

Limiting Identities

The Conservative Attack on History and Feminist Claims for Equality

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Volume 73, Spring 2014

Forum: History Under Harper

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1025177ar>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Strong-Boag, V. (2014). Limiting Identities: The Conservative Attack on History and Feminist Claims for Equality. *Labour / Le Travail*, 73, 206–209.

Limiting Identities: The Conservative Attack on History and Feminist Claims for Equality

Veronica Strong-Boag

THE NEW RIGHT AND ITS ALLY neoliberalism have made Canada and the world a worse place. Their version of “vampire capitalism” leaves the nation meaner, more dangerous, and less hopeful, especially for women, children, and long disadvantaged communities such as workers, immigrants, and those with disabilities – in fact, for the 99 per cent. The origins of the assault on equality pre-date the 2008 financial collapse: Canadian Liberals under Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin betrayed the post-World War II capital-labour accord and the Keynesian welfare state well before Stephen Harper became prime minister. Neoliberal and (no longer Progressive) Conservative attacks on Canada’s hard-won but imperfect welfare state reveal a determined defence of patriarchal capitalism. The privileges of the few (commonly male, financially better off, straight, white, and Christian) are to be shored up even as corporate greed, environmental disaster, resource depletion, and deindustrialization jeopardize the majority.

In the 21st century, reactionary advocates of diminished rights and expectations have history and evidence-based research in general firmly in their sights. That bull’s eye reflects the centrality of modern scholarship and activism in exposing colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy and in illuminating plural and counter-hegemonic identities. In the last few decades the systemic oppression and the continuing vitality of First Nations, workers, and women have been irrefutably documented and that data has been central to calls for recognition and redress in matters from residential schools and land claims to pay equity and family law. Today’s conservatives meet that mother lode of evidence with the same response many have to proof of climate change, namely, deny, deny, deny.

Women’s history and more generally history “from the bottom up” have been central to contemporary recognition that oppressive arrangements in families, workplaces, and politics are not natural products of biology but social arrangements dictated ultimately by brute force. Patriarchal fantasies of benevolence and consent, rooted in the New Right’s religious superstition and sense of class and race entitlement, cannot withstand such examination.

In the course of the long struggle for justice, feminist historians, like feminists in general, had much to learn about the limits of their own social locations, but they nevertheless brought unparalleled evidence to the demand that girls and women of all classes and communities deserved a fair deal and that governments had an important role in ensuring that this occurred. History emerged as a key component of an extensive body of feminist scholarship that connected diverse forms of oppression and educated the public and

policymakers about standpoint and intersectionality in constructing opportunity. While resistance to justice was ever-present, and indeed mounting after the 1982 inclusion of women's equality in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, progress was palatable. Unprecedented educational achievement for girls and women, entry into the professions, and recognition of pervasive violence, particular health issues, and disproportionate responsibility for paid and unpaid caring labour, all built on a generation and more of careful scholarly documentation. As numbers of elected female politicians slowly moved toward the critical 30% mark designated by the United Nations as a signifier of real change, patriarchy no longer seemed quite so secure.

Even as scholarship undermined the legitimacy of traditional privilege, faith in the inexhaustibility of "Mother Nature," that mythic justification for ever-expanding expectations and standards of living, and the basis for much seeming liberalism, increasingly ran full tilt into the reality of non-sustainability. Growing proof of environmental and demographic disaster on a national and global scale foretold a not too distant race to the bottom. After the oil crises of the 1970s, the spectre of the "end of times" re-energized apocalyptic male- and ethno-centric religious and economic orthodoxies. These had been ever-present but for much of the post-World War II era reactionary visions had been forced to live on the margins of mainstream political life, despite their regular pollution of public debates on equal opportunity for women and long disadvantaged groups.

In Canada, the appearance of the Reform Party (1987), then the Canadian Alliance (2000), and finally the Conservative Party of Canada (2003) embodied a fearful and belligerent determination to turn the clock back to a supposed simpler time when women, First Nations, and workers no longer contested *élite* rule. So-called Red Tories found no home in the new conservative configuration with its celebration of evangelical Protestantism and market liberalism.

As reactionary apostles knew, the alliance of feminist scholarship and progressive movements has done much to crack the cake of patriarchal custom. With claims firmly rooted in historical investigations that exposed the male breadwinner wage, the white colonial state, compulsory heterosexuality, and male violence, as well as long-standing resistance, researchers and activists had made a critical case for interventionist government. Good history is no handmaiden for patriarchy or injustice.

