On Good Intentions: A Critical Note on Recent Studies of State Planning in Canada

Writing about the modern state is notoriously difficult.[1] Historians have both to come to grips with the immensity of its coercive and administrative apparatus and to not lose sight of the complexities, failings, and incoherencies of the various social groups and individuals that make up this leviathan. The Canadian example, to borrow a phrase from Suzanne Morton's excellent biography of social worker Jane Wisdom, makes for a particularly "messy case file" – the growth of the liberal welfare state under conditions of capitalism and colonialism necessitates that any critical scholar grapple with the contradictory legacies of genuine good will and immense harm.[2]

Where there are discordant notes in the vast chorus of voices contributing to the historiography of the Canadian state, then, they are often to be found in the register of disagreements about the relative weight that should be placed on intention or impact, a debate carried out in the language of hegemony, legibility, biopower, and governmentality.[3] But if this lexicon conjures up for graduate students such as myself visions of the "1990s" section of our comprehensive reading lists, recent arguments playing themselves out in the pages of this

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2   Suzanne Morton, *Wisdom, Justice, & Charity: Canadian Social Welfare Through the Life of Jane B. Wisdom, 1884-1975* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 4.

3   For just a few examples, see Ian McKay, "The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (December 2000): 616-78; Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme, eds., *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Janet Guildford and Suzanne Morton, eds., *Making Up the State: Women in Twentieth-Century Atlantic Canada* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 2010); Bruce Curtis, *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics, and the Census of Canada, 1840-1875* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); and Allan Greer and Ian Radforth, eds., *Colonial Leviathan: State Formation in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

journal suggest that the conversation is far from over.[4] In what follows, I want to register some critical thoughts on three recent contributions to the study of state planning in Canada – Larry Beasley's *Vancouverism*, Tina Loo's *Moved by the State*, and Ted Rutland's *Displacing Blackness* – focusing principally on their respective positions on the question of intentionality and impact in assessing state policy.[5] Do intentions matter? Who needs them to matter, and why? These queries provide a connecting thread through what are in fact three rather disparate works of urban planning, history, and geography. While their respective arguments represent distinct positions on the benevolence of state actors, ranging from apologia to critical sympathy to radical refusal, they share, somewhat curiously, a certain distance from the quotidian experiences of those displaced and oppressed by bureaucratic state power.

The high modernism of capital

Relying on the experience and knowledge gained as the former co-chief planner of Vancouver, Larry Beasley has written a detailed descriptive and prescriptive guide to "Vancouverism" – the urban planning philosophy that led the city's development efforts from the 1980s onward – or "the way that one city . . . decided to transform itself to be attractive, competitive, and resilient for the future."[6] Journalist Frances Bula, in her historical prologue to the work, situates this approach as a sort of logical and necessary evolution of the progressive municipal TEAM (The Electors' Action Movement) administration's early 1970s rejection of a grand freeway project through the inner city, and with it the '60s-era, high modern urban renewal agenda.[7] In contrast to other major Canadian cities, then, Beasley argues that Vancouver's planning approach over the last 40 years has been characterized by an emphasis on neighbourhood-focused, high-density development in the inner city area that prioritizes accessibility, local commercial variety, and multiple forms of transit over car infrastructure, underlining social mixing and diversity. It also favours direct

4   See Tina Loo, "The View From Jacob Street: Reframing Urban Renewal in Post-War Halifax," *Acadiensis* 48, no. 2 (Autumn/automne 2019): 5-42.

5   Larry Beasley, *Vancouverism* (Vancouver: On Point Press, 2019); Tina Loo, *Moved by the State: Forced Relocation and Making a Good Life in Postwar Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019); Ted Rutland, *Displacing Blackness: Planning, Power, and Race in Twentieth-Century Halifax* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

6   Beasley, *Vancouverism*, 36.

7   Frances Bula, "Prologue," in Beasley, *Vancouverism*, 13-33.

physical design of new growth over broad policy guidelines while focusing on sustainability and fostering collaboration and consensus between government, the private sector, and the public.

