

LIVED FICTIONS



Unity and Exclusion in Canadian Politics

John Grant



UBC Press • Vancouver • Toronto

Sample Material © UBC Press 2018

© UBC Press 2018

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Grant, John, author

Lived fictions: unity and exclusion in Canadian politics / John Grant.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-3647-0 (hardcover). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3649-4 (PDF).

ISBN 978-0-7748-3650-0 (EPUB). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3651-7 (Kindle)

1. Canada – Politics and government. I. Title.

JL65.G63 2018

320.971

C2017-907483-0

C2017-907484-9

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

A similar version of Chapter 1 was previously published as “Becoming One: Visions of Political Unity from the Ancients to the Postmoderns,” *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* 21, 4 (2014): 575–88. A shorter version of Chapter 2 was previously published as “On the Critique of Political Imaginaries,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 13, 4 (2014): 408–26. Thank you to Wiley and Sage, respectively, for permission to reuse this material.

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpres.ca

Sample Material © UBC Press 2018

Contents



List of Tables / *vii*

Acknowledgments / *ix*

Introduction: Unity and Politics / 3

PART 1: IMAGINING UNITY AND EXCLUSION

- 1 Becoming One: Visions of Political Unity / 19
- 2 On the Critique of Political Imaginaries / 50

PART 2: LIVED FICTIONS IN CANADIAN POLITICS

- 3 A People without Sovereignty: Canada's Constituent Power Problem / 83
- 4 The Crown and the Aboriginal: Imaginaries of Sovereignty and Control / 111
- 5 Embedded Neoliberalism: A New Imaginary for the Welfare State / 144

Sample Material © UBC Press 2018

- 6 Canada's Multiverse: The Dis/Unity of Cultures / 181
- 7 Institutions and Actions: A Vision of Democratization / 211
- Conclusion: Critique and Politics – Or, What Makes a Birthday Party Memorable / 239
- Notes / 243
- Selected Bibliography / 273
- Index / 288

List of Tables



- 1 Pro- and anti-neoliberal positions on the welfare state / 152
- 2 Key policy tendencies: Embedded liberalism and neoliberalism / 158
- 3 Share of after-tax income by all family types and persons not in an economic family / 178
- 4 Share of wealth (total net worth), by decile / 178

Introduction: Unity and Politics



The desire for political unity is a perennial guide for theory because every attempt to realize it has failed. This book is about how we imagine political unity can be achieved and why such projects fail, both in theory and in practice in the Canadian case. The aim of *Lived Fictions* is to develop a critical theory of unity as well as of the political imaginaries that order Canadian society. The book concludes with political propositions that are radically democratic, socialist, and egalitarian.

One of the most enduring problems of politics involves determining who belongs to a political community and who is excluded from it. In our age of globalization, it is natural to think about this problem in terms of immigrants and refugees, borders and national security. The issue is one of a genuine inside and outside: Who is allowed to enter the state, and who is not? It is equally the case, however, that belonging and exclusion are internal to a political unit. This is especially so in political theory. Throughout the history of political thought, the nature of belonging, or what is frequently called political unity, is a constitutive problem. How can a group of individuals be organized to ensure the longevity and prosperity of a political community? Here we are confronted not with having to determine who is allowed in but with establishing the political status of all those already in.

Sample Material © UBC Press 2018

all, in no way does membership entail unity, which cannot be guaranteed as the price of belonging to a place or group.

The history of political thought is filled with accounts of how people can “become one” politically. Acknowledging the strength of the desire to achieve political unity is central, I believe, to understanding what motivates a great deal of political theory. But accompanying this desire is a fear that is spoken about less frequently if not less fervently: the fear of disorder and dispossession. It is a fear of those individuals and groups who belong to a political community but are regarded as threats to the existing arrangement of things. Typically, this is not a situation in which outright enemies of the state have to be looked in the eye. Rather, it is one in which the reality of political belonging involves entrenched social stratification and hierarchy.

