ÉTUDES CRITIQUES / REVIEW ESSAYS

Doing What We Can: Governments and the Unemployed During the Great Depression


There is something iconic about the Great Depression. Writers like John Steinbeck immortalized the struggling family that was forced from their farm to an unknown and at times dangerous future. Charlie Chaplin’s satirical motion pictures captured the humour, conflict and frustrations that characterized the Depression’s economic and social circumstances. News reels brought to the North American public the images of poor, unemployed, thin, dirty young men, women, and families who could no longer support themselves. These images, both fictional and real, have burrowed their ways into our collective historical consciousness.

Given the compelling pull of Depression folklore, the considerable volume and breadth of scholarship into the Great Depression is not surprising. This research into the Depression, beginning as early as 1930 and continuing today, has repeatedly shown that there are many Depression stories that merit our attention and our analysis. Nonetheless, the perennial issue of unemployment is nearly constant. Indeed, the three books that are considered here are bound together by their focus on unemployment and relief. James J. Lorence’s The Unemployed People’s Movement: Leftists, Liberals, and Labor in Georgia, 1929-1941 explores the formidable process of organizing a racially and politically divided unemployment movement in the American South. He points out the surprising successes and less surprising failures over more than a decade of economic depression, stagnation, and recovery. Eric Strikwerda’s The Wages of Relief: Cities and the Unemployed in Prairie Canada, 1929-1939 considers the challenges facing Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Edmonton in responding to the sudden and dramatic increase in the number of urban unemployed and their urgent needs for relief. Lara Campell’s Respectable
Citizens: Gender, Family, and Unemployment in Ontario’s Great Depression unearths how families—parents, grandparents, and children—confronted the Depression within prescribed notions of appropriate gender relations in their homes, on the streets, in relief offices, and in courtrooms. Each of these works expands and enriches our knowledge of the Depression experience so that it becomes more inclusive and more complex.

The pervading myth about labour organization in the South, Lorence asserts, “is the timeworn argument that the region’s workers were somehow impervious to the drive toward organization that affected urban, industrial America” (pg. 1). In The Unemployed People’s Movement, Lorence assures us that the South was a busy, complex, and promising site of organization for workers and, during the Depression, the unemployed. Lorence, borrowing heavily from James C. Scott’s Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts, spends much of his introduction asserting that the unemployed engaged “in a form of protest politics denied them by the existing political discourse of the Depression-era South” (pg. 3). As Lorence points out, this discourse disadvantaged people according to class, race, and region of residence. Unfortunately, Lorence directly connects his evidence to Scott’s ideas only once in the body of the work, leaving the allusions to innovative methods of protest in the introduction as unfulfilled promises.

Lorence’s method of working through the Depression is an impressive accomplishment. His work reveals years of research and careful examination of documents ranging from newspaper articles to oral histories, from government relief agency files and police records to letters complaining about the egregious division of relief provisions. His resulting conclusions combine the closely connected issues of class and race, arguing that for brief moments the growing unemployed movement was, as a result of Georgia’s long history of favouring white over black employees, at the forefront of organizing demands for greater economic and social equality for African-Americans. In part this was a result of both a Communist push for equal treatment under federal relief programming—a push that Lorence explores with an noteworthy awareness of the politics that limit and forge political movements—and because of the black community leaders’ awareness of the “New Deal’s potential for forcing social change” (pg.82).

Lorence’s work makes important contributions to our understanding of organizing labour in the Deep South in the early 1930s, even if his central topic is, indeed, the organization of the unemployed. He argues that the failures of a textile industry strike in 1934 led to greater efforts to provide the unemployed with an advocating voice from within organized labour. After the strike was defeated by the combined efforts of state and industry, unions and other leftist organizations began advocating for and organizing the unemployed to push for an increase in the provision of relief. This helped labour to make greater demands on employers, and compelled the unemployed to endorse, rather than break, future strikes. As a result, liberals, leftists and labour moved in on political territory that had previously been occupied almost exclusively by Communists, and the political strife and infighting that developed—even as Communists enacted a new United Front policy—is quite fascinating for what it reveals of labour politics.
during the Depression. Even more fascinating is the resilience of the unemployed to challenge existing relief systems using the resulting organizations, such as The Workers Alliance of America. As Lorence says:

The Workers Alliance of America had made progress in mobilizing jobless workers and farm laborers for struggle in what began to look like a mass movement. For the first time, thousands of destitute citizens started to coalesce in an organization that was unafraid to cast its objectives and achievements in terms of class interests. The Alliance had weathered a divisive split between Communist and noncommunist leaders to build an organization that fulfilled union functions within the framework of a traditional labor relations system (pg. 186).

