Neoliberalism in Provincial Cultural Policy Narratives: Perspectives from Two Coasts

Jan Marontate & Catherine Murray
Simon Fraser University

ABSTRACT This article outlines the historical trajectories of cultural policy evolution in two provinces not often studied in Canada—Nova Scotia and British Columbia—to determine the extent to which they may be said to conform to the spread of tenets of neoliberalism. The article first examines evidence in conformity with neoliberal cultural policy convergence at the provincial level and then explores divergences. Two very different provincial narratives or policy styles are identified—clientelist and place-based—which, while they contain common elements, have differences that cannot be dismissed as superficial. The authors conclude that analyses seeking evidence of convergence with neoliberal trends that are overly generalized may obscure historically embedded, distinctive political and cultural activities.

KEYWORDS Provincial cultural policy; Provincial cultural administration; Arts, culture and heritage policy; Cultural industries; Neoliberalism; Nova Scotia; British Columbia

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Jan Marontate held a Canada Research Chair in Technology and Culture at Acadia University until 2006. She is now an Associate Professor in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University. Email: jmaronta@sfu.ca. Catherine Murray is a Professor in the School of Communication, Co-Director of the Centre for Policy Studies on Culture and Communities, and Chair of the Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies Department at Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6. Email: murraye@sfu.ca.
press). A subsequent panel discussion in 2008 at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Vancouver examined the growing involvement of provincial administrations in Canadian cultural policy governance and the relevance of selected assumptions about a neoliberal tide leading to convergence in cultural policy in five provinces (Harvey, 2007; Peck, 2005; Sassen, 2005). In this article, the authors identify the conceptual and methodological challenges encountered in research on the province as an actor in multilevel cultural governance and raise questions about the extent to which policy changes in British Columbia and Nova Scotia can be attributed to the adoption of neoliberal models.

Although the underdeveloped nature of historical archives, data, and policy literature related to cultural policy necessarily limits the kind of systematic comparative analysis needed to advance theory about provincial cultural policy in Canada, it became apparent to the authors that Nova Scotia and British Columbia, situated on the geographic peripheries of the country, exhibit two quite distinctive policy styles that diverge from those identified in Central Canada. Rather than assume structural overdetermination or convergence with neoliberal models in an *a priori* fashion, our investigations suggest general policy narratives need to be supplemented with “smaller stories” to more effectively capture configurations of events and objectives in specific socio-historic contexts. Provincial policy narratives need to take into account how particular values are prioritized in different political and historical contexts, and how policy subsectors, subsystems, and networks frame issues.

This article begins with an overview of neoliberalism and cultural policy. After a consideration of the province as a cultural policy actor, we turn to a comparative analysis of points of convergence and divergence with neoliberal policy models in cultural policy formulation and administration in the two provinces. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological challenges in documenting and interpreting policy narratives, a discussion that discloses the shaky inferences about rationales and meaning in studies of policy convergence. We conclude with a characterization of policy styles on the two coasts.

**Neoliberalism and cultural policy**

We adopt a general definition of neoliberalism following David Harvey’s characterization of neoliberal policy as the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, light regulation of markets, and free trade (Harvey, 2007). The defining features are a series of retractions of social spending, programs and social welfare support that spill over to other domains such as culture, education, or the environment. Although there is some concession that neoliberal policy dissemination may be uneven, there has been a particularly uneasy fit of the term with the “cultural” turn into the so-called knowledge economy, which has inspired strategies to support “creative industries,” such as those pioneered by the UK and Australia in the late 1990s (Hartley, 2007; Pratt, 2008). Such approaches are often associated with higher degrees of public investment in cultural infrastructure, education, and training, and other tax or new-enterprise stimulus measures more proactive than those typically associated with neoliberalism (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007).
In critical policy studies the term also refers to a particular institutional expression of new public management theory, involving an increased reliance on non-governmental agents and the private sector, a shift from a controlling to an enabling state (with a lighter regulatory touch), and finally, the devolution of centralized responsibilities and increased involvement of multiple levels of government (Dobuzinskis, Howlett, & Laycock, 2009; Gattinger, 2008). According to these observers, globalization imposed or facilitated policy convergence around neoliberal principles, leading to a transfer of ideas, values, and programs across geopolitical regimes, nations, provinces, and cities across time. Yet attention to multilevel state intervention in culture in Canada has been scarce.

**Multilevel governance and the province as a cultural policy space**

Establishing the province as a relevant actor in cultural policy in the English-Canadian provinces requires a re-reading of the constitutional framework. Culture is not explicitly mentioned in the British North America Act. Although responsibility for broadcasting was found in the Radio Reference of 1932 to fall under the federal government, it is telling that responsibility for social regulation of its contents—interpretation of community standards of morality in film or video representation, for example—fell under provincial jurisdiction. Historically, provinces have exerted considerable authority in matters related to language and cultural rights for minorities within provincial boundaries. While Québec’s historic claim to cultural self-determination is well known, there are ambiguities inherent in aesthetic or anthropological definitions of the cultural field that lead to a larger provincial role in cultural determination than supposed, even for English provinces.

