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## Misrecognized Materialists



*Matt James*

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Misrecognized Materialists:  
Social Movements in Canadian  
Constitutional Politics



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*For Lisa*



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# Acronyms

AAFC	Afro-Asian Foundation of Canada
ACCL	All-Canadian Congress of Labour
B&B	Bilingualism and Biculturalism
BNA	British North America
CAVM	Canadian Association of Visible Minorities
CCF	Co-operative Commonwealth Federation
CCL	Canadian Congress of Labour
CCNC	Chinese Canadian National Council
CEC	Canadian Ethnocultural Council
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CJC	Canadian Jewish Congress
CLC	Canadian Labour Congress
CP	Communist Party of Canada
CPC	Canadian Polish Congress
FFQ	Fédération des femmes du Québec
FTQ	Fédération des travailleurs du Québec
JCPC	Judicial Committee of the Privy Council
LDR	League for Democratic Rights
LWR	League for Women's Rights
MP	Member of Parliament
NAC	National Action Committee on the Status of Women
NACOI	National Association of Canadians of Origins in India
NAJC	National Association of Japanese Canadians
NBBC	National Black Coalition of Canada
NCIC	National Congress of Italian Canadians
NCW	National Council of Women of Canada
NJCCA	National Japanese Canadian Citizens' Association
NUPGE	National Union of Provincial Government Employees
PSAC	Public Service Alliance of Canada

QFL	Quebec Federation of Labour
TLC	Trades and Labour Congress of Canada
UCC	Ukrainian Canadian Committee
UN	United Nations

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## Misrecognized Materialists



# 1

## Constitutional Politics and the Politics of Respect: An Introduction

Constitutional politics is a Canadian synonym for futility. Memories of our decades-long search for a comprehensive unity settlement spark chagrin: a “mad excursion”; a tale of “wonderful naivety” at best.<sup>1</sup> There can be no doubt that the constitutional turn has failed to ease the Canada–Quebec divisions it was meant to resolve and should on that key measure count as a failure. But there is also a different story to be told. This book tells that story. Bringing into focus the historic role of Canadian constitutional politics as a forum for questions that business as usual tended to exclude, it shows how the constitutional debate became an important arena for marginalized groups seeking inclusion and respect.

Significant attention has been paid to the participation of feminist and ethnocultural minority groups in Canada’s high-profile and relatively recent battles over the ill-fated 1987-90 Meech Lake Accord and rejected Charlottetown amendment package of 1991-92, but more still needs to be said.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, what Peter Russell calls Canada’s “constitutional odyssey” also includes such landmark struggles as the entrenchment of the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Canada’s mid-century transformation into a welfare state, and the 1960s confrontations over multiculturalism and dualism.<sup>3</sup> Social movements were key participants in these events, and this involvement merits closer analysis as well. Thus, focusing on national organizations representing women, working-class people, and ethnocultural minorities, this book studies the history of Canadian constitutional politics from a social movement standpoint, starting with the Rowell-Sirois hearings of the Great Depression and concluding with the parliamentary hearings prior to the Charlottetown Accord’s convulsive referendum defeat.

The constitutional malaise of the post-Charlottetown era makes a strange window on the broader record of social movement involvement.<sup>4</sup> For much of the twentieth century, a combination of right-wing

provincial opposition and Ottawa's reluctance to fight jurisdictional battles on behalf of outsider groups prevented equality seekers from establishing even their most elementary policy goals as significant topics of legislative discussion. Thus, when the attention of elites turned at key points to the constitutional arena, social movements responded not with cynicism or resignation but by welcoming the emergence of a venue for projects that normal politics seemed to preclude. The development of two pillars of Canadian citizenship in particular exemplified this dynamic: social programs for poor and working people, and equality rights and civil liberties for the marginalized and oppressed.

A unique feature of constitutional politics helped amplify traditionally silenced voices more generally. As Alan Cairns points out, the ultimate constitutional question – which follows from the constitution's role as an authoritative centre of nation-shaping rules and cues – is this: "Who are we as a people?"<sup>5</sup> When constitutional politics asked this question, the ordinarily excluded asked back: "What about *our* role in the country? What about *our* histories, contributions, and claims?" This dynamic created political space for social movement aspirations and ultimately made the polity more receptive to previously neglected identities and complaints.