One of the central claims of this book is that examining political belonging and unity uncovers the unavoidable reality of exclusion *within* political units. Relative to the promise of unity, little has contributed so much to exclusionary practices than the desire to achieve unity. But perhaps this is the point in some cases. What if the desire for unity has long masked a reality, little understood but expertly exploited, that sometimes exclusions are best achieved by convincing everyone that unity, a political and social oneness, is a universal tonic for human ills? I take this argument one step further: unity and exclusion are bound up in a dialectical relationship in which the former necessitates the latter. This dialectic is positive – the dynamics of unity and exclusion are at the forefront of constructing the terrain of politics – as well as negative – there is no final resolution, only ongoing negotiations and negations. The reality of this negative dialectic poses something of an embarrassment for political theory given the confidence with which projects of unity have been asserted. The issue does not stop with theory, however. The impossibility of a theoretical solution to political unity suggests that an actual, lived solution is equally impossible. Indeed, the problems of theory do not exist apart from society. Yet pursuing such a solution is central to politics and our contemporary scene in particular. In fact, some consider this to be what

makes politics a fundamentally noble activity: it is predicated on finding consensus and conciliation in the face of competing claims.¹ This view drives the politics of recognition and reconciliation in Canada, while in the United States apparent ideological polarization is denounced for producing political disunity and a less perfect union.

The desire to become one should alert us to the fact that not only politics but also social life more generally depend on a collective commitment to *imagining* how our lives are structured and the ways in which we belong – or do not belong. Enlightenment modernity is shaped by a dominant belief that our lives are not preordained and that what we imagine is possible for others is possible for us too. It is interesting, then, that the idea of “imaginaries” has exploded in and beyond political theory only in the past fifteen years, driven in part by the work of Charles Taylor.² The term refers to the complex ideational structures and their accompanying practices that allow us to make sense of the society in which we live. Imaginaries by definition are widely shared, so they act as a type of glue that makes it possible to live together in social groups and engage in social practices. Our imaginaries are composed of our expectations about how people will behave, the stories that we tell each other, and most of all by the ideas that we use to understand the societies in which we live and the practices we perform. But to speak of *political* imaginaries is to be concerned mainly with understandings of political belonging, perceptions of the state’s legitimacy, its responsibilities and actions, along with its expectations of citizens and their expectations of it. A discussion of political imaginaries rightly brings out the master nouns of politics, such as *power*, *sovereignty*, *justice*, *liberty*, and *equality*, each of which has a place in this book.

Our political imaginaries include the market economy, the public sphere, the citizen-state, and charters of rights. To these imaginaries we can add those of democracy and sovereignty, which are more general than those just listed and often provide evaluative frameworks for approaching them. At this early stage, some readers will point out that there seems to be little difference between imaginaries and what

we call ideology. One distinction, for example, is that even though there are many ideological ways to think about the market economy, the economy itself is unavoidable for anyone who thinks specifically about politics or more generally about how a prosperous life can be achieved. This insight is certainly part of what makes imaginaries a productive addition to the vocabulary of political theory.

In the mainstream literature, however, the concept of imaginaries is deployed in a largely benign and descriptive fashion that fails to appreciate the equivocal, dialectical constitution of imaginaries. In this book, I develop an original interpretation of imaginaries and how they operate: they are what I call “lived fictions.” A pithy way to define the term is to call them socially effective illusions. Our imaginaries are lived because they are constitutive – they construct and orient our sense of ourselves and our practices within society, but they are also fictions insofar as they distort features of our lived experience in such a way that allows for harmful inequalities and relations of dominance to take root. The neoliberal fantasy about completely self-sufficient individuals is of this type. This particular fantasy judges the successes and failures of a person only after erasing his or her social circumstances from consideration, even though those circumstances offer the context needed to understand what success might look like for that person in the first place. Neoliberals do not actually deny that social conditions exist; they simply imagine that everyone enjoys enough freedom and opportunity to make those conditions inconsequential.³ From the standpoint of its typical critics, neoliberalism’s understanding of the individual in society is fictitious. However, that understanding is also a genuine portrayal of how life is lived for those under neoliberalism’s sway, which can occur not only in our imaginaries but also in our institutions. The dialectical critical theory on which I rely allows us to view the lived and the fictitious not only as opposites but also as mutually interactive and dependent features of social life – a strange reality, to be sure, but one that captures so much of our lived experience.