Canadian cultural policy studies frequently assume that a focus on activities related to culture in the aesthetic sense must include both traditional art forms and new media (i.e., performing arts, visual arts and crafts, the book-publishing industry, the music and sound-recording industry, and the film, video, and audiovisual industry). These studies have asserted that culture is a federal jurisdictional responsibility since the *Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences* (Massey Report, 1952, in Tippett, 1990). Federal and supra-regional agencies (like the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency) have frequently organized their activities around definitions of culture in this aesthetic sense. Boundary problems crop up in consideration of responsibility for government support for culture as conceived in broader “anthropological” definitions (for example, in connection with provision of services in both official languages or support for other ethno-linguistic communities). In Canada, the principal powers that shape the anthropological definition of the cultural field—education, labour, and social policy spheres—reside at the provincial level but have been implemented in diverse ways. Provinces have been more or less assertive in mandating arts or cultural heritage education in the school curriculum, for example. There is also considerable variation among provinces about what is considered “cultural” among different groups in the same area over time. In some initiatives the aesthetic and anthropological categories are combined. For example, in Nova Scotia there is some targeted support for “aesthetic” activities linked to specific ethno-linguistic heritage groups officially designated as “founding cultures”
(Mi’kmaq, Acadian, African–Nova Scotian, and Gaelic). By contrast, British Columbia has until recently assiduously avoided linking arts policy to distinctions rooted in anthropological conceptions of cultural difference. Powers over land, property, civil rights, and other resources that are central to the provision of cultural infrastructure are also provincial. In other words, if reference to relatively circumscribed residual powers of the federal government in support for culture is set aside, many jurisdictional powers over culture are provincial.

The origin of the assumption that provincial economic development tends overwhelmingly to be neoliberal may be found in English-Canadian political studies where provincial jurisdiction over the exploitation of natural resources has led to an emphasis on an economic rather than a cultural role for provincial governments (Pratt & Richards, 1979). From this perspective, there is a natural spillover from a “neoliberal” approach to land resources to labour and social policy measures (that prizes flexibility over social welfare as a route to success in the global economy). Neoliberalism is further advanced with patterns of power sharing or downloading. Devolution of federal responsibilities to provinces in the cultural field occurred in two movements. The 1984 public-sector economic strategy for culture and communications negotiated between the Government of Canada and the Province of Manitoba has been treated as the classic turning point in the history of the emergence of neoliberalism. It clearly coupled cultural policy and development with economic objectives at national and provincial levels. The second movement occurred after changes introduced by the federal government in the mid-1990s. Devolution of federal programs (such as unemployment insurance and human resources retraining) “expanded provincial policy choices by removing conditions that had formerly been attached to federal funds transferred to the provinces for social policy purposes” (Mcbride & Mcnutt, 2007). To weigh the practical effect of such devolution requires an assessment of evidence suggesting convergence and divergence.

Convergence in cultural policy

Many characteristics of the histories of British Columbia and Nova Scotia seem to suggest conformity with neoliberal thinking, although events have followed different courses. In BC, for example, long-time premier W.A.C. Bennett (from 1952 to 1972) was a “province building” premier (Mitchell, 1983). His economic and cultural initiatives included the development of community arts councils and museums in isolated communities. This inspired a resource-based conception that has linked cultural attractions to tourism since the mid-1950s and, more recently, the need for in-migration of coveted highly skilled international workers in creative industries (such as video game production and the film industries). In BC more resources go to cultural industries (and especially film) than to traditional forms of visual and performing arts, although the picture changes if heritage institutions and libraries are included. BC’s political culture places a high value on individualistic entrepreneurial ventures (Howlett, Pilon, & Summerville, 2009), and most money supporting the arts is self earned rather than dependent on public-sector funding. There is a reliance on sustainable, autonomous, and not-for-profit foundations for arts funding such as the Vancouver Foundation,
which is among the three largest such community foundations, supporting a range of activities (Murray, Baird, & Beale, in press).

Both provinces share a history of voluntary cultural entrepreneurship that predates “official” cultural policy in the wake of the 1951 Massey Report (Tippett, 1990)—such as provincial support for theatre and music ventures in Nova Scotia or municipal support for such ventures in British Columbia in the 1940s. They share a strong ethos of community autonomy in matters of culture, promote participatory community arts, and have attempted to establish balance in rural/urban representation in cultural governance and spending that is consistent with experience elsewhere in Canada, notably in Saskatchewan.

In Nova Scotia there is such a long history of entrepreneurial ventures functioning without government subsidies that the province may seem to have anticipated rather than conformed to more recent neoliberal trends (Marontate, in press). Railways, steamship companies, and private entrepreneurs led cultural tourism initiatives beginning in the mid-1800s (White, 2003). The earliest known library in Canada, the first documented theatrical performance in the country, and one of North America’s earliest schools of arts and crafts (founded in 1887 and now known as Nova Scotia College of Arts and Design University) were all private initiatives. Provincial support for culture was often associated with economic development initiatives. For example, by the 1930s the provincial tourism bureau had begun actively marketing the province, and in 1945 the Department of Industry and Publicity launched a film production unit for tourism and industry promotion. Home to some of the earliest Canadian motion picture companies in the early decades of the twentieth century, Nova Scotia, with Ontario, was among the first to establish minimum Canadian content requirements for newsreels in the 1930s. There are even earlier historic examples of support for the arts and culture as a public good, and of NS protectionism. The province took responsibility for what has become an extensive museum system in 1868—a year after participating in the founding of the Canadian federation.

