

RESEARCH ARTICLE / ÉTUDE ORIGINALE

# “Une pièce d’étoffe que nous aurons à faire”: Louis Riel’s Utopia: Between Prophecy and Politics

Luc Barter Moulaison

Department of Political Science, McGill University, Leacock Building, 4th Floor, 855 Sherbrooke Street West, Montréal, QC H3A 2T7, Canada  
Email: [luc.moulaison@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:luc.moulaison@mail.mcgill.ca)

## Abstract

This article offers a re-evaluation of Louis Riel’s political, philosophical and religious writings by reconstructing these writings along utopian lines. In so doing, it supplements the existing literature on Riel’s writings that tends to see Riel as either a prophetic figure or a practical man of action, but rarely, if ever, both. In its reconstruction of Riel’s utopian vision, this article focuses on three aspects of his writings. First, it addresses his critical conception of Métis self-government before Confederation. Second, it examines his proposals for the overthrow of what he perceived as Anglo-Canadian tyranny in the North-West. Third, it considers his visions of an ideal—that is, utopian—society in the North-West. The article concludes by examining the implications of this reading of Riel’s utopian vision for his legacy in Canadian political science.

## Résumé

Cet article propose une relecture des écrits politiques, philosophiques et religieux de Louis Riel dans le cadre du concept de l’utopisme. Ce faisant, il contribue à la littérature sur les écrits de ce dernier qui tend à présenter Riel soit comme une figure prophétique, soit comme un homme d’action pratique, mais rarement, voire jamais, comme les deux à la fois. De par de sa reconstruction de la vision utopique de Riel, cet article se concentre sur trois aspects de ses écrits. Premièrement, il aborde sa conception de l’autodétermination des Métis avant la Confédération. Deuxièmement, il examine ses propositions pour le renversement de ce que Riel percevait comme la tyrannie anglo-canadienne dans le Nord-Ouest. Troisièmement, il examine ses visions d’une société idéale, c’est-à-dire utopique, dans le Nord-Ouest. L’article conclut en examinant les répercussions de cette lecture des écrits de Riel pour la science politique canadienne.

**Keywords:** settler colonialism; Métis politics; Western Canada; critical theory; history of political thought

**Mots-clés:** Colonialisme de peuplement; l’ouest du Canada; la politique des Métis; histoire de la pensée politique; théorie critique

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## Introduction

There is a puzzle in Louis Riel's political, philosophical and religious writings: religious prophecy coexists alongside practical political concerns. The literature on Riel's writings tends to adopt two interpretive approaches to this puzzle. The first sees Riel's political commitments and writings as secondary to his prophetic flights of fancy; the second emphasizes Riel's this-worldly ambitions at the expense of the prophetic. There are lessons to be learned from both of these approaches to Riel's life and writings, but there are also some issues to be corrected. The main deficiency is that privileging either the practical or the prophetic neglects important aspects of these writings—in particular, the sketches that Riel makes in his later writings of a future multinational and ecumenical Métis-led confederation in the Americas. This lacuna is evidenced in the fact that little sustained attention has been drawn in the literature to a fragment that appears in Riel's later writings entitled *Massinahican*. *Massinahican* is a Michif term that derives from the Cree word for “book” or “Bible,” and there exists sufficient evidence to suggest that Riel envisaged developing these fragments into a book that would provide a fuller exposition of his political, philosophical and religious thought than is available to us.<sup>1</sup> Only a few pages of the *Massinahican* survive, but what remains of the text provides some clues on the underlying *utopian* that animates Riel's later writings. By later writings, here, I refer to Riel's writings after 1880. This choice of 1880 is not arbitrary. As Max Hamon points out, Riel's political life can be helpfully separated into two periods: one before 1880, in which Riel thought that the Métis' best hope was for accommodation with the British Crown, and one after 1880, at which point he had renounced his allegiance to Britain and had started to consider alternatives to British government in the North-West (Hamon, 2020: 227–28; Riel, 1985a: 220).

Attention to the *Massinahican* leads us to read Riel's writings in a different light than is charted by much of the existing literature. This article examines Riel's post-1880 writings as an attempt to seriously think through three issues: first, what it would take to overthrow what Riel describes as Anglo-Canadian tyranny in the North-West; second, what forms of government the Métis should adopt to this end; and third, what an ideal society would look like after having overthrown Anglo-Canadian tyranny.

The article is divided into four parts. First, I conduct a review of the literature on Riel's writings. Second, drawing upon Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*, I define the conception of utopia that will be used in analyzing Riel's later writings. Third, I reconstruct Riel's later writings as utopian by examining three themes in Riel's writings: his conception of Métis self-governance, both before and after the transfer of the North-Western Territory to the Canadian state; his description of the arrival of Anglo-Canadian tyranny and his attempts to think through the measures that would be necessary to overthrow it; and his sketches of an ideal society in the North-West.

Finally, this project considers three conclusions that are revealed by a Blochian analysis of Riel's political writings. First, this analysis demonstrates that Riel's utopian vision is inspired by a profound sense of indignation at the colonization of Métis and First Nations lands; it also demonstrates Riel's strategic use of the utopian themes of universalism, solidarity and universal concord contained within

the social teachings of the Gospel in order to imagine alternative futures in the North-West. Second, Riel's utopian vision, and the practical means that he prescribes to realize this vision, recalls Bloch's emphasis upon the this-worldliness of what he terms the Christian social utopian tradition ([1954] 1986: 510–11). Third, reading Riel's utopian vision alongside Bloch's writings on utopianism alerts us to the critical function that Riel's writings carry today, in particular its capacity to call into question what Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández have termed “settler futurity” (2013: 80).

