

# Lawn and Order: The Politics of Horti-Culture in Toronto

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## ABSTRACT

The contemporary ‘lawn aesthetic’ for urban and suburban residential outdoor space in North America has a long history which connects it directly to the emergence of industrial capitalism and modern forms of power. This history is explored and the usefulness of idealist analyses of modern power (Foucault, Bauman) is tested. It is argued that modern reform movements that promoted residential gardening are part of a larger strategy to ensure the material bases of wealth creation through industrial labour exploitation and these ‘benevolent’ reforms cannot be understood apart from their instrumental and class-based motivations.

For a couple of years, I have been working in different capacities with a cross-disciplinary team interested in the public health aspects of residential gardening practices, particularly as they concern the use of pesticides. My first engagement with the topic came when I was asked to write a literature review on whether or not legal restrictions were necessary to get people to reduce their outdoor use of herbicides and insecticides. This work was done in the context of the City of Toronto’s Pesticide By-law, passed in 2003. In following the trails laid out by other authors, I came upon the fascinating connection between gardening in Canada and the Social Gospel, City Beautiful and other social reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The association of gardening with morality and social duty in the past shed light on the rather curious fact that contemporary North American home-owners also often reported that keeping their property looking a certain way was a social and moral duty (Robbins & Sharp 2003).

More recently, I worked on a research project in Toronto that involved interviewing members of non-Canadian-born linguistic groups (Spanish and Cantonese speakers) to see if they thought about their outdoor space the same way that Anglo-Canadians and Americans did. Surprisingly, most of them did manage their outdoor space in ways that could be considered fairly typical. I was struck by their use of adjectives like ‘clean,’ ‘tidy’ and

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‘neat’ to describe desirable outdoor space and their reference to ‘working’ in and on this space and decided to take on the task of writing up this part of our results.

In a research meeting, I said that this part of the material fascinated me and one of the team members suggested that the fact that non-Anglo, non-Canadian born residents might use a similar set of values as other native-born Canadians was a simple matter of “Mary Douglas” – her name standing for the concept of pollution as outlined in her most famous book, *Purity and Danger* (1984). As I travelled home after the meeting, I had two thoughts. The first was, yes, of course, it’s a simple matter of structural oppositions, of things acceptable in the domestic space and things that are not – neat carpets of lawn are good, messy collections of weeds are not. My second thought was that something critical was missing in this analysis, to wit the politics of culture: maybe all systems of values can be understood in terms of symbolic oppositions in the fashion of Claude Levi-Strauss or Mary Douglas, but who determines the content of the oppositions and who benefits from these determinations? What becomes acceptable as ‘clean’ or as a reflection of social duty observed?

Indeed, while Douglas devoted most of *Purity and Danger* to what she called the ‘expressive’ level where ideas about pollution “are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order,” she acknowledged that pollution ideas work at the instrumental level too; as she puts it, “the whole universe is harnessed to men’s attempts to force one another into good citizenship” (1984:3). Citizenship is an expressly political status and ‘good’ citizenship is at once an object of definitional struggle and productive of material consequences. The politics behind what is apparently a product of cultural beliefs and values are why people work so hard to make a space literally based on dirt ‘clean,’ why they will happily spray toxins around their homes, pets and children for the sake of it, and why city and provincial governments in Canada first mandated ‘clean’ (meaning weed-free) farms, fields, ditches and yards and why now, having been so successful in convincing people that weed and pest-free spaces are desirable – even obligatory – have to create laws to stop people from using health-threatening pesticides to achieve them. ‘Culture’ is political and modern horti-culture, especially so.

This paper is a first effort to address these questions in the Toronto context by drawing together historical research and contemporary interview evidence. The fact that many themes have endured throughout the modern period suggests that much more is at stake than horticultural aesthetics.

## Some Material to Think With

I use the term ‘modern’ intentionally to suggest that a concern to control residential outdoor space has a history that is surprisingly, perhaps, coincidental with what many writers would term the ‘modern’ period – that being roughly from the mid to late 18th century to the present. I will recount some of this history very briefly, using a few quotations to illustrate the

uniformity and continuity of sentiments throughout this period with regard to the cultivation of outdoor residential space in the Anglo world of Britain, Canada and the U.S. I will address three areas of interest: the aesthetic standards of ‘neat’ front yards, weeds and the association between gardening and moral work.