To be clear, lived fictions do not depend on a strict opposition between fictitious representations and what is real. Instead, we can say

that what is lived is regularly fictitious, while the fictitious itself is lived and therefore perfectly “real.” Reality is always conditioned by, and therefore is never fully detached from, the fictitious. Lived fictions thus have the unusual ontological status of being and not being. The resulting temptation is then to ask about the status of what might be called a “real illusion.” Does such a phenomenon distort reality or constitute it?

The questions that this book asks are motivated by the mode of critical theory developed by the early Frankfurt School, according to which theory becomes critical only when it takes society as its object and pursues emancipatory aims and intentions.⁴ At least in the Frankfurt School version, these efforts rely on dialectical thought in order to generate the desired critical insights. I have defended the relevance of dialectical theory on multiple occasions.⁵ This book testifies to its contemporary significance, but because many people are skeptical of dialectics it is worth orienting readers regarding my views without taking an excessive detour.

Criticisms of dialectical theory are numerous. Some of the best known include the following: that the open and hazardous nature of modern power relations is made to conform by dialectical theory to a predetermined logic of contradiction (Michel Foucault⁶); that dialectical theory makes every event fit a picture of historical destiny that the theory had in mind from the start, thus eliminating all contingency and unpredictability (Louis Althusser⁷); that dialectical theory is appealing only to people driven by resentment toward life and existing social relations, thus prioritizing negation and destruction over joyful, creative activity (Gilles Deleuze⁸); and that dialectical theory involves an implausible reliance on a determining ground (often the economy) out of which all other relations are determined (Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe⁹).

Many critics, including those noted above, focus their attacks specifically on Hegel’s dialectics and then proceed – implausibly – as if their objections apply to all dialectical theory. So, though they might be correct in specific instances, as blanket condemnations their claims

simply do not hold.¹⁰ What then? I undertake the following three strategies. My first strategy is to recast dialectical relations as ones that regularly combine features of dependence, antagonism, and production. This enables a move beyond the simplistic view that dialectical theory deals exclusively with contradictions that are always resolved in a progressive, forward-moving manner. There are multiple occasions in this book when I indicate the presence of this alternative dialectical logic and its consequences for the critique being pursued.

My second strategy is to link this reworking of dialectical logic to Theodor Adorno's project of negative dialectics.¹¹ One of its central insights is that, because there is no truly objective or transcendental position from which to view the world, social scientific ways of evaluating society – without denying their achievements – fail to grasp its true dynamics. Negative critique evaluates society and institutions according to their own values and aims, convicting them on their own terms. Further, negative dialectics engages in a relentless search for what traditional theory leaves out (in short, the dynamics and the extent of exclusion and domination). Society is revealed to be at odds with itself, regressive despite obvious examples of progress, and therefore lacking any true hope for a better life as things stand. The political potential of negative dialectics is rooted in “the continuing irreconcilability of subject and object,” which Adorno says “constitutes the theme of dialectical criticism.”¹² This includes the irreconcilable differences between our concepts and the things that they represent as well as between the individual and society. Recognizing those differences constructs a place from which critique can pursue effective action. Unlike its beginnings in immanent critique, negative dialectics arrives at a point where it must proceed radically, as if from the outside, in the knowledge that attempting to fix society according to its existing premises is doomed to fail.

