

**Labour**

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

**Le Travail**

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



## Stephen Dale, *Shift Change: Scenes from a Post-Industrial Revolution* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2021)

Christopher Lawson

Volume 90, automne 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094797ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v90.0025>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Lawson, C. (2022). Compte rendu de [Stephen Dale, *Shift Change: Scenes from a Post-Industrial Revolution* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2021)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 90, 318–320. <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v90.0025>

became more extreme, resulting in the Supreme Court's 1857 Dred Scott decision nullifying the Missouri Compromise and southern demands for a federal slave code throughout the territories.

In recounting the antislavery campaign Wilentz explores the dispute between the more numerous group who sought to work within legislative politics versus the smaller number led by William Lloyd Garrison, editor of *The Liberator* and co-founder of the American Antislavery Society, who scorned the major parties as well as the Constitution, which Garrison called a "covenant with death." Over time many of Garrison's allies, particularly African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass, came over to the antislavery interpretation of the Constitution. In addition to its intrinsic merits, this position had more potential to mobilize voters around the idea of fulfilling the nation's promise than did the case for overthrowing it. During the crucible of the late 1850s, when Dred Scott and Bleeding Kansas soured northerners on further concessions to the South, the antislavery constitutionalism of Douglass and Lincoln triumphed over the murkier popular sovereignty doctrine of Democratic Party leader Stephen A. Douglas.

Wilentz concludes that Douglass and Lincoln not only pursued the better political strategy but also had the correct reading of the Constitution to back them. As earlier reviews have shown, this book will not end the debate over the character of the Constitution, a point Wilentz notes in his preface to the 2019 paperback edition. For this reviewer, more attention to the Constitution as a living document – an ever-changing code shaped by the partisan context of the times – would enhance this debate. As recent scholarship has shown, jurists and their decisions were entangled with partisan politics at both the federal and local level. Perhaps the original intent of the framers

mattered less than the contemporary balance of power and the always crucial question of how legal doctrines were enforced. However, Wilentz clearly shows that Americans cared about the original meaning of the Constitution and its implications for slavery. In this respect and others, he makes a brilliant case for the antislavery implications of the republic's founding in a highly readable, informative book that will interest beginners as well as seasoned professionals.

FRANK TOWERS

University of Calgary

**Stephen Dale, *Shift Change: Scenes from a Post-Industrial Revolution* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2021)**

EVEN BEFORE BEING hit by the biggest pandemic in a century, cities across Canada and the Global North were struggling with a series of concurrent and interconnected crises. These include a housing crisis, a crisis in policing, a crisis of low wages and precarious employment, and a crisis of racism and discrimination. These crises did not appear overnight, and there have been excellent recent scholarship that identifies their roots in the neoliberal restructuring and deindustrialization of the late 20th century. However, we lack a full understanding of the way that these crises are currently reshaping everyday urban life in Canada and of how communities are finding ways to fight back. Stephen Dale's textured analysis of urban change and conflict in his hometown of Hamilton is thus a timely study and potential model for future research.

As Canada's "Steel City", Hamilton has undergone a difficult post-industrial transition in recent decades. However, it is relatively unique among smaller post-industrial cities in its close proximity to a major global metropolis. Seventy

kilometres up the road is Toronto, a city with some of the most unaffordable housing in the world. In the first chapter of *Shift Change*, Dale explains how Torontonians, who once ignored their smaller and grittier neighbour, have recently taken a new interest, attracted by a media caricature of Hamilton as a post-industrial museum (with its inhabitants conveniently airbrushed out). This newfound interest has naturally resulted in spiralling housing costs, gentrification, and a particularly intense conflict over urban space. It is thus not surprising that the consequences and conflicts generated by the housing crisis form the central thread that runs through the full length of *Shift Change*. Dale identifies the rapid rent increases and chronic lack of affordable housing as the driving forces behind many of the city's other social challenges, including crime, drug abuse, and homelessness.

In the subsequent chapters of the book, Dale fully immerses himself in community life, and he introduces the reader to the key protagonists in this struggle over Hamilton's post-industrial urban space, including artists, labour unions, anarchists, and property developers. Dale is measured and nuanced in this analysis, breaking down and challenging traditional good guy/bad guy categorizations in the debates over development and gentrification.