### *Neat, Green Lawns*

While we tend to take the existence of lawns for granted, they are a relatively recent fashion that dates back only as far as the 18th century when English rural manor-owners used lawns to mimic the views produced in Italian landscape painting. This pastoral aesthetic was adopted more widely first by middle-class British and wealthy North Americans in the mid-19th century (Robbins and Sharp, 2003; Slocum and Shern, 1997). At a material level, widespread use of lawns in small residential settings had to await the industrial manufacture of the lawn mower in 1830 to take the place of a flock of sheep or hired hands to crop the grass. In North America, the lawn ideal did not become common among the ‘middle classes’ until industrialization – which occurred on a large scale much later here (1870 onward in Toronto for example) – had produced a sufficient population of middle-class people who could afford it. A selection of quotations shows this historical progression.

Writing of the new English suburban middle class in the period 1780-1850, Davidoff and Hall note that:

Gardens were now seen as an extension of the home...The main feature of the middle-class garden was the lawn...bordered by shrubberies, flower beds, [and] fruit trees...the garden provided a strong visual confirmation of the middle-class ideal. (1987:370-71)

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the lawn ideal spread along with preferences for single-family suburban residences as marks of ‘suburban respectability’ and class status (Feagan and Ripmeester 1999). Writing of the U.S., Jackson notes that “pitched roofs, tended lawns, shuttered windows and separate rooms all spoke of communities that valued the tradition of the family...the pride of ownership” (1985:71-72). In Canada, the first federally subsidized suburb for the working class in Ottawa in the 1920s was designed expressly to provide an ‘ample garden’ around single family houses (Delaney 1991:160). A 1969 *Life Magazine* article captures how important the well-cared for lawn had become in the post-WWII, North American suburban world:

Let a man drink or default, cheat on his taxes or cheat on his wife, and the community will find forgiveness in its heart. But let him fail to keep his front lawn mowed, and to be seen doing it, and those hearts will turn to stone. (Feagan and Ripmeester 1999:620)

In summarizing a focus group in Toronto in 2003, researchers concluded that:

the condition of the lawn, especially at the front of the house, was of consequence, because it reflected on the owner. Lush, green, beautifully main-

tained lawns were seen to add to the overall appearance of the house and street. (Toronto Public Health 2004:14)

From our own research, we asked people to compare their lawns and gardens with others and got responses like “I am always the first one to mow the lawn. I think I keep my lawn nicely,” “everyone wants to maintain their gardens and have them looking nice, they want to have them looking better, like a competition,” and “well, to be frank, among [my friends], I’m the one that has the best garden. And that’s because I take care of it.” The lawn continues to perform the job of signifying middle class respectability in contemporary urban settings.

### *Weeds*

As Mary Douglas so rightly pointed out, strict purity in any realm is “highly uncomfortable or it leads into contradiction” (1984:163), and so it is with the image of the perfect garden and lawn; it is rarely achievable for very long in the real world of plants and animals that fail to recognize symbolic boundaries. Weeds do not get much attention from anyone in the Anglo-European world until after 1500, and then the interest is agricultural rather than horticultural (Timmons 2005). However, with the extension of horticultural interest among a growing population of urban and suburban property owners, weeds become the subject of municipal legislation and social reform. Weeds are often and consistently anthropomorphized as having evil or hostile intent toward the garden and the gardener. Some examples make this clear.

Evans notes that in Ontario in the 1860s, around the time of the first weed-specific legislation in Canada, The Canada Thistle Act of Upper Canada:

members of Ontario’s agricultural community were regularly portraying weeds as foreign aggressors who were rapidly wresting farmland away from their human adversaries. Individual farmers were cast as helpless in the face of this evil onslaught and hope for the future was pinned on a general call to arms enforced by the legal might of the state. (2002:67)

Analyzing urban weed control laws in St. Louis and Washington at the turn of the 20th century, Falck concludes:

Weed control advocates in cities believed that reshaping the nature of the urban fringe could create boundaries between healthy safe spaces and filthy, dangerous places; between wealthy people and meager folk; between city vegetation and wild flora; and between an ordered future and an unkempt past... The triumph of weed control was not the eradication of weeds from cities; the triumph was alienating weeds from the urban consciousness and obscuring the nature of the city. (2002:624)

