

**Labour**

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

**Le Travail**

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



**Will Langford, The Global Politics of Poverty in Canada:  
Development Programs and Democracy, 1964-1979 (Montreal:  
McGill-Queen's University Press 2020)**

Shannon Stunden Bower

Volume 88, Fall 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084991ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2021v88.0016>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Bower, S. (2021). Review of [Will Langford, *The Global Politics of Poverty in Canada: Development Programs and Democracy, 1964-1979* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2020)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 88, 193–194.  
<https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2021v88.0016>

**Will Langford, *The Global Politics of Poverty in Canada: Development Programs and Democracy, 1964-1979* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2020)**

HISTORIAN WILL LANGFORD has produced an impressive study situating Canada in relation to global mid-20th century efforts to understand and address the problem of poverty. Characterized by wide-ranging research and nuanced analysis, Langford's volume is a signpost for scholars working on modern Canadian history and a model for historians keen to foreground the links between the Canadian past and global processes.

Langford situates his study within what he terms the global politics of poverty, which he understands to have emerged in the late 1950s and operated through the late 1970s. This politics was animated by debates over how to remediate the profound inequalities increasingly recognized to operate on scales ranging from the local to the global. In establishing the terms for such debates within Canada, Langford argues the concepts of development and liberal democracy were particularly significant. Development was taken by Liberal reformers as a remedy for poverty, with development understood to consist of various rational processes of socioeconomic change that would empower impoverished peoples to act on their own behalf. Through this empowerment, reformers' thinking ran, the scope of democratic engagement would be enhanced and the circumstances of impoverished peoples would be improved. The various ambiguities and inconsistencies in these conceptualizations receive careful treatment from Langford, with particular emphasis on the tensions between Liberal reformers and New Leftists who entertained visions of more radical social change. Ultimately, Langford's analysis illuminates both the

idealistic underpinnings of efforts at poverty elimination and their starkly limited potential to meaningfully disrupt the capitalist social relations and economic hierarchies that defined poverty.

Langford focuses on four case studies, examining events in Lesser Slave Lake, Montreal, Cape Breton, and Tanzania. Anti-poverty efforts in these places were animated by two state development agencies (the Company of Young Canadians and the Cape Breton Development Corporation) and a state-funded non-governmental organization (the Canadian University Service Overseas), but Langford focuses less on institutional actors and more on a wide range of participants, including students, activists, and militants, among others. The inclusion of three Canadian case studies allows for comparisons to be made between Canadian examples, ensuring the international scope of the study does not come at the expense of domestic nuance. At the same time, the inclusion of only one international case study creates a clear opportunity to build on Langford's work by integrating more case studies of Canadian involvement in anti-poverty projects undertaken overseas.

Across his four case studies, Langford explores three distinct variants of development: community development in Lesser Slave Lake and Montreal; regional development in Cape Breton; and international development in Tanzania. While attending to local contexts, Langford nevertheless speaks to each development variant in ways that invest his work with broader significance. His exploration of the origins and implications of each variant is particularly useful, offering important reference points that are relevant to scholars, both historians and those from adjacent disciplines, studying development beyond the local contexts that concern Langford.

Langford's case studies are linked by what he understands as the failures of the development imperative. While acknowledging the high-minded ideals invoked by adherents, and recognizing that New Leftists were typically more ambitious than Liberal reformers, Langford makes clear that development was ultimately more conservative than revolutionary. While the various development efforts Langford studied did involve some change, they failed to amend the radical inequalities characterizing life within and beyond Canadian borders. Development programs worked to incorporate impoverished groups and individuals into capitalist liberal democracy, rather than pushing for meaningful efforts to remediate the structural conditions underlying the unequal distribution of power and resources.

Langford's work contributes to a number of topics and themes that have recently preoccupied historians of Canada. The changing character of the mid-20th century Canadian federal government has received substantial attention in recent years, primarily from scholars concerned with the operation and effects of the welfare state. Langford argues the politics of poverty helped determine the evolution of the welfare state through the 1960s and 1970s. Langford's analysis also positions scholars to better understand the changes flowing from the increasing influence of neoliberalism, changes that ranged from the practical to the ideological. If Langford's work helps historians think anew about the federal state in modern Canada, so does it contribute to efforts to rethink how to situate the nation in historical analysis. In demonstrating the interconnectedness of historical processes across domestic and international scales, Langford writes Canadian history while avoiding any reification of the nation as the fundamental analytical unit.

In his conclusion, Langford presents insights relevant to present-day efforts at driving socioeconomic change, ongoing undertakings he understands to share features with development. Langford points to questions around the appropriate means of involving impoverished people in these efforts, as well as to uncertainties around what these efforts should aim to teach the communities they target. More profoundly, Langford signals ongoing concerns around the ethics of and prospects for outsider-led efforts at social and economic change. In the absence of a radical remaking of the persistent inequalities characterizing liberal capitalism, present-day iterations of the development imperative seem unlikely to involve any greater success than their historical antecedents. These insights ensure Langford's study is relevant to a readership outside history and potentially even outside the scholarly community, insofar as practitioners of present-day development might appreciate Langford's historically-informed reflections.

Will Langford's *The Global Politics of Poverty in Canada* is an important contribution to our understanding of a number of issues, a creative effort to integrate the study of Canada into broader global dynamics, and a convincing record of development's failures. Langford's historical analysis of the development imperative amounts to a persuasive argument for the need to think carefully and creatively about new ways of working toward societies that are actually more equal and democratic, and for the importance of recognizing that the most promising ways forward likely emerge from the expertise of those who are disempowered and disadvantaged by current systems.

SHANNON STUNDEN BOWER  
University of Alberta