While Vancouverism's core tenets of flexible zoning and social mixing are now axiomatic in the urban design world, these were indeed new and exciting ideas in the 1980s and 1990s.[8] And on the surface, this would seem to be a pleasing antidote to the technocratic, displacement-driven urban planning agenda of the immediate post-Second World War years. But, as James C. Scott reminds us, "Large-scale capitalism is just as much an agency for homogenization, uniformity, grids, and heroic simplification as the state is, with the difference being that, for capitalists, simplification must pay."[9] Indeed, there are familiar ingredients in the new high (post) modernism recipe. Much of Vancouverism developed around megaprojects post-1986 World Fair and in anticipation of the 2010 Winter Olympics, and its significantly larger space for public participation and consultation is in fact offset by the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of bureaucrats; as Beasley put it, "It is true that, when people see things they do not like, they will rise up and express themselves vigorously in a democracy . . . . But building a great city cannot be founded on such negativity."[10]

What distinguishes the Vancouverism approach from earlier high modernism is the emphasis placed on finance and real estate capital. In what he bills as the "how-to" chapter on "Public and Private Collaboration," Beasley describes a "transactional development management system"[11] in which municipal bureaucrats become powerful negotiators in a freewheeling, speculative, finance-driven development economy by manipulating land value through the process of re-zoning and density bonuses, in close collaboration with real estate corporations, in exchange for public amenities. It rings hollow, then, that Beasley pleads innocence for the current uber-gentrified state of the Vancouver housing market. For him Vancouver is "a victim of its own success," and the rampant homelessness of areas like the Downtown

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8   See Gary Bridge, Tim Butler, and Loretta Lees, eds., *Mixed Communities: Gentrification by Stealth?* (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2012) and Tore Sager, "Neo-Liberal Urban Planning Policies: A Literature Survey 1990-2010," *Progress in Planning* 76, no. 4 (November 2011): 147-99.

9   James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 8.

10   Beasley, *Vancouverism*, 344.

11   Beasley, *Vancouverism*, 38.

East Side (warranting only 8 pages in a 400-page monograph) represents an unpredictable "black eye" – planners' "central aspiration" of diversity and social mixing having been "hijacked by consumer response to all our other success."[12] Seen from this classical economic viewpoint, gentrification is understood as an unforeseen consequence for the well-meaning bureaucrats who were simply trying to make the city a lovely place to live.

How he describes (or neglects to describe) the socio-economically marginalized, however, leads us to a different conclusion. His racially coded emphasis on mixed neighbourhoods, rejecting the "nightmare of North America's modern urban ghettoes,"[13] is matched by an overall refusal to discuss the racism and colonialism at the heart of the many social injustices faced by Vancouver's poor and working class residents (issues that are touched on for the first time on page 222) as well as a pathologization of the urban poor through an emphasis on mental illness and addiction.[14] Frankly it is difficult to see how urban development based on the facilitation of lucrative land deals could do anything *but* drive up property values and increase displacement (at least in the short term), a problem that theorists of the urban economy began pointing to as early as 1872 and which was certainly widely analyzed during the period in which Vancouverism was born.[15] Most importantly, Vancouver's passage from a "place of radicalism to the ascendance of neoliberal urban governance," as Stacey Bishop described it, was challenged and denounced by a variety of poor people's movements throughout the period of Beasley's tenure with the city.[16] In the balance of impacts and intentions, then, an obfuscation and understatement of the former allows Beasley to rest comfortably in an insistence of the importance of the latter.

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12   Beasley, *Vancouverism*, 223, 230, 60.

13   Beasley, *Vancouverism*, 200.

14   Beasley, *Vancouverism*, 230-1.

15   See Frederick Engels, "The Housing Question" (1872), *Marxist Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1872/housing-question/; Neil Smith, "Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, Not People," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45, no. 4 (October 1979): 538-48; and Smith, "Gentrification and the Rent Gap," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77, no. 3 (September 1987): 462-5. See also Ted Rutland, "The Financialization of Urban Redevelopment," *Geography Compass* 4, no. 8 (2010): 1167-78.

16   See Stacey Bishop, "'Livability is the Victim of Street Prostitution': The Politics of the Neighbourhood and the Rightward Turn in Vancouver's West End, 1981-1985" (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2013), 3. See also the special 2004 edition of *West Coast Line* on the squatters' movement in the Downtown East Side (DTES), https://woodsquat.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/woodsquat-ed-aaron-vidaver-west-coast-line-20041.pdf.