### Prophecy, Politics and Utopia

The literature on Riel's writings is split between two approaches. The first focuses on the prophetic valences of his writings. Thomas Flanagan's (1979) biography on Riel is exemplary of this approach. Although Flanagan was not the first to challenge the “psychiatric reading” of Riel's life and writings, he begins his inquiry by troubling the pathologization of Riel that prevailed at the time (1979: viii; see, for instance, Trémaudan, [1921] 1979; Howard, [1952] 1994; Stanley, 1985).<sup>2</sup> According to Flanagan, by 1875, Riel's focus turns decisively from the political to the religious sphere (1979: 48). On Flanagan's view, Riel's rejection of politics was to be an enduring feature of his life until his execution by the Canadian state in 1885. This rejection of the political even coloured Riel's strategic outlook during the 1885 North-West Resistance, in the course of which “Riel was more prophet and miracle worker than political leader” (Flanagan, 1979: 141). Flanagan sees a strong structural resemblance between Riel's schema of providential history and that of medieval chiliast Joachim of Fiore (88–89). At times, Flanagan reduces Riel's messianic Catholicism to an impotent reaction to the encroachment of Anglo-Canadian colonial forces and settlers on Métis and First Nations lands. For instance, in describing Riel's prophecies, he writes that “the pursuit of the millennium is activated by the threat of destruction to a people's way of life by forces over which they have no control” (183).

Other accounts of Riel's thought identify a similar turn from the political toward the prophetic in his later writings. In his study of Riel's religious philosophy, Gilles Martel contends that in 1875, Riel renounces his political ambitions. Martel writes: “À la fin de l'année 1875 et en réaction à cette cascade d'échecs et de frustrations politiques, l'esprit prophétique s'insinuera dans la conscience de Riel” (1984: 149). Curiously, Martel, like Flanagan, sees antecedents for Riel's prophetic turn as early as his childhood and adolescent years (1984: 89–118; Flanagan, 1979: 3–27). Manfred Mossmann draws upon the studies of Riel's writings carried out by Flanagan and Martel to assess in great depth the content of Riel's “prophetic turn” (1985: 186). Another related strand of this literature that emphasizes the theological dimensions of Riel's thought is the recent work on Riel's theosophical writings, which were written between 1881 and 1884 and can be found in the second volume of Riel's collected writings (Smith, 2013; Riel, 1985a: 387–99; Sentes, 2020).

The second main approach to Riel's writings sees him as primarily concerned with matters of practical politics (see also Ens, 1996; Bruyneel, 2010; O'Byrne, 2014). Adam Gaudry's study of Riel's political thought, for instance, sees Riel as defending a comprehensive Métis political philosophy in his writings and argues

that Riel's writings are tightly bound up with, and informed by, the political realities of Métis and First Nations peoples in the North-West (2014: 5–9). J. M. Bumsted dismisses the salience of Riel's mental condition for understanding his life and writings, focusing on those parts of Riel's writings that are attuned to practical politics. In treating Riel's exile in Montana shortly after his renunciation of allegiance to the British Crown, Bumsted concludes that Riel "gave no outward evidence of instability. . . religious mania, or even discontent" and that his writings from this period were "judicious and balanced" (2001: 238).

While insisting on Riel's practical outlook may help make better biographical sense of the Métis leader, it does little to think through the theological contents of his writings. Bélisle and St-Onge's recent study of Riel's thought represents a promising attempt to think beyond this impasse. Their reading of Riel's life and writings "realizes a melding of the religious and the political spheres within the Métis world" (2016: 103). In their view, Riel's political and religious thought is a "double heresy" that breaks from the colonial Canadian state and from the spiritual and temporal authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Bélisle and St-Onge focus their attention on the organizational structure of the Exovidat, the form of government established by Riel and the Métis during the North-West Resistance, which aimed at an "institutionalization of an alternative political regime and church" through the codification of new ways of living (109–10). They also establish continuities between Riel and that of Ecuadorian statesman García Moreno, placing Riel in dialogue with other Catholic anticolonial thought (107).

St-Onge and Bélisle's emphasis on the indissociability of ritual and politics in the Exovidat is echoed by Kerry Sloan's analysis of Riel's defence speeches delivered during his 1885 trial. Sloan examines Riel's proposal of a "grand confederacy of nations—Métis, First Nations, and European" that he put forward at great length in his defence speeches, and indeed that can be found in many excerpts from his writings (Sloan, 2014: 168; Riel, 1974). In Sloan's view, the multicultural and ecumenical vision that Riel proposes does not speak only to the intermingling of the political and religious spheres in Riel's thought; rather, this melding of the political and the religious demonstrates the profoundly Métis character of Riel's vision for the future of the North-West. Sloan argues that just as being Métis is not a simple matter of being "part First Nations" and "part European," Riel's vision of the fabric of the North-West also eludes binaristic categorization as either political or religious (2014: 169).

These emphases offered by Sloan and St-Onge and Bélisle upon the indissociable nature of religion and politics in Riel's writings represent a welcome advance over the "dichotomous Riel" that abounds in the earlier literature (Gaudry, 2013). Part of their promise consists in demonstrating the radicality of Riel's vision—that is, the radical reordering of the social, political and spiritual orders that Riel proposes. This project pushes this line of inquiry further by considering Riel's later, post-1880 writings in which he details a future Métis-led religious and political order in the North-West. The utopian nature of these writings—in particular, the *Massinahican*—has been noted. Flanagan and Rocan describe the vision sketched by Riel in the *Massinahican* as a "utopian theocracy in which all the nations and religious denominations of the New World are linked in an *entente générale* based on a system of ecumenical councils" (1980: 153). Martel discusses

Riel's *utopie politico-religieuse* (1984: 328–43). Finally, Mike Davis notes the defeat of “Riel’s utopian-socialist Northwest Rebellion” as a prelude to the creation of a “single world market in subsistence” (2001: 120).

Martel and Flanagan’s treatments of Riel’s utopian vision share in common an attention to the content of Riel’s utopian writings. Flanagan’s biography of Riel makes repeated mention of the retrograde political content of his utopian vision, noting how the “reorganization of mankind under clerico-theoretical rule” and Riel’s proposal of a union of church and state chafes against his reputation as a radical in anticolonial circles. He continues: “Today’s left-wing radicals may wish to claim him as a spiritual ancestor . . . but his own political philosophy was so far to the right that it had no place on the Canadian political spectrum” (1979: 95). Certainly, Riel’s later writings contain many discussions that are inimical to contemporary sensibilities, from his emphasis on the revival of the Mosaic Law to his occasional sidelining of First Nations rights (see, for instance, Riel, 1985a: 364–77). Following Sloan (2014), however, who emphasizes the “boundary bashing” form of Riel’s Métis vision, my treatment of Riel’s utopian writings will examine the utopian form rather than the content of Riel’s later writings. It is for this that Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope* will prove helpful in illuminating the significance of Riel’s utopianism.

