Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

DREW KOEHN

BA (University of the Fraser Valley, 2012)


Department of History

Tuesday, July 30, 2019
10:00 A.M.
Clearihue Building
Room B017

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Gregory Blue, Department of History, University of Victoria (Co-Supervisor)
Dr. Lynne Marks, Department of History, UVic (Co-Supervisor)

External Examiner:
Dr. Michael Prince, Faculty of Human and Social Development, UVic

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Kathy Gaul, School of Exercise Science, Physical and Health Education, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

For all but thirteen years of the decades from 1952 to 2017, British Columbia was electorally dominated by the Social Credit Party and its ideological successor, the BC Liberal Party. These organizations represented the interests of business in opposition to the social democratic NDP, which has drawn a core support base from organized labour and the public sector middle class. This thesis frames the Social Credit-BC Liberal political formation as a ruling class bloc that maintained hegemony by switching between distinct rhetorical modes as the political situation required or allowed, with economic austerity, framed as objective necessity, on one hand, and populism, employing overt moralism and down-to-earth posturing, on the other. I posit that both modes operated to mask the class conflict at the heart of the neoliberal project of free markets, public sector reduction, and social atomization that has attained the status of political and economic “common sense” since its policies began to be widely adopted around the world in the late 1970s.

After providing a background for the rise of Social Credit in British Columbia under W.A.C. Bennett (premier from 1952-1972), this thesis tracks the continuities and changes of the province's hegemonic bloc, using welfare policies and poverty discourses as a focus. I consider the party’s transition from a populist one that appealed to the province’s evangelical Christian population to a modernized, neoliberal party under Bill Bennett’s leadership (1975-1986). Exploring the rationales surrounding the cuts to welfare funding enacted under the Social Credit governments of Bill Bennett and Bill Vander Zalm and the BC Liberal government of Gordon Campbell (2001-2011), I analyze how neoliberal and populist styles were employed, what the relationship between the two was, and the extent to which moralism was part of both styles/discourses regarding poverty. I also look at the extent to which the collective solidarity of anti-poverty activists and progressive religious groups was able to push back against neoliberal and populist policies, resisting the individualism that neoliberalism attempts to enforce. In these ways, this thesis seeks to contribute to making neoliberalism a topic of critical political analysis and deliberation at a time when its policies are often framed as non-ideological.