State high modernism and the complicated nature of the "good life"

In contrast to the self-congratulatory tone of Beasley's work, Tina Loo's *Moved by the State* is a more cautious and critical attempt to rehabilitate the activist bureaucrats behind the various post-war provincial and federal government efforts to relocate populations through various schemes for collective improvement. As she puts it, the book is an effort "to attach faces and names to the state, to render a picture of its agents that is as textured and empathetic as one we have of the victims of relocation."[17] Using five case studies – population removal and re-settlement in the North, the closing of outport communities in Newfoundland, development efforts in the east of Quebec, the destruction of Africville, and urban renewal in East Vancouver – Loo argues that while projects of state removal were undoubtedly disciplinary in nature they were also motivated by a sincere desire to extend the benefits of social citizenship in the liberal welfare state – the "good life" – to neglected populations. Ensuring "social security through spatial justice" was part of a broader project of modernization and empowerment that "invited the poor to challenge the very authority that disciplined them."[18]

Loo is a careful scholar, and her case studies do indeed point to instances that should give pause to those of us inclined to buy into too-easy narratives about bureaucratic uniformity and the subjugation of oppressed populations. Particularly in the examples of Newfoundland and Quebec, she demonstrates effectively that rural populations displayed significant agency in their dealings with state planners; in the former case rural residents manipulated provincial removal plans for their own relocation purposes while rural inhabitants organized autonomously in the latter when the Quiet Revolution state's commitment to rural redevelopment wavered. The work highlights the importance of bureaucrats who "coloured inside the lines while moving them," who cared not just about a broad vision of relocation but also the nuts and bolts of local community democracy and autonomy.[19] Furthermore, her chapter on East Vancouver brings important nuance to the hyper-local analysis of *Vancouverism*. In Loo's reading, while local activism was not unimportant, it also indicated a sea change within the federal planning apparatus away from urban renovation and toward new forms of disciplinary power channelled through consultation and representation.

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17   Loo, *Moved by the State*, 6.

18   Loo, *Moved by the State*, 197, 27.

19   Loo, *Moved by the State*, 205.

The analysis falls short, however, with respect to the cases of the North and of Africville. In the former instance, while not denying the fact that community displacement was part of a development agenda thoroughly wedded to Canada's colonization of Inuit peoples and territory, Loo's adherence to the self-conception of Northern Affairs bureaucrats causes her to stray once again into terrain that led to criticism of her work in the 1990s, when Jarvis Robin Brownlie and Mary-Ellen Kelm critiqued the tendency to extract discussions of law and policy from the broader context of assimilation and violence.[20] Of course, this is a risk of the quest to historicize state actors. It requires, at the very least, not dismissing their avowals of genuine interest in putting "the region on a sustainable footing and teaching Inuit to give the bureaucrats and experts hell."[21] But this project would have been more effectively carried out if it placed this self-evaluation on a more equal footing with Inuit assessments of the bureaucrats' intentions. Just about the only voice we have to that effect is that of the late Tory MP Thomas Suluk, speaking positively about the impact of the cooperative movement fostered by Northern Affairs.

Significantly, there is at least one instance that suggests these good intentions were not so clearly legible on the ground. Loo makes passing reference to a German food specialist, a former prisoner of war in Canada, who was brought in to help institute canning processes of traditional Inuit food sources.[22] The accompanying footnote leads us to a 1965 *New Yorker* article, which upon closer inspection tells us that the expert in question, Erich Hofmann, had also been part of the brutal French Legion presence in Indo-China; he was frustrated by the opposition of at least one Elder to his work, a sign of the backwardness of what Hofmann considered to be "primitive people."[23]

With respect to Africville, Loo argues against interpretations of this infamous story of forced removal that insist on the purely racist nature of the operation. She takes issue with Rutland's argument (discussed in greater detail below) that Africville was part of a larger pattern of anti-Blackness engrained in the history of urban planning in Halifax, pointing out in both her book and in her recent *Acadiensis* article that the unusually flexible nature of the

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20 Jarvis Robin Brownlie and Mary-Ellen Kelm, "Desperately Seeking Absolution: Native Agency as Colonialist Alibi?" *Canadian Historical Review* 75, no. 4 (December 1994): 552–4.