The broad historical trajectories of cultural policy development in the two provinces share other striking similarities. Libraries, provincial archives, and museums expressed early provincial aspirations to cultural authority, and indeed, still benefit from the largest proportion of expenditures on culture in the two provinces. Library legislation entrenches an obligation for municipalities to provide access to such services, and both provinces incur considerable expenses in extending services to isolated communities (although a larger percentage of residents live in rural areas in NS than in BC). Search for economic revenues has led to a strong mutual focus on tax incentives and other instruments to stimulate foreign investment in film projects, with less attention to indigenous production in both provinces.

Initiatives associated with a creative city movement (Pratt, 2008) and efforts to adopt creative economy models have been very active in both provinces, particularly in recent years. For example, in 2006 the Nova Scotia Arts and Culture Partnership Council, a partnership between the cultural sector and the Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage, produced a policy document—Creative Nova Scotia: How Arts and Culture Can Help Build a Better Nova Scotia—that specifically links support for cul-
ture to the economy (Nova Scotia Arts and Culture Partnership Council, 2006). In the same year, the Halifax Regional Municipality published its first official culture plan, drawing heavily on theories of the rise of the so-called creative class (Florida, 2002), a theme reiterated in a recent ambitious plan for provincial support for culture produced by a research team supported by the Nova Scotia Cultural Action Network (NSCAN), a coalition of cultural activists (Hamilton, Arabic, & Baeker, 2009). There has, however, been much more limited formal involvement in the Creative City Network of Canada in Nova Scotia (with three official municipalities) than in BC, where 30 municipalities have actively promoted arts, culture, and heritage as a basis for economic and community development (see www.creativecity.ca).

Formal policy frameworks emerged at similar times from similar deliberative processes. Community consultations on policy introduced in the 1970s in both provinces would seem attributable to federal initiatives to promote community partnerships during the Pelletier era of participatory politics. BC and Nova Scotia participated in specific national conferences about the same time, after an initiative by the Canada Council to promote regional partnerships. The administrative formation of the BC Arts Council in 1974 followed Ontario’s lead and was partly indebted to recommendations by an Ontario policy consultant (Paul D. Schafer). Concurrent events in Nova Scotia also provide some evidence that conscious efforts were made to promote convergence and to develop shared approaches to provincial cultural policy within arts organizations across the country. Nova Scotian Arts and Cultural Association advocates organized a national forum on cultural policy in the 1980s with the goal of exploring best practices and sharing provincial experiences to enhance support for the arts and culture. However, the Canadian Conference for the Arts report’s recommendations were only adopted after extensive, contentious consultations with the arts community and significant concessions to the politics of regional representation.

Both provinces later passed legislation that formalized the first articulation of cultural policy goals almost at the same time in the mid-1990s. BC’s NDP government introduced its first cultural policy in 1996 and Nova Scotia in 1997—the first of the Atlantic provinces to do so. The objectives and language of the two statutes are remarkably similar.

But it is important to ask: why is there this apparent imitation, policy borrowing, or statutory convergence, albeit significantly later than such legislation in Ontario or Québec? Both Acts came at a time when there was exceptional leadership and interest in culture at the premier level. In Nova Scotia, the minister Robbie MacDonald (of the then Department of Education and Culture in the Liberal government led by Premier John Savage), and in BC, Premier Michael Harcourt (NDP) both strongly supported arts and culture. The historical conjuncture was marked by other factors that made support for cultural and creative entrepreneurship a topic of concern, among them strident demands for more funding by cultural activists and a decline in primary-sector employment, which intensified the search for new opportunities to engage with the global economy, inspired in part by successes elsewhere (e.g., in service-sector occupations like call centres inspired by the Silicon Valley). As well, federal cutbacks to public institutions in the culture sector, notably broadcast and film (in regional
offices of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the National Film Board, for example) left vacant facilities at the heart of Vancouver and Halifax. At the same time there was an increased interest in promoting the potential for work in the culture sector, supported by surprisingly bullish statistics on employment trends. (For example, a 1996 study commissioned by the NS Department of Education and Culture from Statistics Canada found that between 1990 and 1996, employment in the culture sector in NS increased by 18.6%, at a time when overall employment in the province dropped by –1%.) Yet there were also different provincial responses to the insecurity of the federal union. After the failure of the Meech Lake Accord in 1990 (a constitutional agreement negotiated by Prime Minister Mulroney to accommodate Québec), there was increased awareness of the potential for a federal dissolution. The political actors of the time had growing interest in the Québec model of establishing provincial administrative units to support the development of services in areas previously considered to be in the federal government portfolio. This defensive posture, and growing awareness of the rapidly growing provincial cultural sector, led to widespread provincial efforts to formalize provincial cultural policy.

**Divergences in cultural governance and policy implementation**

Nova Scotia and British Columbia have different histories of settlement and colonization, which are important for understanding the origins of cultural activities and governance structures. Although both provinces had important, longstanding settlements of First Nations communities, Nova Scotia has a much longer recorded history of contacts with Europeans (dating from the late fifteenth century). The first European settlement was established there in 1604. In BC significant documented contacts with colonial visitors and fur traders began in the late eighteenth century, but it was not until the nineteenth century that European colonial settlements, as opposed to trading posts, began to be established. The two provinces also have different histories in Confederation. Nova Scotia was a leader and signatory to Confederation, while British Columbia's entry into Canada four years later was inspired in part by Canada's offer to pay massive debts incurred during the gold rush. Historically both provinces had resource-based economies, but in Nova Scotia fisheries was the pillar of the economy until the collapse of cod stocks, whereas a “boom and bust” pattern has marked British Columbia's economy, with dramatic fluctuations in activities related to mining and forestry in particular during the past two centuries. Nova Scotia has a longer tradition of arts activism and promotion of activities related to the cultural economy, whereas in BC active interest in the economic potential of the culture sector is relatively more recent. Government support for culture has historically been closely linked to federal initiatives and federally supported programs in the Atlantic region, whereas federal influence is much less in evidence in BC. Nova Scotia was reluctant to accept the devolution of federal responsibilities for retraining programs in the 1990s that had implications for workers in the culture sector and creative industries, even after BC and other provinces had signed agreements.

