unsustainability of conservatism necessitates Canada's absorption into the United States. While most Canadian readers reject Grant's pessimism regarding the nation's prospects, they find Grant's characterization of Canada's origins as collectivist and hierarchical—the Tory Touch—appealing. For these readers, Grant's lament for the disappearance of the British Canada of his youth blinded him from seeing that it is possible to maintain distinctive "organic collectivist" social values even as the original Toryism receded. On the other hand, Western Canadians often argue that Grant's lament is not for Canada but for Upper Canada of the United Empire Loyalists. A Canada that has little in common with their own experience (Cooper 1990).[3] In truth, both critiques miss the mark as his idea of Canada is rooted more in a romantic notion than historical reality (Ajzenstat 2003, pp. 109-110). Herein lies the problem. By placing Canadian politics and history within the meta-narrative of technological determinism, *Lament for a Nation* does not understand Canada's Founders as they understood themselves. Moreover, the influence of Grant's text has been so significant that it obscures the origins of the Canadian regime for his fellow Canadians.

First, Grant rightly observes that the existence of Canada as a distinct political community originates in the rejection of the American Revolution, what F. H. Underhill called the "Great Refusal" (Underhill 1960, p. 222). But what were the Loyalists, *Canadiens*, and colonists of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island rejecting? According to Grant, instead of adhering to the Lockean liberalism expressed by Hamilton, Jefferson and Madison, British North Americans, and the Loyalists in particular, were inspired by the premodern political philosophy of the Anglican divine, Richard Hooker. Consequently, they were motivated to build a society with a greater sense of order or restraint than American republicanism would allow. Similarly, the French Catholics of Quebec sought to preserve a distinct way of life from before the Age of Progress. Therefore, English and French Canadians could make common cause and establish a political community that rejected the liberalism that characterized the American regime. According to Grant, this

was the guiding intention behind the *Constitutional Act, 1791* and the *British North America Act* (Grant 2005, pp. 67-68).

This "conservative" interpretation of Canada's origins is familiar to most students of Canadian politics. Indeed, the presentation of a "Tory" Canada in *Lament for a Nation* is well situated within the mid-twentieth century "Laurentianism" of Donald Creighton, Harold Innis, F. R. Scott, and Frank Underhill. The most famous version of this supposition remains Gad Horowitz's "Tory Touch" thesis, which building on the "Fragmentation" theory of Louis Hartz, postulates that the distinctiveness of the Canadian political community is found in the dilution of the "rationalist-egalitarianism" of Lockean liberalism with "corporate-organic-collectivist" notions originating in pre-modern conservatism (Horowitz 1966). For those that adhere to this interpretation of Canada's origins, in addition to explaining why Canadian Conservatives (so-called Red Tories) have historically been willing to advocate state intervention in the market via the National Policy, Hydro-Ontario, or the CBC, the "Tory Touch" also serves as the foundation of a unique Canadian political culture which rather than celebrating "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness," embraces "Peace, Order, and Good Government."[4] Grant argues that the Canadian political community's distinctiveness and value stands or falls on its adherence to this Tory conservatism. "If Lockean liberalism is the conservatism of the English-peoples, what was there in British conservatism that was not present in the bourgeois thought of Hamilton and Madison? If there was nothing, then the acts of the Loyalists are deprived of all moral significance" (Grant 2005, pp. 61-62). Thus, most of the polemical fire of *Lament for a Nation* is directed at those Grant accuses of undermining Canadian distinctiveness. The chief villains being William Lyon Mackenzie King, C. D. Howe, and the Liberal Party of Canada, who, by pursuing policies of continental integration, eroded Canadian sovereignty. While formal annexation by the United States may not occur, in all essential respects, by the 1960s, Canada had been absorbed into the American empire because it no longer adhered to its guiding intention (Grant 2005, pp. 68-69).

However, despite his animus against the Liberal Party, it must be reiterated that Grant's analysis of Canadian politics is situated within his overarching interpretation of modernity as the progressive unfolding of the UHS. Indeed, far from claiming that the demise of Canada is the result of a deliberate choice by Mackenzie King, Grant argues that the expiry of a distinct Canadian political community was inevitable because the attempt to build a "conservative" nation in the age of progress runs against currents of history (Grant 2005, p. 67). Conservative thinkers were destined to exercise less and less influence in a technological society, and conservatism became an empty façade. Diefenbaker's embrace of free enterprise demonstrates the decline and unsustainability of the Canadian conservative tradition (Grant 2005, pp. 14-15, 18, 69-70). Fundamentally, Canadian society abandoned the attempt to maintain a distinctive social order in favour of homogenizing liberalism. Whether it be French Canadians turning their backs on their religious heritage during the Quiet Revolution or English Canadians embracing Americanism. Grant tells the story of an organic, conservative community slowly undermined by progressive modernity embodied by American capitalism. Thus, instead of a turning point, the fall of the Diefenbaker Government was the owl of Minerva taking flight at the dusk of Canada. The end of Canada is "the unfolding of fate" (Grant 2005, p. 91).

