

Peter Graham and Ian McKay, *Radical Ambition: The New Left in Toronto*

Alvin Finkel

Volume 84, Fall 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066549ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ltr.2019.0044>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Finkel, A. (2019). Review of [Peter Graham and Ian McKay, *Radical Ambition: The New Left in Toronto*]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 84, 343–345.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/ltr.2019.0044>

REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Peter Graham and Ian McKay, *Radical Ambition: The New Left in Toronto* (Toronto: Between the Lines 2019)

WORKS ON THE CANADIAN New Left are now sprouting plentifully and certainly a work on the country's major city is welcome. This one is encyclopedic, and Graham and McKay deserve thanks for their inclusive rendition of the youthful radical movements in Toronto from 1958 to 1985. The book is generous in its treatment of most of them, though it offers, as it should, analysis of why some groups achieved more in the short term than others while still others left a lasting legacy, for example, in preserving natural areas or working-class neighbourhoods that corporate interests wanted to bulldoze.

My quibbles with these authors began on the first page where they claim that "in contrast to older formations, new leftists emphasized solidarity with national liberation movements challenging imperialism around the world." Much of the old left, Stalinist, Trotskyist and to a degree the social democrats, though not so much in the early Cold War, had opposed imperialism. The authors supply abundant evidence, in any case, that many new leftists, whatever their reasons for becoming anti-capitalists in the first place, emphasized the local over the global. Graham and McKay are on more solid ground when they define the amorphous new left in terms of their preference for "direct, grassroots, community-based democracy" in their organizational style,

a style which they believed prefigured "the liberated world of the future." (1)

The book demonstrates the impact of the Cold War on limiting growth of left-wing thought and organization after World War II and the debates that occurred within the new left about allowing participation by Communists and Communist fronts in non-partisan organizations even when the positions of the Communists and the new leftists on particular issues varied little. While the authors are no doubt right in suggesting that new leftists often rejected working with communists because of potential smears that their organizations would face, it is also true that the new left generally regarded the Soviet Union as a negative example for socialist transformation and disliked Communists both for their relentless apologetics for that country and their personal stodginess. While the new left shared the Communists' political passions, they diverged on sex, drugs, and rock and roll and there was little acceptance of the grey-haired Reds' view that hippies were evidence of capitalist degeneracy.

This book is at its best in discussing new left strategies and debates regarding protests against American imperialism in Indochina, efforts to protect and strengthen neighbourhoods and organizations of marginal workers and the poor, the early second-wave women's movement, movements of Indigenous people and non-whites, and movements of the early LGBTQ2S community. It confronts

as well the ongoing issue of free speech and freedom to pursue legal activities versus the protection of life and dignity of oppressed peoples. A high point of new left activity in Winnipeg was the 1968 padlocking of the office at the University of Manitoba where Dow Chemicals, which produced the napalm used against Indochinese people, was interviewing engineers. The job-seeking engineers claimed the protesters deprived them of their right to seek whatever jobs they wished. Given what Dow was all about, their claims that the protesters were "like Nazis" spoke of an inverted world.

Mention of other cities in this review may seem a digression. But this book would have been helped by more efforts to place Toronto events in broader contexts. For example, the discussion of women fighting to remove male preserves from the University of Toronto campus, to attend debates at male-only Hart House, and to attend concerts without escorts, all in 1966, while treated sympathetically, is also treated as a half-hearted enterprise. A comparison with other campuses across Canada would likely show that such feminist organizing was rare in 1966. Certainly that was true for all three Manitoba campuses and would remain true for three more years. So the University of Toronto women, one of whom these authors suggest was rather defensive about her feminism versus her femininity, were actually pioneers.

Graham and McKay are at once sympathetic to and critical of the efforts of new leftist groups to produce movements that avoided both Leninist discipline or social democratic tinkering with the status quo. The tent city in a local park which new leftists named Wachea, from a Cree word that indicated all were welcome, and Rochdale, the housing project meant to create intentional community, for example, both exemplified new left enthusiasms and lack of detailed

planning. While police interventions demonstrated mainstream hostility to these liberatory projects, there were internal issues that were simply avoided. At Rochdale, women complained of constant sexual harassment and exclusion from decision-making.