When patterns of government expenditures on culture are compared, there are other sharp distinctions between the two provinces. Per capita federal expenditures on culture in Nova Scotia are among the highest of all provinces (surpassed only by
PEI and Québec), whereas in BC, per capita federal spending is among the lowest. By contrast, municipal expenditures on culture are highest of all Canadian provinces in BC (Hill Strategies, 2005).

Let us consider the question of political parties and their ideologies in connection with policy implementation. After the 2001 election, the Liberal government under Premier Gordon Campbell in BC embraced many features characteristic of neoliberal economic policy (with a rollback on taxes in his first legislature, abolition of the BC Human Rights Commission, and the privatization of BC Rail) (Howlett, Pilon, & Summerville, 2009). In BC the combined time in power of the right-leaning Social Credit and Liberal governments outnumbers New Democratic Party rule almost three to one. Since 1970, Nova Scotia’s political history has been marked by shifts between Liberal and Progressive Conservative leadership, although the NDP won its first election in 2009. Transfer of power in Nova Scotia has historically had a pronounced impact on the public administration of culture and cultural policy, with subsequent restructuring of administrative units responsible for provincial support for the arts and heritage in particular. If we seek to understand partisan orientations to neoliberalism, then, we find episodic periods of conformity historically, but such moot evidence may suggest a persistent non-partisan dimension (Murray, 2010).

The historical development of provisions for the administration of provincial funding of the arts also illustrates the multiple registers of meaning underpinning policy formulation. Neither province endorses a simple model of “arm’s length” delegation of authority in arts funding allocations on the Anglo-Saxon model of cultural administration. Nova Scotia’s Conservative government dissolved its arts council in 2002 and is now the only Atlantic province without one, replacing it with the multi-stakeholder model of the Nova Scotia Arts and Culture Partnership Council. Introduced as a financial measure, which might be interpreted as another manifestation of neoliberalism, dissolution won support only with an appeal to cultural pluralism by elected officials demanding regional distribution of provincial funding (and setting aside the fact that a large proportion of active arts communities are concentrated near the provincial capital). These might be interpreted as “public good” arguments for pluralism, but they came from the elected members of regions seeking ways to kick-start investment in economic development initiatives to replace lost jobs in primary-sector industries with entrepreneurial ventures that had the potential to become self-sustaining. Public administrators in Nova Scotia describe the current Partnership Council advising the NS Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage as an “arm in arm” system of support. BC’s Arts Council might more properly be dubbed “elbow length,” since it has always shared staff with the Culture Division of the BC Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts in the interests of “lean administration.” As a consequence, administrative units have long had a precarious status in both provinces. Although the ideologies and histories associated with partisan politics differ in the two provinces, the evidence suggests a similar politicization of the provincial cultural policy sphere.

Another area of divergence can be found in the provincial control over their social and labour policy jurisdiction to scaffold the arts. Opponents of neoliberal “growth coalitions” point to a widening gulf between rich and poor, a weakening in occupa-
tional health and safety, labour security, and environmental protection, and restoration of class power after the dislocations of the 1970s (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007; Harvey, 2007). Demands for social welfare benefits for cultural workers have not been adequately addressed in either province (Gollmitzer & Murray, 2008). Neither province has implemented status of the artist legislation to protect the economic rights of artists, including the right to self-organize. Experiments with social welfare initiatives have been undertaken but have not been adopted on a large scale. These include subsidized artists’ housing and workspaces, artists-in-residence programs in schools, tax incentives (such as in the City of Vancouver), and exemptions for artists from the payment of municipal taxes (in Nova Scotia). To be fair, the dearth of adequate means for identifying cultural/creative labour and income presents serious obstacles for policy formulation to support workers in these precarious professions.

This is in no small part due to the very nature of entrepreneurial ventures in these fields, marked by rapidly changing tastes, fluctuating seasonal demand, and career patterns that involve intermittent and concomitant part-time employment and the participation of a substantial voluntary workforce in both provinces. Yet both BC and NS have undertaken initiatives to train or retrain skilled labour pools for cultural industries—for example, in film and new media (in BC) or sound recording (in Nova Scotia)—in a bid to attract foreign projects and compete with other locales in the global marketplace, with mixed results. However, provincial investment in high-tech industries, such as film, also supports high-wage film service workers and has been used as a rationale for reducing support for other types of creative workers (such as low-income performing artists, craftspeople, or visual artists). On issues related to social welfare support there are thus small but not insignificant variations.