21 Loo, *Moved by the State*, 55.

22 Loo, *Moved by the State*, 49.

23 Edith Iglauer, "A Change of Taste: A Reporter at Large," *New Yorker* (24 April 1965), 127.

Africville expropriation practice in fact marked a departure from the more obviously racist and classist practice of abrupt slum clearance in Halifax's North End. While the destruction of the community undeniably had negative impacts of its Black residents, Loo insists that we must look to the intentions of government officials who were, in fact, focused on *redressing* past racism through the extension of social citizenship via integration. And in the end, "the process created engaged citizens in Halifax, albeit inadvertently," sparking the development of a grassroots movement for Black self-determination.[24]

This reading is, again, similar to the one Loo made about the potlatch law in the 1990s, in that it abstracts a particular juridical element out of its broader social context in order to complicate a narrative of subjugation. This process of extraction, however, leads to a crucial failure of analysis. In tracing the consistent "good intentions" of the bureaucrats (many of whom re-appear throughout) across these very different cases of expropriation and removal, she obscures the broader, quite remarkable differences between the impacts of the high modernist agenda across apartheid lines. And in her insistence on the importance of individual motives, then, she misses (or ignores) the jarringly clear patterns of white supremacy at work and the very different legacies of expropriation for white and non-white communities, manifested in the varying levels of agency afforded to, say, white Québécois farmers in the Gaspésie, and Inuit hunters in northern Quebec. *Moved by the State* demonstrates that historians need to understand and engage with the intentions of those perpetrating harm, both individual and collective. But this a) cannot be done adequately solely by repeating the self-reported intentions of those in power and b) should not be done in isolation from analysis of impact.

Ted Rutland's *Displacing Blackness: Planning, Power, and Race in Twentieth-Century Halifax*, goes a long way toward grasping these two poles in a more dialectic fashion. Combining Foucauldian critical ontology with the lessons of scholars such as Rinaldo Walcott, Saidiya Hartman, Katherine McKittrick, and Sylvia Winter, Rutland argues that anti-Blackness is not to be located solely in the contextual limitations of this or that particular urban planning scheme but rather at the heart of the modern planning project. His work, spanning from 19th-century social reformers to the neoliberal development of the Halifax Regional Municipality at the turn of the new millennium, demonstrates that it is precisely *within* the good intentions of urban planners

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24   Loo, *Moved by the State*, 124.

that we can find the clearest examples of anti-Black racism. The "good life" promoted by modernizers, even – or perhaps especially – by progressive ones, was premised on a dichotomy between "good" and "pathological" life modes, creating a spectrum of improvable humanity that met its outer ontological limits in Blackness. Indeed, Rutland asks, "if planning is concerned with 'the human,' and blackness constitutes the horizon or outside of 'the human,' then how could planning be anything *other* than anti-Black?"[25]

The book tracks multiple iterations of planning's anti-Blackness across the century, arguing that schemes for urban improvement in Halifax either neglected and ignored Black lives or sought to remodel them along the normalizing lines of whiteness. As such, Rutland is able to move beyond the intentions-impact dichotomy hampering Loo's assessment of the destruction of the Africville. He instead roots the 1960s expropriation in an earlier planning scheme from 1915 that sought to repurpose the area for industrial growth, part of the rise of a scientific racism that excluded the city's Black population from the developing notion of the importance of "living conditions" to social well-being and denying Africville residents the infrastructural renewal afforded to other Haligonians. In the 1960s, anti-Black urban planners did not recognize the multiple forms of mutual aid and community subsistence that Black residents had developed in the face of this neglect, seeing only pathology curable through integration. "Impoverished white residents, though pathologized, could at least be imagined as progressing," writes Rutland. In contrast, "The only progress available to Black residents was thus to be thrown into a white program of improvement that destroyed the basic conditions that had sustained their lives in a difficult but still viable form."[26]

While *Displacing Blackness*'s argument is cumulatively convincing, its constituent parts sometimes convey the difficulties of constructing an analysis around a Black population whose experience is heavily defined by its historical *absence* in the archives and minds of white record-makers. This is particularly true when Rutland is dealing with urban planning schemes that predominantly affected poor white populations, as he does, for example, in the book's second chapter dealing with 19th and early 20th-century social reformers' interventions regarding housing conditions in Halifax's slums. He amply demonstrates the presence of pathologizing discourses shaping the reformers' interactions with poor residents. His broader argument, however,