### Utopia and Messianism

The conception of utopia employed in this project draws upon the theorization of utopia in Ernst Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope*. Bloch’s writings on utopia serve to develop a conceptual framework that illuminates the critical valences of Riel’s utopian vision. I take up Bloch’s insistence upon the this-worldly political significance of the revolutionary messianic tradition, or the Christian revolutionary social utopia ([1954] 1986: 509–15). This engagement with Bloch is not intended to dismiss Riel’s Métis heritage or the thoroughgoing influence of Indigenous spiritualities and cosmologies on his political, philosophical and religious thought, which has been discussed in great detail in other studies (Barkwell et al., 2006; Fiola, 2015). Rather, this analysis takes up Kerry Sloan’s contention that Riel’s Christian and Indigenous spiritual influences are mutually supportive (2014: 186).

Indeed, a crucial part of Riel’s appeal as a political leader derived from the way he turned discursive practices originating in the Western philosophical and religious tradition against the apparatus of colonial domination (O’Toole, 2010: 201). As Hamon puts it in his treatment of Riel’s education at the Sulpician Collège de Montréal, “Riel, as an Indigenous subject concerned about questions of ‘civilization’ and its relationship to the settler-state, learned to channel the epistemology that underscored Canadian colonization to defend Métis interests” (Hamon, 2020: 140). Moreover, Karl Hardy has drawn attention to the ways in which an anti-teleological reading of Bloch’s conceptualization of utopia—in particular, his concept of “anticipatory hope”—can function in service of critical discourses of Indigenous peoples that are “concerned with interrupting the naturalization of a settler colonial reality . . . characterized by the ‘transfer’ or ‘elimination’ of Indigenous peoples” (2012: 129). It is with these stipulations in mind that Riel’s writings are congenial to Bloch’s theoretical framework.

**Bloch, Joachim of Fiore and revolutionary messianism**

Bloch's analysis of the utopian valences of Joachim of Fiore's revolutionary messianism in *The Principle of Hope* is an invaluable point of departure for analyzing Riel's later writings as utopian. Bloch's analysis of Joachim of Fiore is all the more relevant in the context of Riel's later writings because Flanagan sees the continuities between Riel's theological beliefs and those of the medieval chiliast as grounds to label the former's prophetic ambitions as other-worldly and politically impotent (1979: 88–89). While Flanagan concedes that there is no evidence to conclude that Riel drew upon Joachim of Fiore's theology in formulating his providential history, he deems Riel's theology of history as structurally analogous enough to Joachim's to analyze it in similar terms.

For Flanagan's Riel, as for Joachim of Fiore, providential history is composed of three stages. First, there is the age of the Law, as embodied in the Jewish people of the Old Testament. Second, there is the age of the Gospel, which commences in the incarnation of Christ and the advent of Christianity. Third, arrives the final age to come, "the highest stage of human spiritual experience, a millennial realm of glory unlike anything ever seen on earth" (Flanagan, 1979: 88). For Flanagan, Riel's post-1875 writings are shot through with prophecies of this "Third Age." In this account, the third phase of providential history would inaugurate an epoch of spiritual rejuvenation in which the seat of spiritual authority would move from the "Old" to the "New" World, and the temporal powers of the world would be brought to their knees by the coming of the Son of Man (Flanagan, 1979: 92–93). Flanagan draws other-worldly implications from these prophecies, writing that they represent a "refuge from a hostile world . . . [and] an elaborate device for awarding himself the rewards of success and honour which had eluded him in politics" (96).

In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch provides a corrective to Flanagan's reading of the revolutionary Christian messianism pioneered by Joachim of Fiore. According to Bloch, Joachim of Fiore's three-stage theology of history is not to be regarded as other-worldly divination. Rather, the third age of Joachimite providential history represents the inauguration of a "social utopia" [*Soziale Utopie*]. Bloch's term *social utopia* is rather vague, but suffice it to say that the term refers to the form that early utopian visions assumed, which are characterized by the fact that they "predominantly [aim] at *human happiness* and [consider], in more or less *novelistic form, its social and economic form*" ([1954] 1986: 543, emphasis in original). According to Bloch, the social utopias of antiquity and early modernity function as "wishful-images." Bloch is concerned with the ways in which the "wishful-images" conjured by the social utopians gave voice to what is "not-yet-become" [*Noch-Nicht-Sein*]*—*that is, the unactualized possibilities for a better life that lay immanent within any given social order ([1954] 1986: 144). Otherwise put, the critical edge of the social utopian tradition is that these visions illuminate the dreams and wishes of a certain historical epoch.

Bloch draws attention to the this-worldly qualities of Joachim's theology of history. He detects in Joachim's doctrine a reconceptualization of utopia "in the mode and as the status of a historical future" ([1954] 1986: 510). For Bloch, Joachim's theology of history is suffused with a radical mistrust of existing spiritual and temporal powers and a sanctification of political action in favour of the abolition of class



society. Of particular importance is the way in which Joachim envisions the transition from the second age of Christ and the New Testament to the third and final age of the Holy Spirit. According to Bloch, this moment in Joachim's theology does not represent the transcendence of human history. Rather, in this stage, Christ Himself re-emerges on the historical stage and dissolves Himself in the community of believers. Bloch describes this moment of Joachim's theology of history as follows: "[The] kingdom of Christ is for Joachim more decidedly of this world than anything since the days of early Christianity. . . . Christianity . . . operates without masters and property, in mystical democracy" ([1954] 1986: 511).

In Bloch's account, Joachim of Fiore's theology of history figures as the progenitor of the Christian revolutionary social utopia, a tradition with which Riel's later writings stand in continuity. For Bloch, the most significant aspect of the Christian revolutionary social utopian tradition lies not in the content of the utopias that these thinkers envisioned. Indeed, Bloch contends that the content of Joachim's utopia, as well as subsequent Christian ones, is "intolerably mythological" ([1954] 1986: 511). Rather, Bloch is primarily concerned with the critical function of this tradition. He therefore emphasizes the basic wishful-images that resound in, and are set in motion by, these utopian visions. For Bloch, what emerges from these Christian social utopias is the unconditional force of utopian conscience [*utopisches Gewissen*]. Referring to the Joachimite doctrine, Bloch writes: "This way of thinking had less elaborated social utopia than Plato or the Stoics, let alone the rational constructions of the modern age, but it had more *utopian conscience* in its utopia than they did" ([1954] 1986: 511, emphasis in original). By "*utopian conscience*," here, Bloch refers to the unconditionality of the demands made by the Christian revolutionary utopians upon the spiritual and temporal powers that be, their overt and unequivocal hostility in the face of all of those worldly interests that obstruct the realization of Christ's message of universal concord in the here-and-now ([1954] 1986: 514).