Cultural identity politics and the socio-demographic profile of residents differ significantly in these two provinces. BC is faster growing, with a longer history as a “have” province than Nova Scotia, and is characterized by rapid rates of social in-migration and higher levels of populations who do not speak English or French. Its rapid rate of social change has led to what Jean Barman has called a “sojourner” mentality and relatively “thin” conception of provincial “civic” identity, despite successive premiers arguing successfully for its regional “exception” or special status (Murray et al., in press). Nova Scotia, in contrast with its large proportion of rural residents, has a more nostalgic heritage focus. Government administrative units have been set in place to provide support for “founding cultures” (with administrative units at a cabinet level to support Mi’kmq, Acadian, African–Nova Scotian, and Gaelic communities), suggesting a “thick” conception of provincial identity. Nova Scotia’s history of intercultural conflict began earlier than BC’s, in part due to its earlier colonization. The Marshall decision in support of First Nations harvesting rights, although a federal decision, was the outcome of a battle initiated in Nova Scotian courts and has proved seminal in the interpretations of First Nations’ rights throughout Canada. However, approaches in the two provinces diverge on the best way to recognize Aboriginal rights. With more sheer diversity in numbers and types of Aboriginal cultural and linguistic groups in BC, the province set up a separate Aboriginal Language, Heritage and Cultures Foundation in 1990 to champion Aboriginal cultural programs, including cul-
tural awards. But in BC there is assiduous avoidance of “founding culture” language. When the BC Liberal party assumed power in 2001, the regime promised a referendum on the issue of Aboriginal self-government but subsequently recanted. Despite such apparent inclusiveness, BC did not entrench aboriginal rights in its official cultural policy. By contrast, Nova Scotia’s initiatives to establish provincial administrative units to support cultural communities designated as “founding cultures” offers an interesting case of legislative and programmatic provincial support for diversity in the Canadian context. (These units are the Nova Scotia Office of Aboriginal Affairs, the Office of African Nova Scotian Affairs, the Office of Acadian Affairs, and the Office of Gaelic Affairs.) Is this a manifestation of a global trend (resonating with the Canadian-led UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions of 2005? Could it be a response to cultural lobbyists in a “bottom-up” rather than a “top-down” set of initiatives, aimed in part at redressing past discriminatory practices against historically marginalized groups? Or does it respond to multiple agendas? Furthermore, the question of whether these initiatives were undertaken as signals of support for “symbolic” recognition of cultural activities as a public good, group-differentiated cultural rights, or collective entitlement, or whether they were undertaken to forestall demands that might interfere with political and economic objectives is impossible to assess. It is noteworthy that both the province and the federal government have worked in various ways to encourage development of ethnocultural “business plans” in Nova Scotia that will ensure economic viability of cultural heritage initiatives.

Finally, the structure of policy devolution has followed markedly different patterns due to the history of the relationships between the municipalities in the two provinces. An American-tinged populist home-rule movement in BC municipalities faded in the 1920s, but the province adopted a permissive stance to municipalities (where the Community Charter allows wide ambit). Municipal spending on culture rose sharply in the 1990s. However, BC’s pattern of devolution of provincial authority to municipalities is uneven: in education and health, for example, there is a preference for regional institutions, while immigrant settlement services are mostly local. BC’s case suggests a “deep devolution” of cultural and social welfare responsibilities to cities, which then directly bargain with the province for access to resources. It is no accident that BC cities have been leaders in the Creative City Network of Canada and often have been at the forefront in negotiations about bilateral BC-Canada infrastructure agreements. Vancouver was an early proponent of “creative city” approaches to urban planning in Canada, as evidenced in preparation for Expo 86. Vancouver also developed innovative strategies such as offering “bonuses” for amenities, in arrangements that permit developers to increase density in exchange for provision of cultural space or services. In many respects, the cities of Vancouver and Victoria may be said to lead innovations in provincial cultural administration: indeed, at various times in their respective histories, local cultural planners and policymakers outnumbered their provincial counterparts.

In contrast, Nova Scotia long emphasized provincial rather than municipal governance in matters of culture. Local government developed slowly in Nova Scotia. This tra-
dition dates from colonial times, when the British government specifically opposed the development of responsible local government in the province in part because it believed that town meetings in New England had promoted unrest prior to the War of Independence (SNSMR, 2003). Although rural and urban municipalities were eventually put in place, until recently cultural policy has generally been developed at the provincial rather than the municipal level. For example, although it is home to one of North America’s first colleges of art and design and a leader in entrepreneurial cultural industry initiatives (such as the East Coast Music Awards), the Halifax Regional Municipality only adopted what it still qualified as a “working draft” of a municipal Culture Plan in 2006. There are, however, exceptions to this historical trend. For example, some town councils and municipalities outside of the provincial capital have supported built heritage and performing arts initiatives (notably theatre and music festivals).

Just as patterns of devolution are sharply different, so too are patterns of coordination. In the planning of infrastructure, there are strong indications of a two-level model initially in Nova Scotia, with strong reliance on federally funded programs targeting the Atlantic region, whereas an informal tri-level model including the city has been adopted in the Lower Mainland, BC. Nova Scotia is still strongly characterized by dispersed rural settlements, many with a craft and community arts or cultural heritage focus tied to provincial tourism or economic development strategies (like seasonal museums and Cape Breton’s annual Celtic Colours festival).

Although evidence is enigmatic, despite apparent differences, the experience in both provinces supports a general thesis that redistribution and equitable distribution of resources between municipal and rural areas are recurrent and important features of policies formulated by successive provincial political regimes. The lopsidedness of support for culture, favouring concentrations of cultural workers in major metropolitan areas (Halifax and Vancouver), is reinforced by Canada Council funding of artists and federal support for cultural organizations in urban centres. This concentration of federal arts funding in support of activities in large urban municipalities has been a continuing cause of grievance among arts advocates on both coasts.