My third and final strategy is to find examples of dialectical thinking and assumptions in the very critics who dismiss it entirely. I do so with Deleuze and Althusser (a complicated case because of his ambivalence about dialectics), though the evidence in Foucault's work is most

compelling.¹³ Simplifying for brevity, Foucault's elaboration of how power and resistance are intertwined articulates – unintentionally – the kind of dialectical relations that I mentioned above. Contrary to the common view that power eliminates resistance, Foucault insisted that “there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised.”¹⁴ Further, resistances “are inscribed in the latter [power] as an irreducible opposite.”¹⁵ Matters become even clearer when we consider the following: “In effect, between a relationship of power and a strategy of struggle there is a reciprocal appeal, a perpetual linking and a perpetual reversal.”¹⁶ Following Foucault's methodological and genealogical work, we can say that power incites resistance while resistance motivates power.

Barely one step is needed here to see the dialectical features in Foucault. Power and resistance share a relationship defined by dependence – they fundamentally rely on one another for their own existence – as well as by antagonism – they perpetually challenge the knowledges and social relations that the other wants to effect. The relationship is thus also productive insofar as it acts to construct our political terrain. The fact that this terrain is defined by contestation and struggle, even though power and resistance would like nothing more than to eliminate the contestation offered by the other, highlights why the dialectic at play here is the epitome of a negative and nonteleological one: it is ongoing and ceaseless and possesses no transhistorical purpose. Yet this is not all. Foucault was skeptical about the politics of liberation and revolution because he feared that they aim to restore a repressed and essential human nature that simply does not exist. In his mind, we are produced by power in the first instance, not transformed by it away from some original nature. The version of dialectical theory that I am describing takes liberation to mean freedom from a particular set of power relations but not from power as such (the latter position being incoherent). Dialectical theory is then ideally suited to maintain liberation and revolution as features of a critical language of politics without committing the sins that so worried Foucault. The result, I

maintain, is a richer form of critical theory. Of course, readers convinced by what I have outlined might well know that the themes of critical and dialectical theory have always been part of a vibrant discussion; suggestions of a comeback for dialectics should also acknowledge that it never went away and in fact is becoming more diverse than before.¹⁷

Readers familiar with the Frankfurt School will know that its members – especially Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse – discussed the realities of “domination,” “repression,” and “exploitation” much more than “exclusion.” My use of the latter term does not come at the expense of the former ones. If we take exploitation to refer to unjust economic relations, and domination to refer to power relations that involve a significant reduction in freedom and life possibilities, then both phenomena can be understood to generate harmful exclusions.

To develop this point further, my use of the term “exclusion” is intended to indicate the damaging omission of certain people and groups from, for example, politics, from the promised care of the welfare state, and from dominant imaginaries of belonging to which they must assimilate. In each case, I have in mind the kind of “internal exclusion” that involves the creation of social hierarchies inside a country. It is important to clarify, however, that not all exclusions are the same. The historical treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada is better termed “internal colonization.” The exploitation of Indigenous lands and resources goes hand in hand with our settler society’s political domination (legislative and legal) of Indigenous peoples. The imaginaries of sovereignty and control that validate these practices function to exclude Indigenous peoples from Canadian society on the ground of their otherness while simultaneously preventing them from living their lives as they would if they enjoyed genuine freedom and self-determination. So we can see how exploitation, domination, and exclusion are of a kind. The fundamental antagonism between Indigenous peoples and the state should go to the heart of Canada’s

political imaginaries – but only if the antagonism is recognized as such. Instead, Canadian political parties, courts, and the public itself tend to engage in an unthinking acceptance when claims of sovereignty are made by the Crown at the expense of Indigenous peoples. The result is one of the deepest lived fictions in this country, albeit one that can be undermined, as can all lived fictions.