Thus, Canada's constitutional debate can help us to more closely examine key aspects of social movement struggle. The constitutional record reveals movements wrestling with a fundamental aspect of democratic politics: the use of civic dialogue to shape the perceptions of non-supporters. For resolute Marxists, unlettered trade unionists, dedicated feminists, and uneasy ethnocultural minorities, constitutional participation meant engaging interlocutors whose identities and affiliations could scarcely have been more different. At the same time, the constitution's role as an authoritative transmitter of civic messages and cues provided a platform from which groups seeking inclusion and respect could reach the political community as a whole. How equality seekers grappled with these opportunities and exigencies is the focus of this book.

To some, constitutional politics was the indulgent diversion of misguided elites, a world of "pretentious high-mindedness" and "words for the pleasure of words."<sup>6</sup> But from the vantage point of social movements, it was something else: it offered citizens the chance to force onto the national agenda some of the most serious problems of their day – unemployment and poverty; state repression and harassment; disfranchisement and internment; and the myriad forms of discrimination visited on women and racialized minorities.



These were not usually the issues on which dominant groups wanted to focus. Indeed, when citizens tried to make these complaints the focal points of civic discussion, authorities often replied with disrespectful diversions that aimed to foreclose even the possibility of consideration or debate – evasive and trivializing digressions, intimidating attacks, and other assorted signals to “mind one’s place.” These tactics, which remained common into the 1970s and were occasionally seen during the 1980s’ Meech Lake debates, made it difficult for marginalized groups to articulate their political concerns. Equality seekers responded by becoming more attuned to issues of voice, status, and prestige – to the question of honourable inclusion in dominant representations and understandings of the Canadian political community. This book explores the origins and development of this response in the Canadian constitutional arena.

The book also describes the impact of this response on Canadian constitutionalism. The entrenchment of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the development and constitutional enshrinement of official multiculturalism, and, more diffusely, the creation of a more meaningful national citizenship through the construction of a welfare state – these innovations had an importance beyond the immediately practical or merely legal. They infused Canadian constitutionalism with new currents of meaning and purpose and in this way helped movements to pursue their often ignored aspirations and concerns.

The significant venues featured in this book are parliamentary committees and Royal Commissions on key issues of constitutional change between 1938 and 1992. The movements discussed are rooted in both the traditional left and the new social movements; they include organizations based in trade unionism, socialism, feminism, antiracism, and multiculturalism.

Canadian women’s movements are represented by two main groups: the National Council of Women of Canada (NCW), and its more recent counterpart, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC). This study also includes the leading national organizations representing Canadians of African, Chinese, East Indian, Italian, Japanese, Jewish, Polish, and Ukrainian ancestry. The traditional-left groups examined are the main national trade-union umbrella organizations and the Communist Party of Canada (CP). Although the Party is now irrelevant, its significance in the past and its dogged focus on questions of class warrant its inclusion in a study of organizations representing marginalized constituencies.

By contrast, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and the New Democratic Party are omitted because their basic concern – to draw

electoral support from across class lines – led to a much more varied focus. Social welfare organizations are excluded because, except for the relatively recent case of the National Anti-Poverty Organization, which participated only sporadically in the constitutional arena, they tend to represent social welfare as a cause rather than poor people as a constituency. In addition, they have generally been led by social work advocates rather than by poor people themselves. For their part, lesbian and gay organizations do not appear because they made only one formal presentation to a parliamentary committee on constitutional change between 1938 and 1992; thus, there is not enough lesbian and gay participation as such for me to make meaningful generalizations.<sup>7</sup>

Also excluded from coverage are organizations representing indigenous peoples and francophone Quebecers, whose struggles cannot adequately be treated in a study that focuses on groups seeking inclusion in an overarching Canadian citizenship. These actors have instead tended to search for group-differentiated arrangements to honour their historically anchored national claims. However, the Quebec-based League for Women's Rights (LWR), which appeared before the Rowell-Sirois Commission to advocate the enfranchisement of Quebec women (who could not vote provincially until 1940), does make a brief appearance. Its suffragist focus provides insights into the broader history of women's constitutional engagement that the temporal parameters of this book would otherwise preclude.