Finally, different socio-economic resources of the two coastal provinces suggest very different capacity in each province for adapting to the pressure to download fiscal responsibility for cultural development to new alliances of public, private, and not-for-profit partners. In BC, the Liberal government under Gordon Campbell prioritized building the managerial capacity and planning resources of the not-for-profit sector, and civil society partners such as the Vancouver Foundation (the third-largest such foundation in North America) have scrambled to adjust their programs. The 2010 Legacy projects, and emphasis on the development of certain cultural precincts in the City of Vancouver (such as the recently announced BC-supported move of the Vancouver Art Gallery after 2012), have stimulated the hunt for private capital. By contrast, Nova Scotia’s development of cultural infrastructure is less geared to megaprojects, and the pool of available private capital to match developments is much smaller, with some notable exceptions. The absence of national head offices (in finance, transport, or telecommunications) in both provinces presents challenges for securing investment in cultural industries.
Neo-clientelism and place-based provincial cultural policy styles

What may we conclude about evidence of “neoliberalism in action” or evidence of both policy convergence and divergence on the two coasts? Certainly the decentralized, place-specific nature of cultural and creative activities is a factor that has, at times, inspired idiosyncratic policy initiatives. It is not surprising, then, that provincial policy sometimes appears to be a bundle of incremental isolated initiatives in reaction to events. Policy may lag behind social action. In other words, cultural activity wells up and is to some extent self-organizing. Individual or collective cultural activities often predate the development of policies or programs (Tippett, 1990). We conclude that both provinces share a disaggregated historical approach to culture, suggesting that the “natural” tendency to embrace economic policies that resemble policy models associated with neoliberalism may be much less driven by neoliberal ideology than they seem superficially.

In both provinces there appears to be a growing politicization of the cultural policy decision-making, something again not accounted for by traditional conceptions of neoliberal policy convergence. Politicization is apparent in the continuing presence of the politicians in decisions to allocate resources, favour local cultural developments, or re-deploy resources to the electoral bases that are still so important to keep them in power. It is visible in the derogation of traditional arm’s-length principles of cultural governance. However, there is little apparent growth in the capacity of “autonomous” regulation, which is often identified in the history of cultural public administration in Britain and France and its subsequent hybridization (Gattinger & Saint-Pierre, in press). In BC, this proclivity for direct political control may be seen in both parties of the Left and Right when in government. Provincial politics in provinces outside of Central Canada often have dominant premiers and powerful party members in cabinet who exercise strong control over departmental/portfolio configuration. There is such a persistent, deep, and “naturalized” politicization of the cultural policy field and heavy emphasis on links between culture and the provincial economy in BC and NS that this phenomenon merits further critical examination.

In Nova Scotia, political traditions in the major parties have been characterized as “clientelism,” a term that refers to the influential role of personal networks or “teams of friends” that exchange material favours and influence for loyalty and political support (MacLeod, 2006). Cultural policy narratives in Nova Scotia present additional evidence for this tradition of clientelism. The strong role played by members of the Nova Scotia Legislative Assembly in decisions about public administration and the weak position of the civil service have often surfaced at crucial junctures for decision-making about support for culture. Political leaders have resisted granting public servants discretionary powers, and bursts of dismissals often occur after changes of government (Bickerton, 1990). Interestingly, efforts by Premier John Savage, a Liberal who eschewed the traditions of clientelism in setting up an arm’s-length arts board—a practice that some believe led to his defeat in the 1998 election (MacLeod, 2006)—were short-lived. Following his defeat there was a return to the old patterns of clientelism. Key senior public servants responsible for culture and heritage were dismissed, left the public service, or took early retirement.
Traces of practices that might be considered manifestations of clientelism are also evident in the provincial cultural policy field in BC. Intimations of a “cultural agenda” in politics linked to discourse about the new economy and globalization surface around elections, with promises of support and post-election restructuring (Stokes, 2007). Direct, face-to-face networks and relationships of reciprocity in the cultural, political, and administrative communities may run counter to modern norms of civil service professionalism and insulation from political interference. Nonetheless, expressions of support for cultural ventures are often conceived as low-cost, relatively uncontroversial expressions of empathy for community-based initiatives that do not threaten to disrupt broader political agendas. Little concerted effort has been made by political parties to develop coherent cultural platforms, which leaves individual candidates quite a bit of latitude in making promises for action in areas of concern for artistic and cultural minorities in communities of voters, especially since costs of arts subsidies are so diffuse and so low for average citizens to be almost invisible. Core issues at stake for cultural groups are often not well known to a broad public and thus unlikely to provoke vociferous, widespread popular attack. In anticipation of post-electoral consideration, cultural advocates may choose not to overtly ally with any one provincial party. Thus, in both provinces there has been little partisan mobilization around arts and culture issues during elections, in favour of a general-sector (bipartisan) advocacy approach.