The example of Indigenous peoples demonstrates how important it is for critical theory to face up to actually existing social relations. Critical theory has been plagued, I believe, by a preoccupation with how it ought to be conducted, which has come at the expense of theorizing about more than just theory. This is why the Frankfurt School tradition of theory has more followers than practitioners. My response in this book is to address widely acknowledged political imaginaries and to turn to issues of actual politics, including public policy and public opinion when appropriate. Most important is the realization that, as with the construction and operation of imaginaries themselves, theory and practice implicate one another. Similarly, the study of political unity in the history of political thought meets its lived correlate in the construction of belonging and peoplehood. Taking the insights of the first investigation into the place of unity in political theory, we might expect the dominant attempts by the state to construct political imaginaries of belonging in Canada to mask deeper conditions of injustice and exclusion. The following two questions motivate the second part of this book. How does Canada attempt to overcome the exclusions that emerge in political theory and that seem to characterize all political wholes? Which imaginaries are associated with such attempts?

Canada is exemplary of how political unity is an ongoing and always unfinished project. Many commentators think that this project should receive relatively little work. For them, Canada is a well-ordered society: apart from a Quebec referendum here and there, some ill-advised attempts at constitutional reform, and the usual disputes that occur in any federal system, the country is about as soundly organized

as one could hope.¹⁸ One contrasting view is that Canada is remarkable precisely because of its commitment to keep on searching for unity.¹⁹ I support this interpretation insofar as it confirms belonging as one of the constitutive problems of politics. However, in the Canadian context, this perspective focuses on little beyond formal constitutional negotiations. When we look at Canadian politics and ask ourselves how the state has attempted to promote the *widest* sense of inclusion possible, I see three primary approaches: constitutionalism (which I treat broadly and as overlapping though not coterminous with democracy), the welfare state, and multiculturalism. More recently – and emerging in part from multiculturalism – we can add the politics of recognition and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

Each of these spheres is responsible for what I regard as the promises of Canadian politics. At a minimum, constitutionalism promises a legally ordered polity in which people are collectively sovereign; the welfare state promises the protection of all Canadians from undue hardship; and multiculturalism promises a pluralistic and inclusive sociocultural setting. One goal of this book is to show how these promises necessarily call forth collective imaginaries that contribute at once to constituting and distorting our social totality. We should recognize the broader imaginaries to which these promises relate. Constitutionalism corresponds to the political-legal sphere; the welfare state relates to the socioeconomic sphere; and multiculturalism covers culture, cultural relations, and belonging more generally. Each sphere can be treated as analytically distinct because each is a unique historical phenomenon that has appeared in the order that I just listed. Yet Canadian political history can be read dialectically such that the inadequacies of an existing sphere required solutions available only by calling forth and creating a new sphere. For example, the *British North America Act* of 1867 contained no provisions for social welfare other than having municipalities offer poor relief. The creation of Canada's welfare state addressed this inadequacy while forcing politicians and the courts to flesh out which orders of government possessed jurisdictional responsibilities for specific welfare programs.²⁰

By early in the second half of the twentieth century, the welfare state had taken on responsibilities unimaginable at the time of Confederation. A state-run pension plan and universal health care were providing unprecedented levels of support for poor and wealthy citizens alike. Yet the decade of the 1960s showed the welfare state to be insufficient for the needs of political unity and social harmony. The Quiet Revolution and rise of the separatist movement in Quebec put questions of culture and sovereignty at the forefront of Canadian politics. Unsurprisingly, the federal government wished to stress the country's capacity to accommodate multiple cultures while avoiding debates about sovereignty whenever possible. The Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission held in 1966 was the first major attempt to assuage concerns about Quebec's place in Canada and was the forerunner of the policy of official multiculturalism passed in 1971. To my mind, there has always been a tension among the interplay of these three spheres of politics and the desire by the state to treat them more like watertight compartments (to borrow a phrase from Canadian constitutional thought). It is historically true that the limitations of existing spheres led to the "solutions" of new spheres, and for certain groups there is simply no separation between politics and constitutionalism on the one hand and cultural life on the other.