The story Lorence tells of organizing the unemployed under a single banner in a racially and politically segregated society is complex, but the result of Lorence’s detailed research is rich and rewarding. It is not, though, without its frustrations for readers unfamiliar with the history of the left or the Communist Party in the region. The importance of many events, places, people, and organizations remains unclear until the last few chapters, the importance of others remains a mystery even after having finished. Nonetheless, the creativity and depth of research on hand in Lorence’s monograph are worth the occasionally baffling details. Indeed, the sixth, seventh, and eighth chapters each would be well suited to a seminar on labour unrest, the Depression, or political movement and protest organization. Those interested in labour politics along the ‘Southern Front’, in the importance of race politics in labour organization, or in the development of a collective agency among a group of people as disparate as the unemployed would do well to read this book.

Eric Strikwerda’s well-researched and elegantly written The Wages of Relief explores how the provision of relief changed dramatically through the Depression. He focuses on the slow but certain process by which unemployment relief was changed from a municipal project that was aided by provincial and federal governments to a nearly exclusively federal portfolio that limited the input of local governments. This is a book about policy as seen from “the mindset of local elites” (pg. 221). Nonetheless, Strikwerda includes how those receiving relief adapted to the rapidly shifting programs available to them. Those stories remind the reader that government relief policy during the Depression, including the squabbling between governments, altered the lives of millions of Canadians in fundamental and tangible ways.

The first two chapters of Stikerwerda’s book provide the context in which municipal government’s organized unemployment relief in the Canadian Prairies. He begins with the historical context of unemployment relief in the eighteenth century, discusses the British Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, and continues into the history of unemployment relief in Canada up to 1929. In this way, Strikwerda connects unemployment relief provided in the 1930s to policies and methods that preceded it by more than a century and extends the narrative to a broader region and period. For those familiar with the topic or period there is little
new information on offer in these early chapters about relief in the Depression. For those unfamiliar with the topic, the background on unemployment relief that Strikwerda provides is among the best available. As Strikwerda points out, during the Depression “relief officials based many of their policies on a blend of what they viewed as ‘hard economics’ and the particular moral and social order they wanted their relief policies to promote” (pg. 50). As a result, relief providers divided relief according to prescribed gender categories, focused on residents over wanderers, were suspicious of the potential for radical politics, and constructed support employing the philosophy of labour-for-relief.

Once this context has been set, Strikwerda unwinds his fascinating tale about the federal government’s slow encroachment on municipal relief machinery. According to Strikwerda, this began with the federal government’s financial support for municipal public work projects that would not otherwise be possible, continued with the establishment of the Work Relief Camps in 1932, the switch towards a direct relief policy that was more cost efficient, and the Dominion Housing Act. It is a well-constructed argument, and the dramatic change in policy from the 1920s to the war period is clear. By the end of 1937, the National Employment Commission, established by Mackenzie King in 1935 to shape a solution to the unemployment relief crisis, suggested “a central role for the central government” (pg. 211).

The changes that made such a bold suggestion possible in 1937 resulted from conflict directed at the federal governments of both Prime Ministers Bennett and King. Strikwerda capably explores the relationship between this protest and change, showing that the federal government was reticent to adopt new responsibilities over which they traditionally held no jurisdiction. Municipal and provincial government constantly petitioned the federal government to increase financial and administrative support for the administration of relief to the unemployed, and the unemployed protested the low standards of living that poor relief provision made possible. The federal government, though, resisted as best it could while still providing municipalities with the least possible support to ensure their solvency. With the benefit of hindsight, the results of these protests are staggering. Perhaps the two most enduring are the new associations established by premiers and mayors to collectively pressure the federal government and, as Strikwerda points out, the early signs of a welfare state government with the adoption of a more commanding federal role in unemployment relief.

The greatest disappointment in Strikwerda’s work is that the reader is left to wonder whether Strikwerda sees the federal government’s new role in providing relief as beneficial. This is surprising in a work on government policy written since the publication of Ian McKay’s The Liberal Hegemonic Framework and the Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme-edited response, Liberalism and Hegemony. Indeed, this is even more surprising given the present public debate in North America about the role of the government in providing relief to the unemployed and disadvantaged. Nonetheless, Strikwerda’s book is useful to those interested in a greater knowledge of how the different levels of government responded to the Depression and the expansion of the federal state. It would be
well-suited to a course on the Depression in Canada given its many threads, thorough research, pleasant writing, and the unresolved debate at its conclusion.