However, the problem with the "Tory Touch" is, as commentators such as Ajzenstat, Peter Smith, and Rod Preece argue, that it is "bad history and poor political science" (Ajzenstat and Smith 1995, 2002, p. 68; Preece 1977, 1980). While Toryism may have been present in Canadian political culture, it has only ever been marginal at best, as the real contest has been between parliamentarianism, deriving from the British tradition and democratic republicanism emanating from the United States (Ajzenstat and Smith 1995, pp. 1-18). Consider Grant's claim that Diefenbaker's defence of free enterprise is inconsistent with the Canadian conservative tradition; this would surprise its originators. Far from reflecting a pre-modern Toryism, Canadian Conservative leaders' political thought and actions were always grounded in the modern liberal tradition. As John A. Macdonald declared, "I could never have been called a Tory… I have always been a Conservative-Liberal" (*Public Archives of Canada*, Macdonald Papers, Vol. 158, 64021; Preece 1978, pp. 175-179). Like their moderate liberal counterparts, Canadian conservatives were, in effect,

Burkean Whigs (Preece 1977; McKinnell 2023). Macdonald did not introduce the National Policy because he rejected liberal capitalism, but because the United States had ended the Reciprocity Treaty and imposed tariffs on Canadian goods, which several American cabinet members hoped would lead to the annexation of Canada (sometimes history does not just rhyme, it repeats). In such circumstances, Macdonald argued that Manchester liberalism allowed for exceptions to be made (Gibson and Milnes 2014, pp. 282-286*; s*ee also Dutil 2024). The same argument was behind Robert Borden's nationalization of the railroads, the Ontario Conservatives' formation of Hydro-Ontario, or R. B. Bennett's decision to create the CBC. Grant's claim that free enterprise is alien to the Canadian conservative tradition suggests that he has not examined whether the details match his meta-narrative.

This mischaracterization extends to the origins of Canada itself, as Grant fails to examine what the Loyalists or the Fathers of Confederation themselves believed the moral significance of their actions was. While certainly they saw themselves as establishing a genuine alternative to the republican experiment to the south, the philosophical foundation and moral justification are not what Grant claims they are. For the Loyalists, loyalty entailed adhering to the Whig constitutional settlement established by the Glorious Revolution. During the American Revolution, Loyalist pamphleteers such as Charles Inglis, Peter Oliver, Joseph Galloway, and William Smith centred their arguments for rejecting the Revolution on loyalty to the form of regime best suited for the preservation of political liberty. Citing Locke, Montesquieu, Blackstone, and a host of Whig political writers, the Loyalists insisted that the balanced or mixed British Constitution best achieved this principle while accusing the Patriots of advocating republicanism, which they criticized for being inimical to civil liberty (Jenson 2003; Norton 1972, pp. 127-148; Nelson 2014). In other words, the Loyalists did not reject the American Revolution out of an attachment to a pre-modern ideal, but on thoroughly modern Whig principles. This adherence to the principle of political liberty was perpetuated in the establishment of Upper and Lower Canada with the passage of the passage of the *Constitutional Act, 1791*. John Graves Simcoe, Upper Canada's first Lieutenant-Governor, declared that the intention of the new constitution was to create the very "image and transcript of that in Great Britain." For Simcoe, the defining characteristic of the British Constitution was that it secured freedom and happiness for its subjects, which Simcoe contrasted with what he described as the mutilated constitutions of the United States and France (Simcoe 1890). Therefore, the purpose of the of political order established in British North America was to imitate the form and character of the British regime. Similar claims were advanced by Egerton Ryerson, who celebrated victory in the War of 1812 by arguing that Canadians had fought in defence of the idea of liberty that animated British political institutions and constitutional tradition (Ryerson 1880, p. 457). Indeed, at times, during the nineteenth century public opinion in British North America viewed Britain (and by extension British North America) locked in an ideological rivalry with the populist republicanism of the United States and Revolutionary/Napoleonic France (Wise 1993, pp. 51-52).[5] While perspectives of the United States warmed as the century went on, the original Canadian critique remained fundamentally the same. Again and again throughout the Confederation Debates, figures such as John A. Macdonald, George Brown, Georges-Etienne Cartier, Richard Cartwright and Darcy McGee contrasted British liberty with American equality. Describing the purpose of the American federation to be the carrying out of the democratic principle, while the purpose of the Canadian federation would be to carry out the monarchical principle (Province of Canada, Parliament 1865; McKinnell 2023). While acknowledging that the American regime was oriented by similar philosophical principles, Canadian statesmen maintained that the American regime carried within it the seeds of unbridled democracy. In contrast, the British Constitution, was the only form of government that was properly constituted so that constitutional liberty and the rights of the minority were sustained. It could achieve this because a parliamentary regime, supervised by a constitutional monarch created the conditions for political deliberation while checking the ambitions of popular leaders. This is why the Fathers of Confederation sought to establish a Constitution similar in Principle to that of the United Kingdom. For although the Dominion of Canada and the American Republic shared a cultural, political, and philosophical heritage, the Fathers of Confederation understood themselves as establishing a unique regime with distinctive and superior political institutions. These insti-

tutions would sustain and, in turn, be sustained by a political culture animated by adherence to constitutional liberty. Nowhere in the Confederation Debates is there a defence of organic collectivism.