In this regard, the case of Quebec has been the most public one over the past half century. Yet this book contains a chapter devoted to Indigenous peoples in relation to Canadian politics and the Constitution without including an equivalent chapter on Quebec. This is largely because of the present circumstances of Indigenous peoples, which constitute an urgent matter of justice that eclipses the claims of the Québécois: the former are dying; the latter are not. Perhaps not unrelated, the fortunes of separatism in Quebec are noticeably diminished at present. In both the 2011 and the 2015 federal elections, the Bloc Québécois failed to win enough seats to achieve official party status. Provincially, the poor showing of the Parti Québécois in the 2014 election (its worst since 1989) owed much to its focus on separatism and questions of sovereignty, demonstrating

that its minority victory in 2012 rested primarily on the deep unpopularity of the governing Quebec Liberal Party. This lack of appetite for separatism might well have been foreshadowed by the student uprising in 2012 known as the “Maple Spring.” The primary grievance of the student protesters was the proposal by Jean Charest’s Liberal government to raise university tuition fees; more importantly, the larger political aim was not separatism but an attack on neoliberalism. I do not wish to say that Quebec’s separatist movement cannot reinvigorate itself. Nonetheless, the separatists have entered a political slump from which they appear unlikely to emerge in the near term.

In contrast, the country is experiencing a swell of action and events related to Indigenous issues, including the Idle No More movement, the official apology for residential schools, the ongoing string of Supreme Court cases regarding rights and land claims, and greater scholarly interest. Increasingly, the political fight by Indigenous peoples and their supporters is for democratic sovereignty as such, meaning title to land and political self-determination. This raises the stakes for the whole of Canada and forces various Canadian political imaginaries to the front of people’s minds. The most fundamental questions are put in play. What does it mean to be a Canadian citizen? To what extent are Canadians sovereign? Is it possible to live in Canada without being subject to the Constitution? Many people will dismiss this last question as nonsensical, which it is if we interpret it to mean immunity from restrictions of any kind, whether constitutional or normative. One of the central arguments in this book is that all people in Canada possess constituent power that is free *by definition* from existing constitutional rules as long as it meets a series of normative criteria.

Although aspects of this book respond to immediate political circumstances, the argument as a whole is deliberately untimely. Canada is regarded as an emblem of good governance and social order. Arguably, we need such symbols now more than ever as we confront the possibility of a new international era defined by political unrest, economic crisis, and religious conflict. Indeed, the election of the

Liberal Party in 2015, with Justin Trudeau and his avowed “sunny ways” as prime minister, heralded a “Morning in Canada” moment for many observers, not only domestically but also internationally.²¹ *Lived Fictions* is untimely because it challenges the easy assumptions that present Canada as a bright light in troubling times. That this book will seem to be at odds with the prevailing political sentiment means that there is no better time for it. Critical theory is at its best when the need to expose practices of exclusion and relations of domination seems to have been reduced. It forces us to ask whether this is the best that we can do, whether our springtime hopes really are captured, in this case, by the party that has been in power for longer than any other in Canada’s history.

Three aims orient the rest of this book. First, I want to establish the centrality of political unity within the history of political thought. In doing so, I will demonstrate a historical tendency to privilege the sovereign imaginary over the democratic imaginary, a move corrosive to our collective sense of how democracy can be practised. Second, I wish to present the idea of “lived fictions” as a critical and productive way to evaluate political imaginaries. This work begins with the history of political thought, moves to contemporary theory, and then extends into the political promises that have animated political imaginaries in Canada. Third, I want to elaborate the kinds of changes – in both our institutions and our thinking – that would radically alter and improve Canadian democracy and society and Western liberal democracies in general. Democracy in particular fluctuates and is not a tide that manages somehow to come in but never recede. This book is intended as an intervention into politics today, in solidarity with a future that I hope many readers will wish to see as well.