### **Symbolic Capital, the Citizens' Constitution, and New Politics Theory**

Although recognition struggles are often seen as campaigns for self-esteem and cultural authenticity, this book takes a more materialist approach.<sup>8</sup> It treats recognition as a problem of symbolic capital, which is sociologist and cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu's term for a potent social product produced in fields of unequal power.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike the notion of social capital popularized by the political scientist Robert Putnam, Bourdieu's term shares some of the critical bite of Marx's conception.<sup>10</sup> Evoking Marx's view of capital as a technology of exploitation, Bourdieu stresses that advantages and attributes such as network membership and "good taste" operate as bases of sociopolitical power, silencing some agents while privileging others. These two examples are instances of what Bourdieu calls social and cultural capital, respectively; along with Marx's economic capital, they qualify as species of symbolic capital whenever their tendency to function as power goes unrecognized.<sup>11</sup>

This emphasis on the “symbolic” in symbolic capital highlights the role of processes of symbolization and representation in securing relations of deference, naturalizing privilege, and masking the pursuit of self-interest. These processes are politically significant because they help actors exercise powers that might otherwise be blocked or contested. Perhaps most notably, therefore, Bourdieu emphasizes the concept of symbolic capital as a theoretical corrective for one-sidedly economic approaches to inequality and power – approaches that sometimes constitute the symbolic as “noneconomic, and therefore disinterested,” “as lacking concrete or material effect, in short, disinterested but also useless.”<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, Bourdieu’s concept emphasizes that all but the most directly and immediately coercive instances of power depend on symbolically mediated processes of social interaction and exchange – processes that are also a key focus of this book.

Symbolic capital is often conferred by institutions. Framed as matters of established rules and procedures, institutionally sanctioned acts and discourses assume an aura of propriety that tends to mitigate potential appearances of arbitrariness or self-interest. Thus, as social theorist John Thompson states in his commentary on Bourdieu’s work: “Individuals [can] possess more or less ... [symbolic] capital in so far as they are in a position to mobilize more or less of the authority delegated by an institution.”<sup>13</sup> This brief account suggests a useful schematic perspective on the constitutional participation of Canadian social movements.

In Canada as in many other countries, women, working-class people, and ethnocultural minorities have often experienced profound disrespect. Stigmatized as categorically inferior, they have been systematically denied economic, educational, and social opportunities and occasionally even singled out for legally sanctioned demonization and abuse. At the same time, they have faced profound barriers to raising these problems in the political arena; their claims and indeed their very voices have been dismissed routinely as out of place, irrelevant, or unacceptably idiosyncratic. Over the course of the twentieth century, equality-seeking movements sought to confront these elementary problems of voice by struggling to change traditional distributions of respect – that is, by striving to make symbolic capital work for rather than against them. In the Canadian context, constitutional recognition became an especially valued source of symbolic capital – of sanctioned, “in place” discourses for bringing long silenced concerns to the attention of an indifferent and sometimes hostile polity.

This book’s focus on constitutional symbolism also draws on the work of Alan Cairns, whose pioneering writings on post-Charter constitutional

politics mark a signal break with Canadian political science's earlier lack of interest in the politics of recognition. This work – and particularly its interpretive response to the 1980s controversies over the Meech Lake Accord – has established the constitution's new importance as “the central arena within which the groups of an increasingly plural society ... vie with each other for recognition and acceptance”: Canada's “supreme instrument of social recognition and its denial.”<sup>14</sup>

Most importantly, Cairns suggests that the identification of particular axes of social difference in the 1982 Charter, such as gender and ethnic origin, has made “Charter Canadians” out of those who value their newfound recognition and rights.<sup>15</sup> Yet the architects of the Meech Lake Accord seemed unaware of this transformed constitutional orientation. In proposing to subordinate Charter rights to a prior clause recognizing Quebec as a “distinct society” – a clause they sought to entrench through the traditional elitist methods of executive federalism – the first ministers failed to grasp what Cairns identifies as the elementary political reality of the new Charter-identifying groups: “The constitution that gives them status matters to them.”<sup>16</sup> Cairns' work has stimulated interest in social movements among Canadian political scientists. His account of the constitution's contemporary role as a source of symbolic recognition, known as the Citizens' Constitution theory, has expanded the traditional parameters of the field and prompted a generalized disciplinary awareness of the “new constitutional players” and “new Canadian constitutional culture.”<sup>17</sup>