For example, in Chapter 2, Dale describes how the revitalization of Hamilton's economically depressed North End was spurred by the LIUNA labour union, which redeveloped the old railway station into a banquet and convention centre before moving on to other real estate projects in the area. As a unique sort of property developer and one that is deeply rooted in the Hamilton community, LIUNA is committed to all of the "right things": community engagement, mixed-income housing, and

development that benefits long-standing residents rather than displacing them. Nevertheless, the subsequent property boom in the North End has indeed resulted in displacement. Following the traditional pattern of gentrification, "cash has trumped creativity," (53) and the underground arts and music scene of the 1990s and early 2000s has given way to a more corporatized landscape that largely caters to outsiders and to those who can afford the rapidly increasing rents.

As in other gentrifying cities, the role of artists in this transformation is contentious. Dale describes how a local artist co-op organized a public meeting in the hope of bringing the different North End community groups together to find solutions to the housing crisis, but they quickly found themselves in the cross-hairs as the meeting descended into a screaming match. A small group of anarchists have repeatedly targeted art galleries and events, and "view Hamilton's culture-driven renaissance as a cover for a business-orchestrated con aimed at upwardly revaluing Hamilton's bargain real estate and dumping the poor people who've lived there ... onto the street." (56) Dale views the anarchists' tactics as counter-productive but does not deny the legitimacy of their concerns.

In the third chapter, Dale places Hamilton's conflict over gentrification and the role of artists in the context of the broader transnational debate about the "Creative Class". Dale is naturally critical of Richard Florida's failure to recognize the inequality, segregation, and cultural destruction that have resulted from the prioritization of the needs and tastes of wealthy white-collar workers. However, he is once again careful to avoid simplistic good guy/bad guy dichotomies. His core premise is that Hamilton will inevitably continue to grow, evolve, and welcome new people, but it must find a way to do so in an inclusionary and equitable manner.

But how can this actually be accomplished? Dale does not pretend to have identified a magic bullet, but he does find seeds of hope in the city's painful recent history. Chapter 4 focuses on Hamilton's "all for one" spirit, an unpretentious, egalitarian blue-collar ethos that grew out of the steel mills. Much has been lost as both union membership and local corporate power have shrivelled, and that blue-collar tradition also comes with its dark sides, including ongoing challenges with racism and homophobia. However, Dale argues that this residual spirit of place-based solidarity could allow Hamilton to grow more equitably and inclusively than its much larger neighbour. In the fifth and final chapter, Dale explores the challenges that the city will face in the years to come, including the impact of provincial government cuts and the arrival of a new light rail transit system. However, he ends on an optimistic note, pointing to the successful restoration of the city's waterfront and innovative efforts in community-led housing development as models for the future.

*Shift Change* is a highly engaging read and is clearly the result of intensive on-the-ground research. The voices of community activists, union leaders, business owners, and residents are effectively integrated into the narrative and allow the reader to feel immersed in the political and cultural life of the city.

At times, the focus on housing and urban space overshadows other critical aspects of the post-industrial crisis faced by cities like Hamilton, particularly the lack of well-paid jobs and the precarity of employment for those outside of the rarified "Creative Class". This focus also risks obscuring the true historical origins of Hamilton's crisis. Gentrification may presently be top of mind, but the poverty, inequality, drug abuse, and social dislocation faced by many Hamiltonians cannot be understood without reference to

the physical and metaphorical ruins left behind by deindustrialization. It therefore would have been useful to provide a clearer description of the specific process of industrial decline in Hamilton, identifying how it has impacted inner-city communities and reshaped the social and economic geography of the wider city, thereby setting the stage for present-day conflicts and challenges.

Finally, the book lacks an obvious thematic or chronological structure, and international comparisons and connections are introduced in a haphazard way, which often interrupts the narrative flow. Better organization and the addition of a short introduction and/or conclusion would strengthen the force and clarity of the analysis.

Overall, however, Dale has provided a unique glimpse into the social and cultural landscape of contemporary Hamilton and the people who are fighting to shape its future. *Shift Change* will be of value to anyone interested in gentrification, urban change, and the interconnected challenges faced by post-industrial cities across the global north.

CHRISTOPHER LAWSON  
University of Toronto

**Nilanjan Ragunath, *Shaping the Futures of Work: Proactive Governance and Millennials* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021)**

FOR THE PAST TEN YEARS, the future of work has emerged as a key subject for the social sciences, for institutions, and for public discourse all over the world. A number of macrotrends, including the introduction of new digital technologies, the ageing of populations, the climate emergency, and the COVID-19 pandemic, have made labour markets appear unpredictable, reigniting concerns about their future. It is in this context of uncertainty