There are three key takeaways from Bloch's radical interpretation of the Christian revolutionary social utopian tradition. First, Bloch's insistence upon the this-worldly nature of the wishful-images that give rise to the Joachimite doctrine will help to demonstrate that, even as Riel's later writings are suffused with occasional eschatological excesses, this-worldly concerns are never far from his mind. Second, Bloch's analysis of the utopian conscience that inspires the Christian social utopian tradition, and his consequent emphasis on the form rather than the content of these utopian visions, will help to recuperate the critical nature of Riel's utopianism. Third, Bloch's writings are helpful in the context of Riel's writings because, even though Bloch was heavily influenced by the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, he broke with his contemporaries' espousal of the Marxist teleological conception of history (Boldyrev, 2014: 123). Accordingly, Bloch's concept of the not-yet-become, by drawing attention to the unactualized possibilities that exist within any given social order, maintains a radical openness to alternative futurities (Muñoz, 2009: 5).

## Envisioning Riel's Utopia

### *Introduction of the problem*

Little sustained attention in the literature has been devoted to the relationships of fragments of the *Massinahican* to Riel's broader post-1880 textual corpus.<sup>3</sup> The chief interpretive problem of *Massinahican*, which was written in 1880 or 1881 during Riel's exile in Montana, resides in the fragmentary nature of the document: only two incomplete sections of the text exist. One section of the text treats the subjection of Ireland to British colonialism; in the other, Riel describes a Pan-American religious and political entity uniting all the nations of the New World in universal concord. The utopia that Riel elaborates in this latter section displays clear affinities with Plato's ideal city envisioned in the *Republic* (Mossmann, 1985: 196). Like the Platonic polis, Riel's utopia is composed of three classes: priests, knights and tribes (Riel, 1985a: 231). Every 30 years, members of each class from each nationality in the New World will convene to discuss common affairs and to sing the glory of Christ (Riel, 1985a: 231).

It is difficult to see how Riel's meditations on the political and ecclesiastical structure of a future Pan-American society relate to the other extant fragment of the *Massinahican* on the subjection of Ireland and to Riel's post-1880 textual corpus. I submit that the dissonance between these two sections that make up the *Massinahican* can be read in relation to Riel's other later writings in such a way as to shed light on the significance of Riel's vision of a future Pan-American political and religious entity. To begin, it must first be noted that Riel—reflecting Bloch's insistence upon the unconditionality of the Christian utopian conscience—saw the utopia that he developed in the *Massinahican* as resolutely opposed to the temporal and spiritual powers of his epoch. Riel writes in an 1884 journal entry addressed to the Virgin Mary:

O Vierge Marie ! Tour d'ivoire ! Daignez accepter tous les écrits que j'ai rédigés de bonne foi; en particulier Le Massinahican. . . . Daignez obtenir de Jésus Christ qu'il Lui plaise de jeter dans le cœur. . . de tout l'épiscopat Canadien-français, de toute la cour romaine, de toute la cour d'Angleterre, au moyen du Massinahican, la peur, la crainte et l'épouvante (Riel, 1985a: 340).

This passage demonstrates the hostility of the *Massinahican* to both the (Roman) spiritual and (British) temporal powers that be.

The point of departure for this analysis is Riel's treatment of Irish subjugation to British colonial domination. Riel displayed great personal sympathy for the cause of the Irish throughout his life, appointing William O'Donoghue, an Irish-American Catholic, as the treasurer of the 1869–70 provisional government (Hamon, 2020: 173). Riel sees in the fate of the Irish an instructive lesson for how the Métis may resist Anglo-Canadian colonial tyranny.<sup>4</sup> Riel begins the section of the *Massinahican* that concerns the subjection of Ireland by writing that the virtue of the Irish is to never have submitted to Roman rule. Accordingly, the Irish embraced an unblemished Catholicism cleansed of any traces of Roman paganism. Riel does not laud the Irish solely for their Catholic piety. He also draws attention



to the ways in which the unadulterated nature of Irish Catholicism fortified the Irish people in their struggles against British colonization over the course of centuries, even as these struggles had produced few concrete successes by Riel's time. Riel writes: "La force de leurs convictions est devenue [telle] qu'ils ont pu faire une lutte de sept cent ans au gouvernement d'Albion et cette lutte n'a été encouragé par aucun succès" (1985a: 230). According to Riel, there is a political upshot to the Catholic piety of the Irish: it has instilled in them a strong a spirit of resistance against colonial subjugation.

After lauding the Irish, Riel makes clear that their devotion to the Catholic faith is not sufficient to break decisively from British colonial domination. Faith may well provide a source of meaning and value around which to cohere an autonomous nation and the inner resolve to struggle against colonialism, but faith cannot bestow political power and organization upon the faithful. On this, Riel writes: "Il me semble vrai de dire que la vieille Irlande n'a pas pu faire son éducation politique. Son gouvernement n'a jamais été bien formé" (1985a: 230). In other words, Riel contends that the question of political organization is not exhausted by the favour that God might bestow upon the faithful. This passage is therefore at odds with Flanagan's argument that sees Riel as viewing divine intervention alone as enabling the Métis to overcome colonial domination (1979: 140).<sup>5</sup> The fragment ends there, and how Riel intended to relate this analysis of the subjection of Ireland to his utopian vision for the Americas is lost. There is a strong sense in which the political situation of the Irish that Riel describes in the *Massinahican* parallels his treatment of the structure of Métis self-government before British colonization. To illustrate this point, it is worth turning to Riel's narration of the history of Métis self-government.