In *Respectable Citizens*, Lara Campbell expands the discussion of unemployment relief to include those dependent on the men receiving relief. It is an remarkable accomplishment that required a great deal of dedication and creativity to find voices that are not found in relief rolls. In doing so, Campbell offers greater complexity the topic of gendered relief during the Depression. The contribution this makes to our understanding of relief is significant. Her work not only redirects the focus of relief from government policy to the people on relief, but it also shifts the lens of analysis away from those directly receiving relief to the wider net of dependents upon those receiving relief.

It becomes clear through Campbell’s book that men, women, mothers, fathers, children, and grandparents experienced relief according to different limitations and potentialities. They expected different kinds of treatment from government, and they used different strategies to negotiate the terms of relief with government. Importantly, this not only alters our notion of how relief recipients used their agency to challenge government policy, but also our understanding of how relief officers, judges, and municipal governments used their agency to alter relief in particular circumstances. As Campbell says, “through various kinds of protest and struggle, which were in turn shaped by the rhetoric of gender, race, and class, families participated in a wide-ranging political debate over the role of government in the economy and in the structure of the family” (pg. 18).

It is easiest to outline the significance of Campbell’s analysis with brief examples of her scholarship in comparison with the work of Lorence and Strikwerda. Campbell, like Strikwerda and Lorence, is familiar with the long-standing philosophy of providing to the unemployed less relief than can be acquired through the lowest-paid employment. However, Campbell argues that these policies affected women in profoundly different ways than men, given their responsibilities to construct budgets and provide nutritional meals regardless of income (pg. 34). Furthermore, whereas all three scholars outline the different ways in which women and men were permitted to access relief, Campbell, borrowing Joan Sangster’s concept of the moral regulation of gender, points out how restricting relief to men promoted particular images of womanhood—mothers caring for children, dependents maintaining the home, and non-labourers that did not steal jobs from men. These are profound conclusions that have a great deal of potential in altering our understanding of the Depression.

While it is clear that Campbell does not view the Depression as having provided men, women, and children with the same opportunities, she also does not portray them as passive victims bludgeoned by a belligerent economy and careless government. Rather, Campbell shows how men, women, and children adopted constructed notions of gender and used them to produce social change that they hoped would make living on relief more manageable. This was particularly true of women asserting their maternal rights and responsibilities, and of men demanding assistance to care for their dependents. It is in this area of analysis where Campbell’s work is most compelling and most human. As Campbell
regularly asserts in her work, gender structures in the family were in a state of calamity during the Depression. The result was an alarming level of domestic violence and desertion. Nonetheless, it was in asserting traditional gender roles in the family, where “its members lived together, did not argue, supported each other without question, and functioned within a series of well-understood and accepted obligations,” (pg. 148) that the unemployed engaged with the courts, the government, and relief officers. One wonders if more could have been made of this disconnect between the privately held relations and the publicly encouraged life.

The greatest limitation on Campbell’s work is the lack of narrative, and, as a result the absence of a single, digestible thesis. Her research net is wide and her many discoveries are compelling, but there is no clear explanation of how changes to relief policy in the 1930s altered how relief was gendered. Perhaps the stagnation of relief policies as they related to gender is her central idea, though Strikwerda’s research suggests this is untrue. Or perhaps her intention was to highlight how gender was used by both the state and its citizens to negotiate the application of government policy. Regardless, as a result of not having a central thesis around which the book solidified, the book feels more like a collection of historical case studies centered around gender rather than history. This does not undermine the quality or value of Campbell’s research. Respectable Citizens is a significant contribution to the field because it expands our knowledge and understanding of the unemployed by using the lens of gender as it relates to citizenship and the right of economic welfare. It is an invaluable resource to those who study the Great Depression in Canada precisely because its many observations lead to many opportunities for further exploration.

Even though these books ask different questions and take different approaches to finding answers about the Great Depression there is a surprising amount of overlap between them. Clearly, they are in a dialogue about unemployment, relief, how governments made sense of the Great Depression, and the great ingenuity of those who were most disadvantaged by the Great Depression. The actions taken by the men and women and narrated in the books are presented as totally human responses to formidable challenges—wives and mothers used what little aid was available from the courts in Ontario; the poor, rural African American community in Georgia attempted to alter racialized economic relations through government relief; and unemployed men struggled to find relief that would grant them work and wages in prairie cities. Yet each book proposes very different reasons for why governments acted as they did, for how relief was provided to those affected by the Depression, what kind of protests and actions were possible for different groups of people, and much more. Certainly the field of Depression studies is well-populated, but these three publications contribute to our understanding of this mythic, incendiary, and deeply tragic period in important ways.

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