Of course, Cairns' theory has also left a number of gaps to fill. Some writers have begun to explore the broader constitutional histories of particular equality-seeking movements, showing that social movements have pursued concerns beyond the “Charter Canadian” preoccupations emphasized by Cairns.<sup>18</sup> For their part, scholars dissatisfied with the temporal and spatial restrictions of the Citizens' Constitution theory have investigated the origins and meaning of the new movements' emphasis on recognition – an important emphasis throughout the modern world. For many such scholars, American political scientist Ronald Inglehart's New Politics theory provides precisely the broader comparative and historical perspective required.

Drawing on a sophisticated long-term project of international opinion research, New Politics theory has charted the sources and contours of a long-term transformation in Western political culture.<sup>19</sup> Inglehart calls this transformation a “culture shift”: a constellation of far-reaching changes in values stemming from the increased peace and prosperity enjoyed in many nations since the Second World War.<sup>20</sup> These changes

have enabled growing numbers of citizens to set aside the materialist preoccupations of physical safety and economic security that dominated earlier eras, in favour of what New Politics writers call a “postmaterialist” focus on esteem, belonging, and the overall quality of life.<sup>21</sup>

Many Canadian scholars, including F.L. Morton, Rainer Knopff, Neil Nevitte, and Ian Brodie, have thus found in New Politics what Cairns’ approach lacks: a broader account of the sources and aspirations of today’s politics of identity and recognition.<sup>22</sup> The New Politics perspective has been especially useful in helping situate the social movement dimension of Canada’s recent constitutional experience as a particularly sharp manifestation of more subtle, long-term changes affecting political culture and behaviour in all of the advanced democracies.

More recently, and looking beyond the constitutional arena, Nevitte’s influential *The Decline of Deference* shows how the changes in values associated with postmaterialism have fostered an “elite-challenging” ethic that is shaking Canada’s traditional practices of brokerage and elite accommodation to their core.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Morton and Knopff’s *The Charter Revolution* suggests that advantages of education and class location have helped newer generations of activists to bring New Politics values to bear on the courts.<sup>24</sup> These and other New Politics–influenced works have contributed significantly to our understanding of Canadian social movements. As this book will go on to suggest, however, the New Politics approach is in some respects a vision in need of a corrective. I will outline this concern after looking more closely at the vision itself.

### **New Politics: A Closer Look**

New Politics theory addresses a remarkable array of themes, including the changed distribution of political skills, shifting notions of left and right, the increased protest potential of Western publics, and transformations in the bases of party choice. In several influential works over the past three decades, Inglehart has elaborated the social-psychological model behind the New Politics approach in three major ways.

First, he has advanced the scarcity hypothesis, which posits that “one places the greatest subjective value on those things that are in relatively short supply.”<sup>25</sup> The scarcity hypothesis suggests that postwar environments of economic security and personal safety have heightened people’s interest in goods that prosperity and peace cannot on their own provide, such as free expression and a clean environment. Second, he has argued that changes in the distribution of political skills have made citizens better placed to pursue their civic goals than were members of earlier generations. In particular, he has noted that advances in access

to higher education have enabled more and more people to acquire cognitive and communications skills that help them to articulate and amplify their demands. Thus, New Politics scholars link the postwar increase in “unconventional participation” – such as petitions, protest marches, boycotts, and sit-ins – to the heightened political literacy that university and college graduates tend to enjoy.<sup>26</sup>