For the proposition that clientelism has been a factor in BC cultural politics to hold, there would need to be strong federal or provincial presence in cultural development. However, BC premiers, beginning with W.A.C. Bennett in the early 1950s, have emphasized not top-down but bottom-up community-based grassroots arts initiatives. Community arts support has never been abandoned, and there has been a preoccupation in public discourse with community arts councils as an indicator of local autonomy in cultural initiatives. Thus BC’s policy style would be better described as a “place based approach.” Municipalities have considerable discretionary powers in cultural planning. Promoters sell BC as the spectacular film set, a great place to visit, and a landing strip for international capital, with distinctive cultural activities. Overall, our comparative research on Nova Scotia and British Columbia thus finds indications of both cultural policy convergence and divergence but, arguably, sufficiently different provincial policy styles to challenge theories of a rising tide of neoliberalism.

**Challenges in research and interpretation**

In our effort to trace the policy evolution in these two provinces, we encountered fundamental conceptual and methodological challenges in charting cultural policy history. Studies based on the idea that neoliberalism is a coherent hegemonic ideological frame for action may “reduce the understanding of social relations to a residual effect of hegemonic projects and/or governmental programmes of rule” (Barnett, 2004). More generally, debates about “top-down” versus “bottom-up” frameworks for studying the dynamics and rationales for state action also sometimes obscure the polysemous nature of policy initiatives: the same policy may have multiple meanings for multiple constituencies in different contexts, and these may vary over time. However, detailed retrospective information is often unobtainable.
Canadian scholarship documenting provincial cultural activity is sparse outside of Québec (with the exception of Alberta). Partial histories of various initiatives in the culture sector exist for both provinces under study, for example on BC film policy (Gasher, 2002) and the history of filmmaking in Nova Scotia (Filmmography Committee, Nova Scotia Public Archives, 1993). More historical accounts about cultural policy initiatives exist in Nova Scotia (Terris, 1990, 2004) than in BC, where there is a marked absence of public archives. Independently, the authors were forced to undertake original archival work and conduct interviews with key informants to piece together a picture, focusing on developments since the mid-twentieth century.

Changing notions over time of what constitutes “culture” also made it difficult to identify salient features and sources for reconstituting policy narratives. Not only is information about key historical events and participants in policy initiatives fragmentary in both published and archival documentation, it often fails to provide adequate contextual information for establishing plausible connections to rationales, even in the recent past. Furthermore, relationships between activities in the policy arena and their implementation by specific administrative units are not always clear. Government records and archives tend to focus on legislation and administrative infrastructures, with sketchy documentation about relationships between political agendas, public debates, administrative units, programs, and policy, or even basic information about historical divisions of responsibilities. There is little information about the administrative rationales or processes for fixing objectives. Sources that clearly document events related to the activities of stakeholders and lobbyists representing cultural interest groups and not-for-profit associations that participated in initiatives relevant to policy—like community consultations, meeting agendas, and detailed minutes of advocacy groups—are even more scarce. Superficial indicators like the changing mandates of provincial government departments (e.g., the association of culture with economic initiatives or with education or recreation) are not easily interpreted.

A second problem in interpretation is how to conceive of the frequent shift of administrative responsibilities for provincial support for culture (specifically for NS arts and heritage). Flexible structures are the hallmark of provincial administration in the smaller provinces and are sometimes identified as trends in new public management theories. They allow capital, labour, and other interests to shift their political focus expediently (Gough, 2002). We agree that such ministry reshuffling might be casually interpreted as a move to associate culture with economic objectives rather than education or health (as a public good or mechanism to promote social cohesion), in line with neoliberal agendas of the political party in power. Yet this reshuffling could instead be interpreted as a symptom of a lack of status of the culture portfolio in the overall government agenda, a lack of decisiveness, an indication of fragmented efforts to harness culture for multiple objectives, or a rejection of a previous ruling party’s agenda.

Yet another example of the risk of inferential error is raised by the notion of cultural tourism. Aggressive programs promoting cultural tourism have often been defined as a feature of neoliberal principles in action, turning on competitive con-
sumption economics: packaging and promoting provincial attractions as a leisure commodity, or as a way to attract skilled labour to immigrate to the jurisdiction. Although BC may be better known for successfully courting cultural tourism and establishing it as an explicit provincial aim (through an Aboriginal tourism strategy in 2007, for example, or in its championship of Expo 86 and the 2010 Winter Olympics as opportunities for branding), Nova Scotia also has a very long history of participation in tourism initiatives since the early twentieth century (Marontate, in press; Murray, Baird, & Beale, in press). These historical antecedents make current initiatives difficult to interpret as clear evidence of a specifically contemporary neoliberal turn.

Finally, it is axiomatic that cutbacks in cultural spending, like other areas of social spending, are often seen as an indicator of neoliberal ideology (Mcbride, 2005). Contrary to expectations, even in BC, which arguably can be said to have ushered in the first era of slash-and-burn social spending under the Social Credit government of William Bennett in the recession of the early 1980s (and before Mulroney or Harris), cultural spending emerged relatively unscathed in current dollars since 1950 and increased until the provincial budget of fall 2009 and aftermath of the global recession. Provincial expenditures on culture are even smaller in Nova Scotia, which had the second-lowest levels in Canada (Hill Strategies, 2005). Although cultural spending is a narrow indicator of cultural activity, a review of Statistics Canada data (Hill Strategies, 2005) suggests a growing role for municipal governments that has yet to be explored: total spending is increasing, and municipalities are absorbing more of the costs.