### **Depiction of Métis self-governance**

Riel's most elaborate treatment of the history of the political organization of the Métis people before Confederation is to be found in an 1885 article entitled "Les Métis du Nord-Ouest." Adam Gaudry has termed this text, also known as the Last Memoir, "one of the most lucid descriptions of Métis political authority" (2014: 5). The text, published in November 1885 in the *Montreal Daily Star*, is an appeal to the French-speaking Canadian public. Here, Riel lays out a case for Métis self-determination after the defeat of the North-West Resistance. He offers his understanding of Métis title to the lands that they possessed in the North-West, which derives from their descent from the original First Nations inhabitants of the North-Western Territory (1985b: 279; Gaudry, 2014: 6). What is most salient in this text is Riel's description of Métis self-government before Confederation and of the situation of the Métis after their defeat at the hands of colonial troops.

Riel begins his assessment of Métis self-government by alluding to the halcyon days of the Métis in the North-West before their subjugation to colonial control. In this era, the Métis peacefully coexisted with their First Nations allies. The Métis dwelled in harmony with their surroundings and profited from a state of overwhelming natural abundance. Riel describes this state of affairs: "Nous vivions à même notre immense pays, dont la richesse en pelleteries était, on peut dire,

inépuisable; où la chasse de toutes sortes abondait; [et] où les lacs et les rivières étaient une source de bien-être par la quantité et la qualité du poisson dont les eaux étaient remplies” (1985b: 280). Because of this state of natural abundance, Riel writes, the Métis had no need to develop complex forms of political organization. He writes: “Comme peuple primitif, simple, de bonne foi . . . [les] Métis n’avaient presque pas besoin de gouvernement” (1985b: 281).

This is not to say, by any means, that Riel saw the Métis as a pre-political people before Confederation. Rather, the form of Métis self-government that existed in this epoch modelled itself after the organization of the buffalo hunt—one of the Métis people’s chief means of subsistence. As Gaudry puts it, “Riel found the origins of Métis governance and political authority in the lived realities of Métis prairie life” (2014: 7). Riel goes on to describe the organizational principles of the buffalo hunt. The hunt was organized in such a way as to adjudicate between hunters’ divergent interests, to guard against marauders and to ward off hostile attacks (Riel, 1985b: 282). The hunt was led by one democratically elected chief who was supported in his actions by 12 councillors and dozens of subaltern hunters. If Riel describes an organizational structure that resembles more closely a military unit than a political institution, he nonetheless makes it clear that the organizational nucleus of the buffalo hunt would go on to form the de facto government of the Métis people. Indeed, eventually the committee of hunters [*conseils des chasseurs*] was tasked with legislative, judicial and executive authority in Métis lands (Riel, 1985b: 282–83).

As much as Riel is at pains to note that the Conseil de la Prairie represented a legitimate government with a defined constitution, he concedes that this government existed on a provisional basis. Riel writes:

Ce gouvernement provisoire . . . s’organisait partout où s’agglomérait une caravane considérable, et cessait d’exister avec elle; s’organisait pareillement dans tout établissement métis où une assez grande diversité d’intérêts tendait à engendrer des difficultés, où il y avait des dangers à conjurer, des hostilités à repousser (1985b: 283).

As Kelly Saunders and Janique Dubois point out, it is important to note that the concept of provisionality assumes a pivotal role in Métis political thought, referring to a set of political tactics, governance practices and structures that are held together across time by a commitment to the ideal of Métis self-determination in order to protect *aen ishi wiichayyaamitooyahk* [how we live together] (Saunders and Dubois, 2019: 56–59). Provisionality, then, is a crucial means by which the Métis maintain their “unique culture and traditions in changing circumstances” (57). Hence, on Riel’s account, the Métis were by no means a pre-political people before Confederation. Nonetheless, there is a strong sense in which he perceived the necessity of developing more permanent and durable political institutions capable of weathering the threat of encroaching Anglo-Canadian colonialism.

It is important to note that for Riel, the question of political organization is distinct from the question of political authority. As explained by Gaudry, Riel clearly saw the Métis as benefiting from legitimate political institutions guided by the twin Métis political philosophical principles of *kaa-tipeyimishoyaahk*, which refers to

self-ownership and the ability to secure one's and one's family's subsistence, and *wahkohtowin*, which refers to an interconnected set of responsibilities to other human beings, nonhuman beings and the land (Gaudry, 2014: 78–79). In any case, not without a certain reserve, Riel lauds the cultivated economic habits and the “dotte morale d'arts et d'aptitudes excellents” that British settlers brought with them to the North-West, which were skills and characteristics in which the Métis—a people that Riel describes as being in its infancy—had not yet been instructed (Riel, 1985b: 284).

There are strong parallels between Riel's treatment of the structure of Métis self-government in this article and his assessment of the subjection of Ireland to British colonial rule in the *Massinahican*. Riel saw the Métis as a uniquely pious people, like the Irish, and their piety represented a fount of national pride and inner resolve against colonial tyranny. Like the Irish, the Métis were subject to British colonialism: to its strategies of land expropriation, forced displacement and enclosure and to the reorientation of society around the profit motive. Finally Riel saw the Métis, like the Irish, as lacking enduring forms of political organization: their government was suited to their circumstances in the midst of abundance and a lack of meaningful political adversaries, but it had to renew itself and take on a more permanent and durable form in order to mount a successful defence against encroaching Anglo-Canadian colonialism. Recall that in the *Massinahican*, Riel laments that the centuries-long struggle waged by the Irish against British colonialism “n'a encouragé par aucun succès” (Riel, 1985a: 230). Riel's utopia begins as an attempt to think through the political conditions that would prevent the Métis from suffering this fate. It is to this aspect of Riel's thought that I will now turn.

### **Riel's utopia and the overthrow of la Puissance**

In Riel's corpus, the colonial powers of Britain and English Canada often figure as *la Puissance*.<sup>6</sup> In the Last Memoir, Riel writes that he describes the state of the Métis before “la Puissance se présenta à nos portes” (Riel, 1985b: 284). Riel's use of “la Puissance” to designate Anglo-Canadian colonial forces is often complemented by an invocation of “le Tout-Puissant”—that is, God. This coincidence of *la Puissance* and *le Tout-Puissant* may lend itself to a prophetic reading of Riel's program to overthrow Anglo-Canadian tyranny: the invocation of *le Tout-Puissant* becomes a belittling of temporal powers in the face of divinely administered justice. This resembles the interpretation that Gilles Martel gives of Riel's vision of the defeat of Anglo-Canadian colonialism. On Martel's account, Riel's worldview is Manichaeic: he envisions a culmination of history in which all worldly injustices are rectified by a vengeful divine power (Martel, 1984: 65). While there is certainly a providential tinge to Riel's program to overthrow Anglo-Canadian tyranny, the reading of the *Massinahican* above demonstrates that there is a strong case to be made that Riel thought that political organization had to be constructed by the Métis.