The third and core element of New Politics theory is its emphasis on a shift toward postmaterialist values. This emphasis draws on the psychologist Abraham Maslow’s notion of a needs hierarchy, which distinguishes between the “lower-order” physiological needs essential to human survival and the “higher-order” psychological and aesthetic concerns of the sort that individuals tend to emphasize once basic security has been achieved.<sup>27</sup> Postmaterial value change is thus said to occur when large numbers of people begin moving up the needs hierarchy – a process that according to Inglehart’s research began in earnest in most Western countries in the 1960s. To be clear, New Politics does not assert a simplistic correspondence between changed economic conditions and shifts in individual values. It holds, rather, that a postmaterial change in values involves a long-term process of intergenerational population replacement, which occurs as successive cohorts come to political maturity after having been raised in conditions of prosperity and peace.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, New Politics theorists use the notion of postmaterial value change to illuminate conflicts that are reshaping political landscapes around the world. Material disputes over questions of public order and the distribution of wealth remain; but at the same time, new, postmaterial questions of belonging, esteem, and quality of life have come to the fore. The key political actors in this process are new social movements; just as trade unions and social democratic parties in earlier phases of industrialism articulated unrealized material needs, so movements such as feminism, environmentalism, and multiculturalism are highlighting unmet postmaterial concerns today.<sup>29</sup>

This contrast between materialism and postmaterialism has similarities to a European body of work, New Social Movement theory, which also traces a shift from an industrial society focusing on class politics toward a post-industrial society emphasizing a politics of self-realization and identity.<sup>30</sup> However, because the European theories are designed specifically to counter Marxist understandings of social development and human action, they speak less directly to those political and academic contexts in which Marxism’s impact has been less intense.<sup>31</sup> For its part, an American approach, Resource Mobilization theory, shares

the New Politics emphasis on how postwar affluence has enhanced the availability of goods and skills that help movements to proliferate.<sup>32</sup> What distinguishes New Politics from Resource Mobilization theory is the argument of the former that new social movements reflect and promote changes in political culture stemming from the spread of post-materialist values.

Critics often raise methodological questions that emerge from New Politics theory's quantitative dimension. They ask, for example: "How are we properly to discern materialist from postmaterialist value orientations among survey respondents?" and "Do Inglehart's survey questions tap values, or do they tap attitudes and beliefs?"<sup>33</sup> A different set of disputes turns on whether postmaterialist values arise primarily from formative experiences of security (as Inglehart contends) or from increased access to higher education or other non-economic sources.<sup>34</sup> Finally, critics argue that postmaterialism can fuel a variety of political orientations, and not just the New Left outlook on which Inglehart and his colleagues tend to focus.<sup>35</sup> This book does not address these debates.

This book also respects as important the core empirical findings of New Politics survey research. This research suggests that support for postmaterialist priorities tends to be correlated with rising levels of education and economic security and that individuals who back causes such as feminism and antiracism tend to support these priorities.<sup>36</sup> It is no surprise, then, that this book's story is in many ways consistent with a New Politics approach. It suggests, as does New Politics, that the long postwar boom provided a context in which social movements could take root and grow; that the rise of movements such as feminism and multiculturalism was accompanied by a proliferation of symbolically focused struggles over esteem and belonging; and that these changes altered the character of political conflict, in particular by changing the shape and voice of the left.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Politics of Respect and the Instrumental Significance of Symbolic Goods**

Yet the chapters that follow also highlight themes that fit less easily with the New Politics account. Empirically, for example, they show that mid-century socialist groups and trade unions were keenly interested in symbolic questions of honour and dignity. By the same token, feminist and antiracist groups often prioritized distributive concerns such as equal pay, opportunity in employment, and access to social programs. This difference regarding how to characterize movements' priorities is partly

a matter of emphasis; a more in-depth focus on actual movement participation will inevitably capture nuances that an opinion research lens tends to miss.

Nevertheless, the book's emphasis on the mixed and overlapping character of movement priorities is a useful reminder that the materialism–postmaterialism distinction – a staple in textbook accounts of new social movements – can easily be pushed too far.<sup>38</sup> As Miriam Smith observes, for example, the postmaterialist label often obscures the fact that many new social movements, such as feminism, antiracism, and lesbian and gay rights, represent groups with “strong material interests in equality.”<sup>39</sup> Their focus on physical threats such as forced childbirth, spousal assault, and hate crime adds warrant for further caution in this respect.

However, this book's purpose in questioning aspects of the New Politics approach is not to pile up illustrations in support of “the small academic cottage industry that has grown up around the project of proving that [the new social movements] are not really new.”<sup>40</sup> In focusing historically on the participation of Canadian social movements, it is concerned more positively with illuminating Canadians' constitutional struggles over esteem and belonging. At the same time, by engaging critically with the postmaterialism thesis, it hopes to make a modest contribution to the larger scholarly project of analyzing and interpreting the social movement politics of recognition and respect.