When analyzing recent events as manifestations of neoliberalism in action, then, it is important to put them in historical perspective. Political decisions may have multiple objectives and motivations that blur the boundaries between “public good” arguments and market economics. Discourse about government roles with respect to the interplay between public and private rights frequently combines appeals to “public good” and private-sector rights simultaneously. This is the case even in the era predating the presumed rise of neoliberalism.

Concluding remarks: Perspectives from the two coasts
Applications of neoliberal theory to cultural policy studies have often focused excessively on top-down influences and grand narratives. Separated by a continent and several hundred years of colonial history, two cases—the provinces of Nova Scotia and British Columbia—have been explored for their perspectives on “bottom-up” experience. Studies of cultural policy need to take into account the complex interplay and co-presence of multiple discourses, rationales, and material practices.

Although historical narratives in Nova Scotia appear on the surface to exhibit features of neoliberal convergence, the province has not totally abandoned its role as a benefactor, catalyst, or patron. The most extreme example of neoliberal rollback of state support is associated with budget cuts, but these only emerged in 2002 after the election of a Conservative majority with a fiscal responsibility platform (Lederman, 2009). Nevertheless, the provincial government continues to support arts, culture, and heritage through core programs as well as programs geared to its four designated founding cultures. BC’s narrative also exhibits classic features in conformity with neoliberalism, notably its focus on attracting foreign investment in film production,
tourism, and cultural megaprojects, but continues to favour significant regional redistribution in spending on libraries and heritage.

These small but consequential stories of policy experiences and praxis on two Canadian coasts provide rich evidence for the continuing relevance of place-based and clientelist agendas for understanding cultural politics and constraints on the neoliberal tide of global convergence. Perhaps as a consequence of their shared struggles for fair recognition by national institutions and for a re-allocation of cultural resources from the centre, the provinces continue to feature community development and social welfare concerns in cultural policy discourse. This points to the importance of studying “small stories” to gain an understanding of the polysemy of cultural policy. The cultural policy styles that have emerged in the two provinces suggest that specific events and conditions should not be treated as mere obstacles in fitting neoliberal theory to cultural policy narratives at the subnational level. Since the 1960s policy development has often been undertaken in the form of consultations with stakeholders under the umbrella of advisory councils and voluntary planning task forces in Nova Scotia and British Columbia. This democratic deliberation affords a space for the local appropriation or adaptation of ideas from elsewhere, and a place to react to capricious, unilateral federal cultural decisions, or protest and pragmatically adjust to systematic underfunding or under-representation in cultural policy development from the centre. Public and institutional collective memory often fails to provide an adequate basis for understanding the place of dominant ideologies—or resistance to them—in events. It is important not to underestimate the diversity of the history of provincial narratives about cultural development in Canada.

This comparison of two coastal provinces suggests that there is some evidence to support policy transfer and convergence, but there are different modes of civic address. Are the similarities more important than the differences? In our view, the answer is no; the unique social, economic, and cultural circumstances have led to distinctive policy styles, which cannot be dismissed as immaterial. What does this say about neoliberalism and the ability of each of these coastal provinces to redefine itself in socio-cultural and economic terms? It says that cultural workers, policymakers, and organizations have had a stronger hand in shaping culture in each province than is acknowledged by partisans of neoliberal discourse (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Harvey, 2000). These stories of provincial cultural policy formulation provide powerful evidence of the deep diversity and multiple meanings of cultural life in subnational contexts.

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Notes
1. This was the Economic Regional Development Agreement (ERDA). In effect from 1984 to 1994, an ERDA was essentially an umbrella agreement that set out general objectives and priorities for action
and a coordinating structure, with a subsidiary agreement committing both governments to do certain things and usually to share costs. Over the period of the ERDA existence some $5 billion was committed by both levels of government by means of 93 subsidiary agreements. ERDAs were the shared responsibility of the federal minister responsible for the then Department of Regional Industrial Expansion (DRIE) and the minister’s counterpart in each province.

2. The former premier of Nova Scotia, Progressive Conservative Rodney MacDonald, served as Minister of Tourism, Culture and Heritage during the controversial dismantling of the arm’s-length Nova Scotia Arts Council in 2002 and later became premier.

3. In protecting the economic rights of artists with status of the artist legislation, Québec was a leader, adopting an early version in 1988 (L.R.Q., chapitre S-32.01) that was an influential model for federal legislation; Saskatchewan drafted a similar policy in 2002 and approval is still pending; and a provincial act was tabled but not passed in the Ontario legislature in 2007.

4. The Halifax Regional Municipality has recently initiated regular meetings of cultural funders together with the Department of Canadian Heritage (DCH), Atlantic Canadian Opportunities Agency (ACOA), and other funders such as the Canada Council, and the Province of Nova Scotia to discuss programs, policies, and specific client cases.

5. Maria Tippett’s seminal work Making Culture (1990) studied the complex, wide-ranging, and diverse cultural life in English Canada that predated the establishment of the Canada Council and federal cultural policy. Tippett’s narrative tells the Canadian story of an increasing professionalization and engagement with a “national” culture, nationally organized. While Tippett makes references to provincial associations, groups, and institutions (e.g., the BC Patriotic and Educational Motion Picture Bureau, established in 1916), she provides little insight into the cultural policy narratives for BC or Nova Scotia.

6. The culture ministry’s name changed from the Nova Scotia Department of Education (and Culture) to the Department of Tourism (and Culture and Heritage) after the defeat of the Liberals by the Progressive Conservatives in 1998.

Website
Creative City Network, URL: www.creativecity.ca

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