25 Rutland, *Displacing Blackness*, 8.
26 Rutland, *Displacing Blackness*, 163–4.

that the vision of potential human progress at the heart of this pathologization excluded Black residents, is supported by only one example of an *Evening Mail* article and the *lack* of a similar model tenement plan for Black families. The thorny issue of archival silence, and the contradictory ties relating theory to historical record, has been written about extensively, not least by Saidiya Hartman – "How," she asks, "does one write about a history that is this encounter with nothing"[27] – so it is a curious drawback of the book that it does not really deal with these methodological issues. *Displacing Blackness* takes on the difficult task of looking "for racialized power in less-than-obvious places and practices," and should be commended for doing so as it allows us to move beyond the essentially liberal search for good intentions.[28] But while this means that Blackness is always held centrally in Rutland's narrative, it is often without the presence or resistance of actual Black lives. The book is at its strongest when this obstacle is surmounted, as in the chapters on the Black United Front or on the neoliberal remodelling of the HRM.

Intentions, impacts, and politics

So why does it matter where we scholars place emphasis in the contest between intentions and impact? We have seen three different approaches here – *Vancouverism*, with its self-congratulatory insistence on the unpredictability of gentrification; *Moved by the State*, which, while more sophisticated, essentially also turns down the volume on the victims of relocation in order to reproduce the decontextualized self-assessments of state bureaucrats; and *Displacing Blackness*, which rejects the dichotomy of intention and impacts and instead engages in a more complex ontological criticism of what it means to promote human well-being when the definition of humanity excludes racialized lives.

These distinctions matter because they speak directly to the political visions of their authors and therefore the ability of their work to contribute to a struggle for a more just future. The first formulation, Larry Beasley's, displays an affinity for the kind of neoliberal nationalism behind megaprojects like the 2010 Winter Olympics. His insistence that "in Vancouver, status is very much based on merit and hard work,"[29] and his pathologization of the urban poor, are in lockstep with the dominant ideology. Tina Loo pushes us to remember (and

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27   Patricia J. Saunders, "Fugitive Dreams of Diaspora: Conversations with Saidiya Hartman," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 6, no. 1 (Article 7): 4.

28   Rutland, *Displacing Blackness*, 294.

29   Beasley, *Vancouverism*, 84.

perhaps celebrate) a period in which "hope and . . . bureaucratic activism" were the watchwords of the day, indicating a certain social democratic nostalgia for the Keynesian days of the Just Society.[30] While this impulse is understandable in our increasingly dystopian times, and even perhaps justifiable in a certain historiographical, "bookshelf" sense, it seems particularly inappropriate considering the ongoing deep and drastic impacts of community relocation on colonized and racialized populations in the North and Nova Scotia.

Ted Rutland's political agenda is both more open and more transformative. "What is most clear," he writes, "is that there cannot be a different future so long as relatively normative white people cling to their own status quo. This status quo, this life that modern planning secured, is an obstruction to social transformation."[31] While historians such as myself might blanch somewhat at a theoretical approach that sometimes risks running aground on difficult archival shoals, the search for power imbalances and oppressive systems at work within the often-genuine good intentions of Canadians offers a critical path forward for the struggle to break free from a national past still too often enamoured with its own myths of human rights, politeness, and exemption from the rising tide of global racism. We need to take care, however, to prioritize and centre the historical experiences and voices of those most directly affected by these structures, whatever our chosen analytical apparatus.

FRED BURRILL

Fred Burrill est candidat au doctorat au Département d'histoire de l'Université Concordia et chercheur principal affilié au Centre d'histoire orale et de récits numérisés. Il étudie la désindustrialisation et la gentrification à Montréal, mais continue de s'intéresser activement à l'histoire du Canada atlantique.

Fred Burrill is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at Concordia University, and a core affiliate of the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling. He studies deindustrialization and gentrification in Montreal, but maintains an active interest in Atlantic Canadian history.

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30   Loo, *Moved by the State*, 207.
31   Rutland, *Displacing Blackness*, 304.