

Eric W. Sager, *Inequality in Canada: The History and Politics of an Idea* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020)

David Tough

Volume 91, Spring 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1102173ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2023v91.0014>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Tough, D. (2023). Review of [Eric W. Sager, *Inequality in Canada: The History and Politics of an Idea* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 91, 309–310. <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2023v91.0014>

REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Eric W. Sager, *Inequality in Canada: The History and Politics of an Idea* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020)

IN 1905, MAX LORENZ, a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin, produced a graph that plotted the percentage of the population of the United States against the percentage of the nation's income. A straight diagonal line running from the bottom left to the top right, indicating a one-to-one equivalence of people and income, would reflect a society of complete equality; as the concentration of income at the top grew and the concentration at the bottom dropped, the line would skew, bend, and bulge. Lorenz's original graph, for example, showed clearly that America's prosperity had become more concentrated in fewer American hands between 1892 and 1901. Perhaps more importantly, though, the Lorenz graph's putative straight line of equality provided his contemporaries with what Eric Sager calls "a baseline against which to perceive the extent of inequality" (41).

Although Lorenz's is only one of a very long list of contributions to the development of inequality that Sager examines rather quickly, it's an important one conceptually given the language that Lorenz graphing enabled. A little over a century later, in the aftermath of the failure of the subprime mortgage bonds market and the financial crisis and resulting bailout of several major banks, Americans mobilized around the idea of the 99 per cent who had lost wealth through the

financialization of the American economy rising up in protest against the 1 per cent of Americans whose wealth had increased, first at Occupy Wall Street and then at other Occupy sites in other cities. Lorenz curves showing income distributions in Canada would not appear until the 1950s, and even then, the Dominion Bureau of Statistics' experts, like Jenny Moduluk, who developed the original Low Income Cut Off (LICO) in 1961, expressed clear professional discomfort with drawing what they saw as political conclusions from the data. The language of 99 % versus the 1% was less galvanizing in Canada, in part because there was no equivalent Bay Street bailout, but it nonetheless has become one widely recognized way of talking about widening inequality.

It is this novel rhetoric of inequality, as well as its evident weakness as a driver of political change, that inspired Sager to examine more closely how different expressions of inequality emerged at different times. Sager cites a lot of recent scholarship on the topic, generously referencing other scholars by name in the text, but he also follows these other scholars to their primary sources, parsing the arguments and ideas recorded in different contexts. It is therefore a history of the concept of inequality, but Sager devotes considerable space at the end of the book to a discussion of why we need a potent rhetoric of inequality and how such a rhetoric might work in current conditions. Sager's history is "present-directed and even political," (9)

and an impassioned and thoughtful plea for a new movement against inequality by way of an encyclopedic treatment of various ways Canadians have thought about inequality.

A key point Sager underlines is the importance of academic philosophy, as distinct from sociology or economics, in the development of a Canadian intellectual concern with inequality. Echoing Leslie Armour and A. B. McKillop's insistence on the uniquely long-standing tradition of idealism among Canada's academic philosophers, Sager shows that the heyday of denunciations of equality was the early 20th century, well before statistics showing percentages of income were available for Canada. John Porter's *The Vertical Mosaic* appeared later, during the mid-century "great compression," when the income gap had narrowed, but it too drew ultimately on philosophy (specifically the "new liberalism" of T. H. Green and L. T. Hobhouse, as shown in Rick Helmes-Hayes's biography of Porter) and, though it used statistics, these were drawn from income tax records, not from the Dominion Bureau of Statistics – which at the time was still keen to "seal their observations in a value-free box." (283) The upshot is that philosophical condemnation of inequality and data on inequality developed separately and collided rarely; the idea of inequality emerged out of particular social conditions at different times, but none of these instances built on any others, so each iteration of inequality started from scratch, and then disappeared.

Among the many questions the book raises for sympathetic scholars who study inequality for political reasons, I will mention two. The first of these concerns method. Sager alludes to socialism occasionally throughout the book, but these references are comparative, with great care taken to understand the

non-socialist side only. In doing this, Sager seems to be suggesting that inequality is a tradition of sorts, an alternative to class conflict. It could be argued, though, that class conflict is one way to conceptualize inequality. Such an approach would have demanded more engagement with socialism as a body of thought and activism operating historically in the same or similar conditions, but also as one of the influences Canadians drew upon, without thinking too much about it, to explain and condemn inequality.

The other point is about rhetoric and strategy. Sager repeatedly underlines the ultimate failure of the idea of the 99% versus the 1% to serve as the basis of a truly transformative movement in the early 2010s. He concludes that income inequality cannot be the basis of a political movement, but that it would take a disastrous threat to humanity (viral or environmental, perhaps) to force a reckoning with the inhumanity of inequality. It should be noted, though, that the Occupy protests didn't fizzle out on their own, simply victims of fuzzy thinking. They were attacked by police, in locations across the United States and Canada, and dispersed by force. In Canada especially, the failure to inspire the 99 per cent was in large part a failure by the New Democratic Party, in the federal election of 2015 and beyond, to coherently communicate a position to the left of the Liberals on income inequality and income redistribution. Fuzzy or fiery, rhetoric needs political power, and the desire to use it.

DAVID TOUGH
Trent University