In 1996, the City of Toronto prosecuted a woman for having a ‘naturalized’ garden in the front of her Beaches home based on her having violated the weed height by-law. She ap-

pealed to the Supreme Court of Ontario who ruled that the weed by-law was an infringement on her freedom of expression. Justice Fairgrieve's wording is interesting:

The objective of creating neat, conventionally pleasant residential yards does not warrant a complete denial of the right to express a differing view of man's relationship with nature. As between a total restriction of naturalistic gardens and causing some offence to those people who consider them ugly or inconsiderate of others' sensibilities, some *offence* must be tolerated. (Bell v. Toronto [1996] O. J. No. 31 46, emphasis added)

From our own research with Spanish and Cantonese speakers, people reported 'fighting' with weeds, weeds 'attacking' their garden, and dandelions 'infesting' space. One woman summed it up nicely: "The main thing I want to learn about is weed control. If I can master that, I will be satisfied." Weeds continue to be seen as 'enemies' of the hard working gardener.

### *Work and Morality*

Well-kept gardens, which require constant surveillance and hard work, have long been a sign of moral rectitude in the Anglo-Christian world. During the 19th century in Britain and then toward the end of that century and the beginning of the 20th in North America, gardening one's residential space came to be viewed as a social or civic duty, tying nicely with Douglas's observation about the instrumental function of ideas of purity and pollution in enforcing 'good citizenship.' Indeed, the garden came to be seen as proof of the moral fibre of the home-owner and sometimes, as with children, humans were seen to require the same 'work' as gardens to flourish. Significantly, in industrial and industrializing cities facing the challenges of rapid population growth and the poverty of industrial workers, gardening became one of the instruments in urban reform and beautification and was sometimes also seen to be a tool for moral reform of the poor. These connections are made clear in the examples that follow.

In 1834, the Toronto Horticultural Society was founded by the elite of the city "to ameliorate the wants of the humble, and [to contribute] to the gratification of the exalted." When Allan Gardens was opened to the public in 1860, one of the founders of the society remarked that the society worked to promote "a new source of healthful recreation and rational enjoyment for their fellow citizens" (Crawford 1997: 127, 134). Later in the 19th century, the City Beautiful Movement grew out of the White City exhibit at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 and the Garden Cities of England campaign inspired in part by William Morris of Arts and Crafts fame. In Canada, the movement relied on local horticultural and civic improvement societies to promote the ideals of "municipal parks, tree-lined streets, well-tended front lawns and public plantings" (Von Baeyer 2007). City Beautiful dovetailed with another Canadian initiative, the Social Gospel. Social Gospel promoted the idea that salvation could be had in this lifetime through social reform. Social reform in turn and in part, depended on a beautified public realm. In that way, tend-

ing one's garden was directly tied to civic duty to the society as a whole. Chen refers to this phase as 'hortisocial' because of the centrality of gardening to so many movements and says "the civilizing mission...was then analogous to turning jungles (both foreign and home, racial and the working class) into gardens that were rationally designed but more importantly under gentle but firm control" (2003:465-66). These public initiatives have waxed and waned through the 20th century but in 2005, the City of Toronto convened a "Clean and Beautiful City Roundtable," and CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design<sup>1</sup>) has become widespread across North America in the last 30 years (Blomley 2004), demonstrating the continuing relevance of these ideas.

In the contemporary setting, participants in a Niagara Region study reacted negatively to 'naturalized' front yards where plant heights and types are not tightly controlled. One explained that:

If the lawn looks bad, it will look like we are on welfare, or a person has no money. It makes the whole neighbourhood look bad. I hate [the alternative yard]. The people are lazy. (Feagan and Ripmeester 1999:629)

In Toronto, people have commented that taking care of the lawn "is not fun work, it's necessary work" and many of our participants likewise identified gardening with work and nice gardens with 'hard work' and 'dedication.' The connection between morality, hard work and yard work is clearly still relevant.