To this end, I suggest that the postmaterialism thesis overemphasizes two features of contemporary recognition struggles in ways that tend to obscure other, equally important aspects. The first feature is the link between postwar prosperity and the politics of esteem and belonging; in New Politics scholarship, this emphasis tends one-sidedly to depict new movements and their supporters as the lucky beneficiaries of affluence. Second, the theory's classification of esteem and belonging as “higher-order” needs frames new movements' concerns as esoteric departures from more comprehensible preoccupations. These emphases combine to provide an unduly partial and at times misleading narrative of the politics of recognition and respect.

This narrative features prominently in Canadian laments over the “problems of governability” in post-Charter constitutional politics.<sup>41</sup> Nevitte's account in *The Decline of Deference* is one example; by linking “the turmoil facing Canadians since the early 1980's” to the rise of postmaterialist movements “not filled with those who suffer from any personal deprivation,” it portrays the movement concerns involved as somewhat trivial.<sup>42</sup> More directly, an emphasis on the “higher-order” character of postmaterialist aspirations paints new movements' objec-



tives as cultural cum emotional desires, in contrast to more evidently rational concerns. Thus, Janet Ajzenstat asserts that “the demands of ‘new politics’ groups are less amenable to conciliation through the bargaining and trade-offs that are a feature of quantitative who-gets-what-when-and-how politics ... New politics adds a further dimension of intolerance to the contestation in the arena of constitutional debate.”<sup>43</sup> Leslie Pal’s discussion of the “sorry history of Canadian constitutionalism” puts the postmaterialism concept to similar use: “Citizens and policy-makers are willing to compromise on material interests, but ways of life are intrinsically more precious and less negotiable. The result is new difficulties ... a certain prickliness on the part of significant segments of the public who feel that public policy should not merely confer benefits but also afford dignity, recognition, and support.”<sup>44</sup>

In the Canadian constitutional context, “postmaterialism” has in this way become a shorthand designation for the symbolic and emotional aspirations of a privileged activist minority whose struggles leave upset in their wake. Indeed, in some uses the term itself is self-evidently negative, as in Anthony Peacock’s “anti-majoritarian ... post-materialist ... constitutional cognoscenti,” or Knopff and Morton’s “postmaterialist ... knowledge class ... fatally removed from ... the reality inhabited by ordinary men and women.”<sup>45</sup> While obviously polemical, these usages reflect the concept’s more general tendency to frame movements such as feminism and multiculturalism as “lifestyle” movements in search of “self-fulfillment,” but not as political campaigns for employment opportunity or freedom from violence.<sup>46</sup>

This book is not a critique of New Politics theory; its aim is more modestly corrective. Nor does it suggest that Canada’s social movement struggles have been salutary in every possible respect and that criticisms are therefore inevitably unwarranted. It seeks instead to illuminate dynamics and problems that the notion of postmaterialism tends to obscure. Focusing historically on the constitutional participation of Canadian social movements, it explores the significance that esteem and belonging tend to assume when disrespected groups seek to focus political discussion on their traditionally neglected needs. The post-materialism lens misses this significance by taking an exclusively expressive view of esteem and belonging. According to this view, esteem and belonging are aesthetic, cultural, and psychological goods valued for the intrinsic satisfactions they bring. Of course, the expressive view has considerable general validity; the emotional and psychological importance of esteem and belonging indeed makes them ends-in-themselves. However, researchers must also attend to their instrumental significance

if they are to understand the problems, motivations, and achievements of equality-seeking movements.

Thus, by emphasizing the instrumental dimension, the chapters that follow foreground what the New Politics approach tends to miss. Highlighting the practical and political aspects of esteem and belonging through a series of concrete cases and examples, they show how problems of stigmatization and disrespect presented marginalized groups with significant problems of security and safety. Furthermore, they show how groups seeking to confront these problems in the constitutional field became increasingly engaged in struggles for recognition and respect. From this account emerges the main message of the book: social movements have not participated in Canadian constitutional politics as the fortunate postmaterialists of New Politics theory, but rather as “misrecognized materialists” – as groups seeking esteem and belonging in order to focus their political community on traditionally neglected needs for security and safety. To these struggles we now turn.