

Eric W. Sager, *Inequality in Canada: The History and Politics of an Idea* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020) 468 pp. Paperback \$37.95.

This erudite study of select intellectuals prior to 1970 argues that a distinctly Canadian understanding of the relationship between inequality and wealth distribution emerged by the early-twentieth century. Developed largely outside the academy, this liberal understanding was rooted in small town and rural Canada's encounter with industrialisation and was primarily articulated within a Protestant tradition that went well beyond the social gospel to embrace an immanent understanding of God's plan. Between the wars, this framework developed into an idealist individualism wherein structural economic inequality was effectively disassociated from questions of wealth distribution. As a result, the emergence of a welfare state in post-war Canada endorsed approaches which privileged equality of opportunity over any systemic critique of capitalism.

Reclaiming the strengths of this Canadian intellectual legacy matters to Eric Sager. He argues it effectively counters the pessimism that so dominates current writings on inequality and, by twinning this legacy with Indigenous perceptions of nature, we will be better prepared to meet the exceptional shocks of climate change.

The core of the book consists of eight ostensibly chronological, but in fact thematic chapters establishing the development of a Canadian approach to inequality. First, however, an overview of key British and American contributions to understanding inequality establishes that very few of their ideas resonated with Canadian intellectuals.

In the first of his two discussions of Quebec, Sager examines how a "Catholic" understanding of inequality by the *Patriotes* differed from that of reformers in Upper Canada. Having set the stage for a religious understanding of the question, we are introduced to Protestant critiques of wealth in Ontario from 1830 to 1880. We then see how intellectuals within the labour movement up to 1920 reacted and, significantly, it is here that Sager introduces us to the belief in a secular immanence: "an ongoing condition of self-realisation" (192). A more divinely inspired politics of self-realisation, he argues, was to animate the rural romantics and social gossellers of the farmers' and progressive movements. Despite or perhaps because of the importance of these movements, their ideas were totally ignored by the country's political economists. The silence in the academy was only broken by the comedic relief of Stephen Leacock's 1914 *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*. We then have our second Quebec interlude, with a discussion focusing on the corporatist Esdras Minville, editor of *Actualité économique* in the late-1930s and early-1940s,

and entitled the 'Force and Frailty of Quebec's Social Catholicism.' Philosophers in English Canada up to 1945 are shown to have been a decidedly more pragmatic lot, interested in education and eschewing anything beyond "equality of treatment, of sacrifice, and of opportunity" (265). This emphasis on equality effectively put an end to any politics of substantive inequality, and resulted in its replacement by a limited distributive justice of social security. The construction of a post-war welfare state was guided by a profound belief in the primacy of equality of opportunity. Thus, it is not John Porter's 1965 *Vertical Mosaic* that gets the kudos, so much as Pierre Berton's 1968 *Smug Minority* and C.B. Macpherson's 1965 *The Real World of Democracy*, because they went beyond a belief in the centrality of education.

This study relies extensively on period documentation mined from online archives for its historical evidence. The meta-narrative is constructed from a wide-ranging review of the secondary literature (the endnotes run to 136 pages in 10-point font) and is guided by a trio of Canadian historians one is most unlikely to ever see sharing a beer at the CHA: Michel Ducharme, Ian McKay and Michael Gauvreau. The spiritual force of argument and not infrequent eloquence is all Sager's own.

Readers of this journal will be disappointed by Sager's extremely narrow definition of inequality. He is only interested in 'vertical inequality' and if intellectuals related it to wealth distribution. Gender does not make a substantive appearance until page 272; race never does. On page 282, we meet Jenny Podoluk, the only woman to merit serious attention. This federal statistician developed the Low Income Cut-Off — how Canada measured poverty for fifty years — and yet Sager fails to make the connection between her pioneering work on income disparity and gender. It may be that Sager simply does not believe in intersectionality (fair enough, few male scholars of my generation do) but the male intellectuals whose writings he studies lived in worlds where social, gender, national and racial inequalities were a normal, albeit unspoken, part of their daily lives. Careful readings require listening to the silences.

Canada has had a remarkably stable and highly concentrated corporate sector for more than a century. Fishers, farmers, and workers have been struggling against this vertical inequality and the iniquitous distribution of wealth it generates for just as long. None of their collective strategies from group government, producer co-operatives, *caisses populaires*, community draws for cod-trap berths, orderly marketing, or collective bargaining merit mention. Their substantive legacy of public ownership of hydro, broadcasting, grain and liquor sales, railways and airlines apparently never mattered. Furthermore, the entire left tradition of political economy is conspicuous by its absence. Gustavus Myers is dismissed as polemic, while Frank Scott's political analysis of corporate concentration, Stanley Ryerson's historical analysis of the national question and Frank and Libby Park's pioneering analysis of corporate structures are simply ignored. Reading this book, one would never know that there was a progressive Catholicism in the Antigonish movement and Jesuit-

led social action or for that matter a Quiet Revolution in Quebec.

What saddens me most, however, is not what Sager didn't do, but his singular failure to discuss what he did do. Ostensibly because it is a qualitative study in intellectual history, no proper explanation of his method is given; a mere page and a half at the outset on possible reservations and it never comes up again. This is most unfortunate. Eric Sager is one of Canada's leading quantitative historians and so particularly well positioned to assess critically the new methodology of data mining. Religious publications dominate the nineteenth and early-twentieth century online corpus of *Canadiana*, how did this influence his findings? Overwhelmingly, it was white, educated males who got published, how relevant can these reflections of the privileged be to confronting climate change?

In the 1830s, when Indigenous peoples were still the majority in what would become Canada, the colonial government of Upper Canada banned oral communications between it and traditional Indigenous leaders. Henceforth, all communications were to be in writing. Oratorical skills had long been a key diplomatic advantage of Indigenous peoples, and by written decree they were eliminated. The impact on the history and politics of inequality in Canada of our centuries-long silencing of First Nations cannot be properly addressed by a simple invocation, however well-meaning, of Indigenous thought in the conclusion to a study whose very design denied them any place.

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