## Preliminary Analysis

Horticulture around the domestic urban and suburban residence in countries like Britain, Canada and the U.S. evidences a number of continuous threads of meaning including associations with moral work and social duty, notions of cleanliness and of defending public space against weeds-as-aggressors. These ideas appear first in Britain but quickly get transplanted to North America and gain widespread currency with industrial urban expansion and the spread of social reform movements to address the ensuing chaos of densely populated, working class, industrial cities.

Some of the questions that I am starting to think about are: Why are residential lawns and gardens quite literally the sites of so much public and private practical and symbolic work over such a long period of time? What is the consequence when only some uses of outdoor space are deemed socially and morally acceptable? Why have these uses been mandated through laws and other forms of social constraint aimed at reproducing 'good citizens'? Why are weeds more than 'plants out of place' following Douglas, but are also frequently used to represent people 'out of place' like the working poor, foreign born and other 'dangerous classes' during the period of intense industrialization in North America? How do contemporary newcomers to Canada absorb these ideas and come to take them for granted?

I have begun my analysis by considering the ‘coincidence’ of gardening as a practice among the emerging middle classes of the Anglo world with modernity itself.

The conceptual tool that seems to fit best with the material is that of governmentality. The timing is right, the sentiments of reformers and governors fit with Foucault’s ideas of the ‘conduct of conduct,’ concern for bio-politics or governing populations, and the expansion of both state and non-state expert power/knowledge into social reproduction through ‘pastoral’ techniques (Foucault 1994). In short, it is tempting to think of the gardening complex as a governmental discourse about how people should live.

Though writing before governmentality captured the sociological imagination, Zygmunt Bauman (1987) suggests that modernity itself is a ‘garden culture.’ In delineating modernity and postmodernity and the kind of intellectual practices that characterize each, Bauman argues that modernity was a process of converting ‘wild cultures’ into ‘garden cultures.’ This in turn, calls into being a new governing role, the gardener, to replace the older role of gamekeeper. This shift starts in the 1500s and is completed by the 1800s in France, from which it becomes “the pattern to be coveted by, or to be forced upon the rest of the world” (Bauman 1987:51). In the end, pre-modern, popular culture was destroyed leaving “the poor and the lowly incapable of self-preservation and dependent on the administrative initiatives of trained professionals” like “‘social’ scientists specializing in converting and cultivating human souls and bodies” (Bauman 1987:67). Bauman, like Foucault, focuses on the writings of philosophers, observers and experts to reconstruct modernity. His use of ‘garden culture’ requiring expert ‘tending’ and ‘cultivation’ is not very different from Foucault’s governmentality. Both are idealist constructs that explain the emergence of more or less extreme forms of social control as the unfolding of new ideas about the role of government and ‘governors’ whether official or academic.

My problem with these formulations of new patterns and techniques of governing is that while they are about governing and ‘power,’ they actually skim over the real question about modern power and that is, why did it come about when it did? To answer this question requires, in turn, a very careful look at who benefits from the use of power/knowledge discourses. Bauman, to be fair, gives a hint of this when he argues that the shift to gardening from gamekeeping was necessary because the pre-modern European peasantry were no longer able to produce the yield demanded by the ruling class by following their own ‘timeless habits’ and had to be ‘cultivated’ and ‘tended’ by a new knowledgeable class of experts (1987:52). This is the part Foucault does not address in his idealist model (Dupont and Pearce 2001) and that gets lost in many contemporary applications of the governmentality concept. Scholars using the idea seem to think they are addressing politics by talking about power, but without a material base to explain why this form of power and not another, they are stuck with Mary Douglas’s expressive function and lose sight of the instrumental. To quote Eleanor Leacock, we should not forget “as academics tend to do (if they ever learned it in the first place), that oppression and exploitation by sex, race, and class are fundamental in the contemporary world, and that theories which ignore this reality are meaningless if not downright destructive” (1981:5). Attributing modern techniques of power, including

apparently ‘benevolent’ reforms and improvements, to pastoral states and social science experts while ignoring the key role played by both in enabling capitalism to thrive by not destroying the capacity of labour to reproduce itself – as it has been on the verge of doing since industrialization – is meaningless as a form of critical engagement.

Turning back to the subject at hand, the emergence of gardening as a moral and necessary activity in modern North American cities and suburbs, what can be said of the material and class basis of these horti-cultural practices and values?