The authors quote a number of Toronto activists from the period, some of whom, like Judy Rebick, Judy Darcy, Ulli Diemer, and Peggy Morton, remain important figures on the Canadian left to this day. The work of George Martell and others on *This Magazine Is About Schools* deserves particular notice because it demonstrates the efforts of new leftists to balance their goals of individual liberation, on the one hand, and ending class oppression on the other.

Graham and McKay tackle the difficult issue of the conflicts between those who remained committed to a new left view of the world in the 1970s and those who tacked towards Marxism-Leninism. They provide strong evidence that those who scorned the indiscipline and sometimes lack of political seriousness of the new left weakened the new left without creating organizations that could attract more than small numbers of people. But they suggest that the Marxist-Leninist formations, after berating their former new left colleagues, came around by the 1980s to accepting the importance of the diversity of issues that the new left grappled with as opposed to simply focusing on the class struggle and working-class revolution. Perhaps, but by then the sense of breaking with an oppressive establishment that restricted both individual and collective rights in the interests of capitalism and patriarchy had become less the cry of a significant section of a young generation and more the property of a shrunken portion of a generation approaching middle age and unable to make connections with anyone younger than themselves.

These two authors place the shifting attitudes of the 1960s and 1970s within

the context of the postwar compromise that bequeathed the Keynesian welfare state but are somewhat vague regarding the class, gender, and ethnic composition of the Toronto new left. They provide a lovely kaleidoscope but perhaps lack the kind of data that would allow them to hazard educated guesses about the gendered, raced, and classed balances among who became active in the city's new left and who did not.

In the end, this work provides a major contribution to our understanding of how the new left was made and unmade in Toronto from 1958 to 1985. McKay, as the originator of the oft-challenged idea that much of Canada's history is best understood in terms of the ability of a liberal order to co-opt all sorts of people and movements, joins with Graham to praise the new left in Toronto for creating democratic counterinstitutions that might be seen as first steps towards transcending the liberal order. From food coops to health centres, neighbourhoods protected from developers to subsidized housing projects, the new left created challenges to bourgeois individualism that have not disappeared and should not be dismissed as simply minor stones in the road to long-term capitalist hegemony.

ALVIN FINKEL

Athabasca University

Michel S. Beaulieu, David K. Ratz, and Ronald N. Harpelle, eds., *Hard Work Conquers All: Building the Finnish Community in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 2018)

SCHOLARS OF Finnish North Americans have generated a prodigious number of studies over the past century, with impressive works on history, sociology, ethnology, and other disciplines. Given the relatively small population of Finns who

settled in North America, it is perhaps unsurprising that much of this output has been published by presses in Finland, Finnish cultural heritage societies, or self-published by scholars. The result, unfortunately, has been that the influence of Finnish Studies on the wider world of North American scholarship has been – with some exceptions – relatively minor.

But in the 21st century, the academic reach of Finnish Studies in North America has increased considerably. This is due in no small part to the work put in by the editors of *The Journal of Finnish Studies*, a fine scholarly journal exploring Finnish and Finnish migration topics. Credit is also owed to the staffs of two outstanding university presses, Michigan State University Press and University of British Columbia Press, which have published books on Finnish North American History.

The latest work in this rapidly lengthening line is *Hard Work Conquers All: Building the Finnish Community in Canada*, edited by Michel S. Beaulieu, David K. Ratz, and Ronald N. Harpelle. *Hard Work Conquers All* brings together ten scholars from North America and Europe to bring new scholarship on Canadian Finns to a wide academic audience.

For generations, scholars of Finns in North America have been writing local, regional, and institutional histories. Many of these have focused on exceptional aspects of the Finnish immigrant experience, including the impressive contributions by Finns to the North American socialist, communist, and Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) movements. Finnish immigrants were frequently the largest group within labour and left-wing movements, especially in radical hot spots such as the mining regions of Michigan and Minnesota, the Pacific Northwest, and in Ontario. For example, in the late 1920s, Finns