Grant asks, "If there was nothing valuable in the founders of English-speaking Canada, what makes it valuable for Canadians to continue as a nation today" (Grant 2005, pp. 61-62)? However, Grant dismisses what the Founders thought was valuable, the distinctiveness of a parliamentary regime supervised by a constitutional monarch, as "no deep division of principle" (Grant 2005, p. 72). Indeed, nowhere in *Lament for a Nation* is to be found an analysis of responsible government, the principle of constitutional liberty, or Canada's founding constitutional documents. This refusal to take the claims of the Canadian Founders seriously *is* a failure to take the political seriously. Defenders of Grant might argue that since both are modern societies, they are ontologically the same. Substructure trumps superstructure. Canadian parliamentarianism and American republicanism are just floating down the same river in what might as well be the same boat. However, the simple truth is that the idea of Canada in *Lament for a Nation* is built on a poor understanding of Canadian political and intellectual history, if not an outright mischaracterization. Or as Ajzenstat devastatingly observes, "it is a romantic fiction" (Ajzenstat 2003, p. 110). Students of Grant must ask themselves, if Grant gets so much of the surface wrong, what does this say about what the claims about the depths? The great danger of neglecting the question of the regime is losing sober insight into our real situation and projecting hopes into facts and wishes into thoughts.

THE POSSIBILITY OF CANADA

Chamberlain concludes his critique of my "Between the Pincers" by situating our differences in a reiteration of Strauss' division between Athens and Jerusalem (Chamberlain 2025, p. 85). While I understand his point, I think Karl Löwith's contrast between the classical cyclical apprehension of nature and the Christian/modern belief in linear history is more instructive. As demonstrated by the classical regime cycle, the ancient understanding of history took its bearings from the eternal cycle of generation and corruption, growth and decay. Conversely, the Church Fathers developed a theology of history "focused on the supra-historical events of creation, incarnation, and consummation." The modern philosophy of history reveals its kinship with the Christian eschatological understanding in interpreting history as progressing or developing toward a goal (Löwith 1949, p. 19; McKinnell 2022). Yet as Löwith argues, any elaboration of a plan of history cannot be demonstrated by reason; it is a faith claim. This is why the original Biblical and Augustinian understanding did not endow political-historical events with transcendental meaning. However, Grant's political and philosophical reflections are shaped by modern philosophies of history. Whether it be Hegel's unfolding of freedom or a progress in decline as with Heidegger's forgetfulness of Being, all philosophies of history profess to know the *true* desirability of political-historical events and see the historical process as leading up to our redemption or fall. This forces a thinker like Grant to ignore the visible political dimension or re-interpret the surface to make it consistent with the invisible meta-narrative. At best, such an approach is unreasonable; at worst, it is politically irresponsible.

Equipped with the sober wisdom of classical political science, one sees the problem facing the Canadian regime is the deformation of our basic political institutions and the corrosion of Canadians' attachment to the unwritten norms, habits and dispositions that sustain it. Consequently, significant efforts must be undertaken to recover the Canadian regime's founding principles and educate citizens about the underlying structure of Canadian parliamentary government. Thus, engendering the possibility of carrying out reforms that answer to the needs of the moment while returning to and renewing our political tradition. Convinced of the all-encompassing power of technology, Grant would no doubt see this as the equivalent of rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. But to give the last word to Löwith, "the question, however, is whether our task is to push down what is failing, i.e., a disintegrating world, or whether it is the more responsible task of reforming and renewing our tradition" (Löwith 1941, p. 242).

NOTES

1 The difficulty is that at other times Grant suggests the opposite. "Quite frankly, if it is a question of U.S.A capitalism lined up with the sinister Realpolitik of the Vatican against the totalitarian USSR, it seems to me hard to choose—but on the whole the USSR" (Grant 1996, p. 129).

2 I fail to see how this does not entail the collapsing of contemporary conservatism, liberalism, and socialism into each other.

3 I would argue that one of the most significant political consequences of the myth Grant articulates about Upper Canada is that he persuaded Western and Ontarian Conservatives that he was describing reality. That his voice was really was that of Loyalist Upper Canada. See (Ajzenstat 2003, pp. 109-111). So influential is Grant's story in *Lament for a Nation* for Albertan Conservatives that it has given rise to a belief that unlike those who settled on the Prairie, my Loyalist ancestors were not attached to individual liberty, nor in possession of rugged self-reliance when they carved farms and communities out of the Niagara wilderness after fleeing north with only what they could carry.

4 The claim that "Peace, Order, and Good Government" serves as Canada's *raison d'être* and distinguishes it from the United States has been repeated so often that it has become a cliché. Besides the fact that it would be a bizarre regime indeed that did not intend to achieve this, "Peace, Order, and Government" is only ever discussed in the Confederation Debates as a constitutional/legal provision, not a moral principle.

5 Of course, French Canadians held different views on this question. However, Pierre Bédard, Étienne Parent, Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine, Joseph Cauchon, and George-Étienne Cartier all held that the British parliamentary *regime* was best suited for the preservation of their specific way of life because it safeguarded the political minority.

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