Once in power thanks to the first-past-the-post electoral system, the Harper administration launched a systematic assault on evidence and expertise which call into question traditional privilege. This explains its ready take-up of previous Liberal attacks on Status of Women Canada, the Court Challenges Program, federal employment equity commitments, and prospects for a national childcare system, all supported by extensive evidence-based feminist research. The movements speaking for justice – whether feminist, Indigenous, or labour – were all dismissed as "special interest" and unrepresentative of the deserving "majority," supposedly represented by conservative loyalists.

Cutting corporate and other taxes to shore up their argument that fair-dealing was unaffordable, Harper Conservatives largely abandoned evidence-based public policy. History was only one victim. The long-form census and the long gun registry were denounced as threats to privacy, even as ministerial research capacity of every kind, concerning issues such as Great Lakes water quality, salmon stocks, and food safety, was massively downsized. Status of Women Canada lost critical capacity for monitoring gender equality. Responsibility for documenting the well-being of Canadians was increasingly downloaded and privatized.

Conservative ideologues tapped “civil society,” by which they meant the volunteer sector and individual families, in which, not so incidentally, women are the regular mainstay, to take on multiple duties of care, whether for the ill or the environment, now more likely than ever to be abandoned by the state. However touted, such respect for civil society custodians of public good is little more than rhetorical. Their contributions are not likely to spur government action. Take, for example, the BC CEDAW (Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) Group. Its documentation of the drop in Canada’s standing in the World Economic Forum’s gender gap index from 7th to 25th between 2004 and 2009 prompted no official remedy. As the state distanced itself from evidence collection, social ills became invisibilized. The 1980s commitment to “gender lens” appraisals of policy completely disappeared from the official agenda.

Misogyny and opposition to equality prefer a nostalgic romantic past in which power goes unquestioned, élites rule in the common good, and “good” women’s labour freely subsidizes male authority. Instead of addressing social need, C/conservatives offer 21st-century Canadians the paltry Community Historical Recognition Program, significantly downsized archival and museum commitments, and effectively meaningless apologies for past sins. Citizens are urged to celebrate supposed connections with British royalty and sanitized versions of how women and men, Native and non-Native, French and English, collaborated to save Canada from the Americans. Old-fashioned icons like the War of 1812’s Laura Secord trump unsettling figures like abolitionist Mary Ann Cary Shadd, labour activist Kate McVicar, or Mohawk-English champion E. Pauline Johnson, all rescued by modern scholarship. National identity is reduced to piety. Soft-soaping history is no accident: it camouflages a hard-edged contemporary politics that denies women and others justification for redress and recognition.

Feminist scholarship in history, allied to counterparts in other disciplines, contradicts all claims to a rose-coloured past. It documents the extent of women’s work, their vulnerability to violence, the restraints on their freedom, and their continuing resistance. Feminist historians have built on the insights of many suffrage campaigners, who, for all limited visions, identified injustice as pervasive. Like their foremothers, today’s scholars regard a more complete

understanding of history as critical to making the case for fair-dealing and government action.

Today, Canada's feminist history, to take only two recent comprehensive examples – *Canadian Women: A History* (2011) by Gail Cuthbert Brandt et al. and *A Brief History of Women in Quebec* (2013) by Denyse Baillargeon – sets the record straight. Inequality and injustice constitute the real meaning of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism. Reactionary nostrums from conservative and neoliberal ideologues threaten the well-being of the entire community. Feminist scholars draw a straight line between historical evidence and contemporary inequality.

The pro-democracy website, womensuffrage.org, maintained since 2012, typifies pervasive scholarly commitment to informed public policy. Much like the related initiative, ActiveHistory.ca, it endeavours to take the full tidings of modern scholarship to a wider public. Contributors do not stand on the sidelines of public debates: they connect past and present, power and privilege, Canada and the world, all the while viewing the position of women and girls as a key indicator of social health and democracy. This is civil society at work.

In the 21st century, Canadians face a federal government that prefers fantasies to evidence. As it sheds duties of care, it rejects external scholarship that questions its retreat from justice. Sanitized versions of the past that smack more of medieval theocracy than modern democracy aim to muzzle dissent and to obscure the need for action. Feminist history supplies a critical corrective to today's reactionary panaceas. The dilemmas of our age demand recognition of multiple, contested, and relational national and global identities not denial and retreat from evidence. We need more good history not less.