
Drawing heavily on the interpretation of Gramsci championed by British cultural studies in its analysis of Thatcherism, this book charts lucidly the course of the "Common Sense Revolution" led by Mike Harris’ Conservative Party in its first term in office as Ontario’s government (1995-1999). Those years stand as a turning point in the neoliberalization of Canadian politics. Until Harris, neo-liberalism had a rather low profile in “middle Canada” (i.e., Ontario). In the 1980s and early 1990s, Thatcherite policies were advocated loudly and implemented in provinces far removed from the middle. But at the federal level, the neo-liberal agenda proceeded mostly by stealth, under the sign of continental free trade. The remarkable success of the Harris Tories in breaking from Ontario’s long tradition of moderate brokerage politics merits careful scrutiny. This book throws a great deal of light on the role of political communication in Ontario’s neo-liberal transition.

Kozolanka’s study actually does double duty. The early chapters furnish an incisive analysis of the new right’s bid for power, featuring a detailed Gramscian theorization of hegemony as a forever-tentative accomplishment that in its neo-liberal form has relied upon polling, advertising, persuasive public relations, blitzkrieg political offensives, divide-and-rule tactics, the identification of business with the general interest, and a “permanent campaign” to sustain governmental popularity. These chapters offer a concise, up-to-date application of hegemony theory to the phenomenon of neo-liberal transition, highlighting the new communications strategies and technologies that have “sold” neo-liberalism to sceptical publics and contributed in the process to a further shrinkage of the public sphere. The later chapters of fer well-researched case studies that reveal specific aspects of the struggle for hegemony in mid-1990s Ontario. These studies focus on the strategic interaction of government and challengers and the role of media (represented by the three Toronto-based daily newspapers) in key conjunctures: the public-sector strike of 1996, the amalgamation of Toronto, the Higher Education Restructuring Act of 2005, and the labour-sponsored Ontario Days of Action (1995-1998). In contrast to traditional, election-centred approaches, Kozolanka extends the concept of political communication to “long-term, project-wide and paradigm-shifting implications” (p. 81). This enables her to make use of established methods of media mapping, including content analysis and critical discourse analysis. She is able to show how, despite the strong advantage the Harris government had as primary definer, controlling the legislative cycle that shapes the flow of new discourse, the regime was not consistently able to control communication. Advocacy groups such as Citizens for Local Democracy and People for Education were able to gain standing in media accounts, and at key moments, the popularity of the regime hung in the balance. These chapters comprise the book’s original research contribution, and the empirical material is rich in detail and interwoven with theoretical ideas nicely.

Throughout, Kozolanka takes the standpoint of a critical, independent scholar, sympathetic to neo-liberalism’s opposition, but not apologetic for their failings. From that vantage, she is able to register, in the latter part of the book, some important criticisms of the “Days of Action” campaign, labour’s main response to the Common Sense Revolution. By choosing to channel working-class opposition into a series of ritualistic protests, largely
ignored by the corporate media, labour leadership missed an opportunity to build a more coherent and wide-ranging opposition. The same standpoint informs the book’s conclusion, which invokes recent literature on media democratization in an effort to imagine an alternative communicative future.

The only weakness I can see in the argument is a certain ambivalence, or perhaps inconsistency, in interpretation. On the one hand, Kozolanka reads the Harris Tories as having waged a successful war of position prior to their ascent to power that built an organic system of alliances favouring neo-liberal transformation; on the other hand, she notes that once in power, the regime shifted to a Thatcherite two-nations strategy, cleaving the disorderly have-nots from the worthy taxpayers ideologically. In the process, the “organic” basis for hegemony was lost, exposing the regime to possible counterhegemonic resistance. Although the claim seems to be that the government committed a strategic error, the actual analysis reveals a remarkably effective “blitzkrieg of government restructuring” that made it difficult for oppositional groups to organize beyond episodic defences of their immediate interests. In short, the Ontario case shows precisely how a two-nations hegemonic project works. Such a project jettisons the expansive hegemony of one-nation projects such as the Keynesian welfare state necessarily, and it requires coercive measures against the unworthy nation, which open opportunities for resistance. For a regime pursuing such a project, the key issue is whether opposition can be contained at the economic/corporate level, and on this score, the Harris Tories did remarkably well.

The book got its start as a doctoral thesis, and it bears some birthmarks. These include a slight tendency, in the early chapters, toward verbosity in reviewing literature and, in the middle chapters, toward minute empirical analyses that sometimes miss the forest for the trees. There is also a significant historical omission, which compromises the narrative on neo-liberalization. Kozolanka’s account has neo-liberalism migrating from Britain to New Zealand (the Labour Party’s “Rogernomics,” beginning in 1984), through Alberta (the Klein program for Alberta, beginning in 1992), to Ontario. Neo-liberalism in Canada as a coherent hegemonic project actually had its start in British Columbia, in 1983. The BC provincial government’s 26-bill “restraint program” was a blitzkrieg predating even Rogernomics. Informed directly by the Fraser Institute and facilitated by consultative links to the Thatcher regime in Britain, the program was hotly contested. Its controversial implementation has been documented extensively in the academic literature. This curious omission is perhaps itself a commentary on the fragile and fragmented status of Canadian studies. Aside from these relatively minor quibbles, The Power of Persuasion is a persuasive intervention in its own right and a clear demonstration of the continuing relevance of hegemony theory in political and communication studies. The definitive work on the new right revolution in Canada has yet to appear. When it does, likely as a comparative, multilevel study, Kozolanka’s insights on the Ontario piece will no doubt figure significantly.

William K. Carroll, University of Victoria