The North American pattern of a single family dwelling on its own plot of land, surrounded by garden spaces, and significantly, fronted by garden and lawn, emerges as part of a whole package of ideas about privacy; the primacy of the nuclear family as the site of reproduction of labour and the appropriate gender roles to be nurtured therein; and, public health and civic duty to the moral fibre of the nation. Interwoven among these threads are very clear concerns about managing the working classes in growing industrial cities.

To take the example of Toronto, the population increased five-fold to half a million between 1881 and 1921 while the value of manufacturing increased by 500% between 1900 and 1921, making that sector the largest employer in the city. The bulk of the new population came from European in-migration, largely of British origin. Housing did not keep pace with the rush, forcing poorer workers to become or host lodgers in ever more crowded living spaces. In the downtown core, people were building ‘rear cottages’ or shacks behind the houses that fronted streets forcing many families to share limited outdoor privies. In the latter part of the 19th century, typhoid, diphtheria and scarlet fever continued to claim many lives as a result of the absence of sewers, running water and housing standards. Toronto’s labour force first resisted mechanization with tailor and shoemaker strikes (1850-1870s) and then began to agitate for the right to unionize and limit the workday to nine hours in 1871-1872. During the period of intense expansion of factory work in the late 19th century, children made up about 11% of the workforce and worked the same hours as adults (60 per week), while women represented another 22-29% in 1871 and 1891 respectively. Conditions were so bad that a Factory Act was passed in 1886 limiting employment of children to boys 12 and older, and girls 14 or older, but these laws applied to factories with more than 20 employees only and did nothing to affect the home-work system used by large retailers like Eaton’s for clothing manufacture. A Royal Commission report aptly titled “Labour and Capital” concluded in 1889 that “They [the evils of a factory town] spring from the desire to acquire vast fortunes in the shortest possible interval of time, regardless of the suffering which might be caused” (Kealey 1974). This was the situation when urban reformers – government officials and philanthropists alike – began to concern themselves with the domestic conditions in which Toronto’s labour force reproduced itself.

Promoting ‘sanitary’ privately owned housing surrounded by green space was one tool in the reformers’ kit that was particularly well-suited to address their concerns about the health and morality of working class living conditions. As historians of the period have shown, reformers were concerned to get women out of the labour force and back into their homes; to separate work and home life in a rational, Taylorist fashion in order to increase

the efficiency of production of both realms; to provide 'rational' and orderly amusements that would not offend the growing bourgeois class forced to share urban space with a potentially undisciplined mob of impoverished newly-arrived workers; to promote and enforce standards of public health for the benefit of the economy and 'the nation'; and, to promote a stake in civic life among the working class through the mechanism of private property ownership (Purdy 1993; Delaney 1991; Goheen 2003; Brace 1995; Mackintosh 2005; Valverde 1991; Crawford 1997; Chen 2003). In 1919, Charles Hodgetts, medical advisor to Canada's Commission of Conservation, dedicated to the "efficient and economical use of the nation's resources, including human life," declared, rather candidly, that poor housing "decreased the efficiency of the people to the point where one in three men are unfit...to fight the battle for freedom and honour [WWI]...[and] unfit to efficiently assist to build this nation in its struggle for supremacy in the markets of the world" (Delaney 1991:151, 160). This, then, was the material basis for 'benevolent' social reform of the working class in modern, industrial Canadian cities.

## Conclusion

While this is a work in progress, requiring more detailed analysis of the micro-politics of urban reform and class in Toronto (and elsewhere), there is clear evidence that the standard of the well-tended residential garden is the product of explicit efforts by both government and individual bourgeois reformers to raise the yield of the industrial labour crop during the early years of monopoly capitalist expansion. To ignore or marginalize the instrumental, material and class bases of these efforts, as the current fascination with Foucauldian discourse tends to, produces great fodder for the intellectual mill but leaves us unable to expose the exploitative roots of modern 'benevolence.' Residential lawns are about ordering public space, private lives and social reproduction; horti-culture is indeed deeply political.

## Notes

1. CPTED rests on the principle that public space that appears cared for and tended deters criminal behaviour by extending claims of private property into the public realm. This space then becomes defensible against undesirables because it is and appears to be surveilled and controlled. CPTED has received broad support in the U.K., U.S. and Canada (Blomley 2004).

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