If, by 1885, Riel judged that the Métis lacked durable political organization, and if he conceded that a military assault to take on colonial forces directly was impractical owing to the superior manpower of Canadian troops, then the question becomes: What avenues did Riel see as open to the Métis in their struggle against

Anglo-Canadian tyranny?<sup>7</sup> The key to this problem, I submit, is to be found in the immigration scheme that Riel proposes throughout his entire corpus, all the way up to his final public statements of defence (Reid, 2014; Sloan, 2014). The first appearance of Riel's proposal for mass immigration from, primarily, majority Catholic European countries to the North-Western Territory is to be found in an 1885 petition to John A. Macdonald; R. B. Deane, a North-West Mounted Police captain; and Edgar Dewdney, the lieutenant governor of the North-Western Territory (Riel, 1985b: 117). The plan then recurs in different formulations in his writings and in his defence speeches (Riel, 1974; Riel, 1985b: 139, 147–51, 162–63, 309–11, 312–13, 316–19). It is worth contextualizing Riel's immigration scheme. Hamon notes that Riel had taken an interest in the repercussions of mass immigration into Métis territories since at least 1869, when, at the Council of Assiniboia, he raised his concerns about the Métis being “crowded out of a country which they claimed as their own” by immigration from Anglo-Protestant countries (Hamon, 2020: 214–16). Moreover, certain aspects of Riel's immigration scheme were not uniquely his own. Archbishop Alexandre Antonin Taché, one of Riel's key allies in the Catholic clergy, agitated in favour of immigration of French Catholics from Quebec to outweigh the increasing influx of Anglo-Protestant settlers from Ontario (Huel, 2003: 156–61).

Neither politically practicable in the immediate short term, nor directly related to his prophetic mission, Riel's immigration scheme features aspects of both the political and the prophetic Riel: political, because Riel made a series of attempts to realize this scheme throughout his career, and prophetic, because of the priority that this scheme accords to Catholic immigrants from the Old World, on the grounds that it would help to fulfil the divinely appointed mission of the Métis people. But this scheme also points toward the properly utopian aspects of Riel's thought: as will be explored below, Riel's proposal is an integral aspect of his utopian vision of the creation of a new Métis-led society that would unite the Americas from Pole to Pole.

Riel's project for mass immigration from mainly, but not exclusively, Catholic countries from Europe to the North-West recurs throughout his writings. The most elaborate exposition of this proposal is to be found in the aforementioned 1885 letter addressed to Macdonald, Deane and Dewdney. Riel criticizes the repeated failures of the Canadian government to honour its promises to the Métis people, in particular its promise to grant them one-seventh of the area of the province of Manitoba at the time as a precondition of their accession to Confederation. Riel then sets out the measures that he and the Métis people are ready to take in order to have their rights promised to them by the government of Canada respected. First, he briefly threatens a Métis-led military operation against the Canadian state but then dismisses this idea on the grounds of its impracticability and unpopularity among the general population. It is here that he turns to his immigration scheme, which is the point at which the “moyens d'action peuvent devenir populaires” (Riel, 1985b: 120).

Riel's plan is as follows: Riel will dispatch his military ally, Gabriel Dumont, to negotiate with representatives of several nationalities: “irlandaises, canadiennes-françaises, italiennes, Polonaises et Juives” (Riel, 1985b: 120). Riel extends the ambit of these negotiations to several more peoples: “Belges, Bavaois, Danoises,

Suédoises et Norwégiennes” (Riel, 1985b: 121). While the means by which these territories will enter the hands of the Métis and their allies remain obscure, Riel proposes a division of the lands of the North-Western Territory as well as the newly formed province of British Columbia, among each nationality. He writes: “[on] leur cédera assez de terrain, pour faire à chacune de ces nationalités, une province dans leur nom, dans le Nord-Ouest” (Riel, 1985b: 120). The precise division of these territories among the different nations differs throughout Riel’s corpus.

In one 1885 letter addressed to A.-A. Taché, he promises Vancouver Island to the Belgians to found a “new Belgium.” In another from the same year, which was published posthumously in the Quebec newspaper *La Justice*, he promises it to the Jewish people to found a “new Judea” (Riel, 1985b: 151, 316). However, Riel consistently sets forth two preconditions that each nation must respect. First, in exchange for their allotment of land in the North-West, each nation must guarantee to the Métis “des colons nombreux et bien munis” (Riel, 1985b: 120). Riel’s motivation is clear: it is only through a large numerical majority that the Métis and their allies can hope to confront the colonial powers of English Canada. Second, this New World confederation of peoples must respect the terms that the Métis negotiated upon the entry into Canadian Confederation; that is, the territory of the confederation must set aside one-seventh of its land for the Métis.

Riel’s immigration scheme therefore answers part of the puzzle raised by the *Massinahican* and Riel’s ensuing treatment of Métis self-government: one way, indeed, for the Métis to avert the fate of the Irish under British subjugation would be to enlist representatives from a diverse array of nationalities who would convince their Old World compatriots to emigrate to the North-West in exchange for large parcels of land. In turn, the new Métis-led confederation of peoples would have the strength to decisively defeat colonial forces in the West. But this proposal alone does not exhaust the problem of political organization that Riel raises in the first section of the *Massinahican*, and it does not shed light on the nature of his utopian society that he outlines in the second section of the text. In order to wrap up these loose ends, one final detour must be taken through Riel’s later writings: his invocation of the creation of the nation *métisse-canadienne-française* and of the social and political institutions that would be congenial to it.

### *Ideal society in the Americas*

A first glance at Riel’s immigration proposal may well make it appear as though he is arguing in favour of a confederation composed of a number of distinct Old World nations. However, to read this proposal solely in these terms would be to neglect Riel’s insistence upon the novelty of his vision of a future Métis-led society in the North-West. In this regard, Flanagan’s contention that Riel follows Joachim of Fiore in auguring the coming of a third age of spiritual rejuvenation remains relevant (Flanagan, 1979: 88). While Riel’s vision of this new society is reflected with a certain providentialism, he nonetheless sees the foundation of this society as an eminently practical political task (Beyer, 1984: 96). In an 1877 letter addressed to his cousin Paul Proulx, Riel takes pains to note that in the course of the past few years, he has been more occupied with politics than ever (Riel, 1985a: 119).

Moreover, in a diary entry from the 1880s, Riel calls upon Christ, asking Him to “Make me strong in practical matters; and very adept at grasping abstract principles,” further demonstrating Riel’s enduring preoccupation with practical political concerns in this period of his life (Riel, 2020–21: 151). Riel then notes the urgency of founding a new people in the North-West “un peuple nouveau non pas en esprit d’opposition vis-à-vis le Bas Canada mais dans le but avouable de favoriser les intérêts les plus chers” (Riel, 1985a: 119). This new people would inherit the providential role assigned to the original French Canadian settlers, but they would do so as a wholly new people, inured to the “infirmités de la vieillesse” in which the French Canadians of Lower Canada had begun to slumber (Riel, 1985a: 120).

Riel christened this new people the “métis canadien-français.” It is worth noting that Riel had used the term “métis canadien-français” in a strategic political context since at least 1874 to unite the Western Métis with French-speaking Canadians in Lower Canada in the face of Ontarian aggression (Hamon, 2020: 248). This new people would inherit its family name [*nom de famille*] from its French Canadian progenitors, and its baptismal name [*nom de baptême*] would be *métis*, on the grounds that the name is of such a nature as to promote the foundation of a powerful nationality in Manitoba and the North-West (Riel, 1985a: 120). Riel favoured the name *métis* on the grounds that it signifies *mélange*, and while he notes that the term originally refers to the mixed descendants of European settlers and First Nations peoples, it is nonetheless apt to designate “une race d’hommes, qui se recruterait du mélange de tous les sangs, entr’eux; et qui, tout en passant dans le moule canadien-français, conserverait le souvenir de son origine, en s’appelant métisse” (Riel, 1985a: 120). Riel then emphasizes that the name *métis* is all the more felicitous on the grounds that it appeals to all peoples: first, because of its inherent inclusivity, and second, because it stresses the contribution that each nation would play in the foundation of this new people (Riel, 1985a: 120). Moreover, as much as Riel insists upon the providential role of the *peuple métis canadien-français*, he takes pains to assert that this new people is a people that must yet be constituted.

Accordingly, Riel puts forward a lengthy meditation that likens this *peuple* to “une pièce d’étoffe que nous aurions à faire”; a piece of cloth that we must weave (Riel, 1985a: 120). Riel sees the actions of the Métis during the Red River Resistance as having contributed to the construction of this *étoffe*: “Depuis le commencement des troubles jusqu’à nos arrangements avec Ottawa, nous avons filé la chaîne” (Riel, 1985a: 120). To return to Riel’s account of Métis self-governance, it is fair to say that Riel sees the weaving of this cloth as akin to the process of Métis political organization that he saw as so direly needed. Riel reiterates his depiction of the Métis people as a new people—a people so new that it does not yet possess, alone, the know-how to make its *étoffe*. Hence the necessity of enlisting aid from other, more experienced peoples in the construction of the *peuple métis-canadiens-français*. Riel writes, regarding the contribution of Old France to the creation of this new people: “Elle sait que nous n’avons pas de métier . . . ils mettent pour nous sur le métier de la France, la chaîne que nous avons filée” (Riel, 1985a: 121). Owing to the fact that some eight years intervene between the writing of this text and his immigration proposal outlined above, it is fair to say that Riel’s immigration scheme is motivated by similar concerns. To the extent that Riel’s immigration plan maintains a certain complicity with the Canadian



state's dispossession of First Nations lands by promising land to European settlers, this strategy resembles the process of contested colonialism—that is to say, the extension of settler-colonial practices while simultaneously contesting elements of the settler-colonial order (Collie and Bhattacharjee, 2023). However, it is important to note that Riel's assessment does not stem from a conviction of the superiority of the civilizations of the Old World over that of the Métis; rather, it is rooted in an anxiety about the accelerating pace at which English Canadian usurpation of Métis lands was proceeding in his time. Stressing the urgency of the constitution of the *étouffe métisse*, Riel writes: “Nous n'avons pas de temps à perdre. Il faut que notre étoffe se fasse” (Riel, 1985a: 120). As Sloan puts it, Riel welcomes the inevitability of immigration, but on Métis terms (2014: 176).

The aspects of Riel's writings treated above thus cohere into Riel's utopian vision. His immigration scheme becomes a practical political remedy for what he perceives as the Métis people's lack of political organization, and the nations of the Old World that would come to settle in the North-West become part of the nation *métisse-canadienne-française*: a nation that Riel describes in a letter addressed to his confessor as fulfilling God's providential mission for the New World (Riel, 1985a: 134–41). We have arrived from one fragment of Riel's *Massinahican* to the other. The second fragment, which describes the organizational structure of a future Pan-American society of universal concord and Christian fraternity represents a utopian vision of the society that the universal nation *métisse-canadienne-française* will establish in the future (Riel, 1985a: 231). In keeping with the non-exclusionary nature of the *métis* appellation, Riel's vision sees each nation as conserving *le souvenir de son origine* in this New World confederation of peoples. Moreover, even as each people would pass into the *canadien-français* mould, Riel restricts belonging to the *nation métisse-canadienne-française* mould solely to one's participation in this grand project of universal concord. Members of the confederation need not be Catholic to participate in it: “tous selon leur croyance feraient partie de cet ordre religieux que je voudrais voir [dans le Nouveau Monde]” (Riel, 1985a: 231).

The significance of Riel's vision of a multinational and ecumenical confederation has been widely commented upon. Peter Beyer suggests that Riel's conception of the moral nationhood [*nationalité morale*] of the Métis derives from ultramontanism and the emphasis that it placed upon language and religion as vectors of national belonging (1984: 96–97). If this is the case, it is difficult to understand how Riel's invitation to Jews and other non-Catholic Christians to join him and his Métis allies in the North-West fits. Further, while Jennifer Reid's analysis of Riel's defence speeches is correct to suggest that Riel's confederation incorporates “new nations based on transformed ethnicities,” the extent to which this betrays that “Riel had no problem with the basic idea of a Canadian state” is questionable (2014: 252–54). Riel's elaborations of his immigration scheme in his aforementioned letters make little mention of the possibility of accommodation of this Métis-led confederation with the Canadian state, and Flanagan's contention that the content of Riel's defence speeches—namely, the possibility of accommodation with the British Empire—was modified according to the largely Anglo-Protestant jury before which he spoke is not unreasonable (Flanagan, 1979: 178).

A more plausible interpretation of Riel's conception of the relationship between confederation, ecumenicalism and nationality is given by Sloan, who contends that

Riel's thinking, deeply Catholic as it was, "transgressed the bounds of Catholic colonialism" (2014: 183). In particular, what emerges from the *Massinahican* is not a concern with the particularities of Catholic doctrine or ecclesiastical hierarchy; rather, Riel stresses how the nations of the New World would act in the service of Christian fraternity and universal concord if they would but unify with one another and cast themselves into the *métis* mould. In this regard, Riel's utopian vision resembles closely Bloch's emphasis upon the spirit of fraternity and concord inherent within the Christian revolutionary tradition:

The City of God of the Joachites, on the other hand, turned a very sharp regard on institutions which promoted acquisition and exploitation, and it practiced that tolerance which was necessarily alien to an International of the Church, namely toward Jews and heathens. The citizenship of the forthcoming City of God was not determined by baptism but by perceiving the fraternal spirit in the inner world ([1954] 1986: 511).

In this light, Riel's utopian vision, which seizes upon those utopian wishful-images that lay immanent within Christian doctrine stands in continuity with the Christian social utopian tradition analyzed by Bloch.

## Conclusion

The foregoing reconstruction of Riel's writings along utopian lines examined three themes, each of which point toward a critical aspect of Riel's utopian vision understood in Blochian terms. First, Riel's utopian vision is rooted in a profound sense of indignation at the colonization of Métis and First Nations lands, and it strategically wields the utopian wishful-images of universalism, solidarity and universal concord contained within the social teachings of the Gospel in order to imagine alternative futures in the North-West. Here, it is worth returning to Bloch's insistence upon the unconditionality of the utopian conscience. He writes: "Utopian unconditionality comes from the Bible and the idea of the kingdom, and the latter remained the apse of every New Moral World" ([1954] 1986: 515). Riel's utopian reordering of the Americas into an ecumenical and multinational confederation of Christian fraternity is therefore in keeping with the nonnegotiable hostility that Bloch sees in the Christian revolutionary social utopian tradition to worldly injustices and a sanctification of the use of political action to rectify them.

Second, Riel's utopian vision, and the practical political means that he prescribes to realize this vision, recalls Bloch's emphasis upon the this-worldliness of the Christian social utopian tradition. For Bloch, Joachim's greatness consists in the transfer that he proposes of the "kingdom of light *from the other world and the empty promises of the other world into history*" ([1954] 1986: 510, emphasis in original). Part of Riel's "double heresy," then, consists in imagining how the spiritual promises of the Catholic Church can be realized in the here-and-now—in historical time (Bélisle and St-Onge, 2016). Even as Riel saw the task of constituting the *étouffe métisse-canadienne-française* as part and parcel of his prophetic mission, he asserts that this task can only be accomplished through protracted political struggle against colonial forces and, having accomplished this, the unification of all peoples and religions in the New World. As Sloan puts it, "Riel realizes his

plan may take some time . . . but he has faith that his spirit can still accomplish 'practical results' by helping the Métis nation to return from exile and reclaim its rightful place in the great confederacy of peace" (2014: 188). Riel's messianism is not a flight from political engagement, as the "prophetic" reading would have it, but rather a redefinition of political action in divine terms.

Third, reading Riel's utopian vision alongside Bloch's writings on utopianism alerts us to the critical function that Riel's writings carry today. Recall that, for Bloch, utopian imaginings are born out of the not-yet-become—that is to say, a loose bundle of unactualized wishes, dreams and possibilities that lie within the present order of things. As José Esteban Muñoz argues, Bloch's not-yet-become bears "on the *here* of naturalized space and time" and opens up a critical space to imagine alternative futurities (2009: 29, emphasis in original). If, as Eve Tuck and Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández put it, settler colonialism denotes an investment in settler futurity, according to which the historical and ongoing displacement and eradication of Indigenous peoples are projected to keep apace in the future, then alternative futurities, such as those proposed in Riel's utopian *Massinahican*, can function to pose the question: What can be otherwise on these lands? (2013: 80). Although it is the case that some of Riel's proposal for alternatives to Canadian settler colonialism may be uncongenial to contemporary sensibilities, his lifelong mission of envisioning such alternatives remains instructive and can function to disrupt those narratives that see settler colonialism and its attendant political practices and governance structures as necessarily triumphant.

## Notes

1 While *masinahikan* is the Cree word for book, the word *Bible* is translated into Cree as *kihci-masinahikan*, which translates literally to great book, or *manitowi-masinahikan*, which refers to a spiritual book (itwêwina Plains Cree Dictionary, n.d.).

2 Gregory Betts (2008) provides a study of the function of the category of insanity in Riel historiography.

3 It is reasonable to believe that Riel's writings on monadology and theosophy were intended to be part of the *Massinahican*; there is considerable room for future research on this.

4 Riel's fascination with the experience of Irish anti-colonial resistance was reciprocated in the Emerald Isle. In reaction to the Canadian government's suppression of the North-West Resistance, the leading Irish-Catholic nationalist newspaper, the *Freeman's Journal*, expressed sympathies for Riel's plight and his struggle against Canadian Orangism (Read and Webb, 2012).

5 It is important to note that Riel expressed an enduring concern for the question of political organization and governance throughout his life. Darren O'Toole's (2010) magisterial study of the use of the rhetoric of republican nondomination during the Red River Resistance by Riel and other Métis leaders provides but one example of this.

6 It is worth noting that such a use of the term *la Puissance* was not unique to Riel. Many in his time used the term as a translation of the English *Dominion* (Délisle, 2012: 18).

7 Whether Riel thought a direct assault on Canadian forces was impractical is a matter of controversy. Flanagan contends that Riel met with American president Ulysses S. Grant in 1875, pleading for permission to mount an American assault on Manitoba (1979: 54). Hamon challenges this account, arguing that Riel did not exhibit enduring sympathies for American annexation (2020: 178–80).

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