

Seminar Series
Changing Urban Waterfronts Research Project
March 3rd 2008

Notes for Presentation:

Walking on Water: The Politics of Land Creation

Gene Desfor
York University
Faculty of Environmental Studies
desfor@yorku.ca

“Lake Ontario, whether liquid or solid, has always been reckoned among the assets of Toronto.”

John Ross Robertson (Kyle, 1910)

The presentation closely follows a paper by G. Desfor and L. Vesalon: Urban Expansion and Industrial Nature: A Political Ecology of Toronto’s Port Industrial District.” This paper has been submitted to a journal for review.

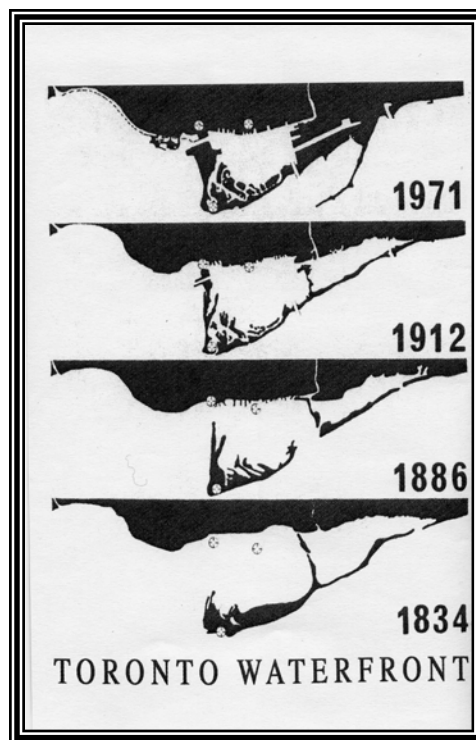
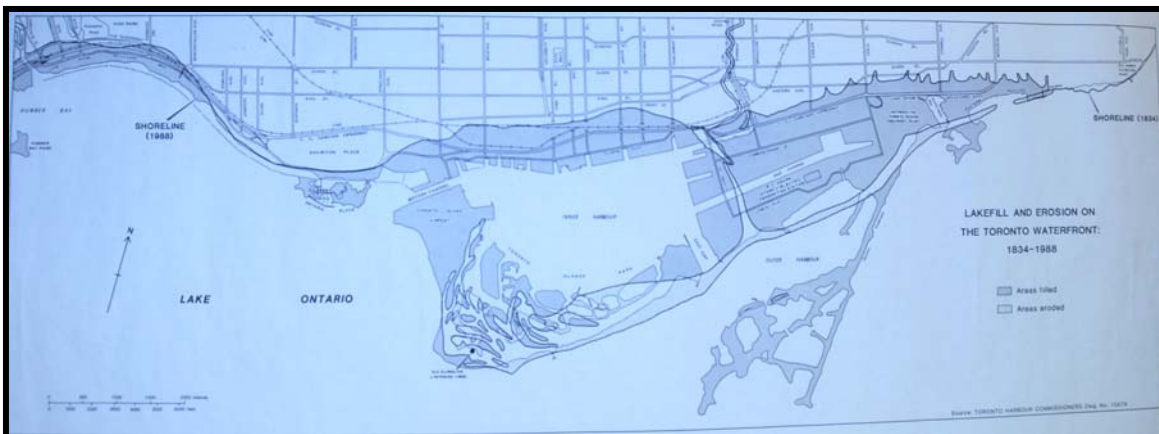
Co-sponsors of the Seminar Series: City Institute at York University, The Cities Centre, University of Toronto, and by SSHRC

I. Introduction

- A. The aim of my talk today is to ‘make sense’ out of the political and economic practices that were involved with the production of an industrial form of socio-nature—the Port Industrial District—during the early decades of the twentieth century in Toronto.

The way I will do this is first to outline the main features of the paper—the importance of land fill in urban expansion, the institutional, geographical, and temporal foci of the paper—then to introduce the principal concepts, and finally to summarize the conclusions of my work. Interspersed with the text are a number of historical images. The detailed historical research on which the paper is based will not be discussed, but readers interested in this material can find it in the full paper.

- B. The importance of land creation should not be underestimated as a source for urban expansion. About 85% of Toronto’s central waterfront has been created from fill—as seen in the images below.



C. Institutional Focus

The Toronto Harbour Commissioners

Established by an Act of Parliament in 1911

Part of the local-state and had a powerful influence on reshaping Toronto's waterfront

D. Main Concepts in the presentation

a. Socio-nature:

An apparently contradictory term concerned with attempts to unite what the enlightenment and modernity set asunder—that is, the assumption that society and nature are separate and discrete entities.

Socio-nature is inherently political because it is, at least partially, produced through social practices and underpinned by political decisions.

Introducing the concept of socio-nature into the analysis enables me to discuss how political and economic interests, their discursive representations of nature, and urban development processes are intertwined in the production of industrial nature in the form of 'new' land made available for development.

b. Industrial Nature

Industrial nature is a particular form of socio-nature that supports, and simultaneously undermines, an economy in which striving for profitability drives an incessant output of manufactured commodities from various forms of socio-nature and the coordinated work of labour.

Images of industrial nature in the Toronto port lands



The Port Industrial District in the 1950s



This Bascule Bridge that crosses the Ship Channel in the Port Industrial District was constructed as part of the Toronto Harbour Commissioners 1912 Waterfront Plan.



The Port Industrial District in the 1970s.



The Port Industrial District in the 1980s

c. Spatio-Temporal Fix

The starting point for the analysis is that dominant sectors in capitalist economies endeavor to manipulate socio-nature to support their logic of wealth accumulation.

Generally this takes place through economic and political processes that regulate the application of capital and labour to resources in the production of commodities. However, such attempts to manipulate socio-nature are problematic because of contradictions which arise.

Overaccumulation is one of the great contradictions of capitalist economies.

Harvey's notion of a spatial and temporal fix addresses the ways capitalist society attempts to divert the excesses of overaccumulation in productive directions and put off, at least temporarily, crises tendencies.

Erica Schoenberger commented that, "Harvey's great insight in *Limits [to Capital]* was that restructuring the geography of capital—altering its very earthly foundations—was a particularly effective way of productively absorbing these excesses."

I am arguing that combining the dynamics suggested in the notion of a spatio-temporal fix with the concept of socio-nature is particularly useful for understanding a large-scale transformation of the "very earthly foundations" of Toronto.

Representing the creation of a new land form as a restructuring of the geography of the "very earthly foundations" of Toronto provides us with a way to analyse linkages between the production of socio-nature and political, social and economic practices involved in a major drive toward industrialization and urban expansion.

Two aspects of Harvey's spatio-temporal fix:

First: "A certain portion of the total capital becomes literally fixed in some physical form for a relatively long period of time....Some fixed capital is geographically mobile (such as machinery that can easily be unbolted from its moorings and taken elsewhere) but the rest is so fixed in the land that it cannot be moved without being destroyed. Aircraft are mobile but the airports to which they fly are not."

Second: "The spatio-temporal 'fix', on the other hand, is a metaphor for solutions to capitalist crises through temporal deferment and geographical expansion. The production of space, the organization of wholly new territorial divisions of labour, the opening up of new and cheaper resource complexes, of new dynamic spaces of capital accumulation, and the penetration of pre-existing social formations by

capitalist social relations and institutional arrangements...provide multiple ways to absorb existing capital and labour surpluses.”

Both dimensions of Harvey’s spatio-temporal fix, the territorial and the spatial, illuminate important aspects of the transformation of Ashbridge’s Bay and marsh.

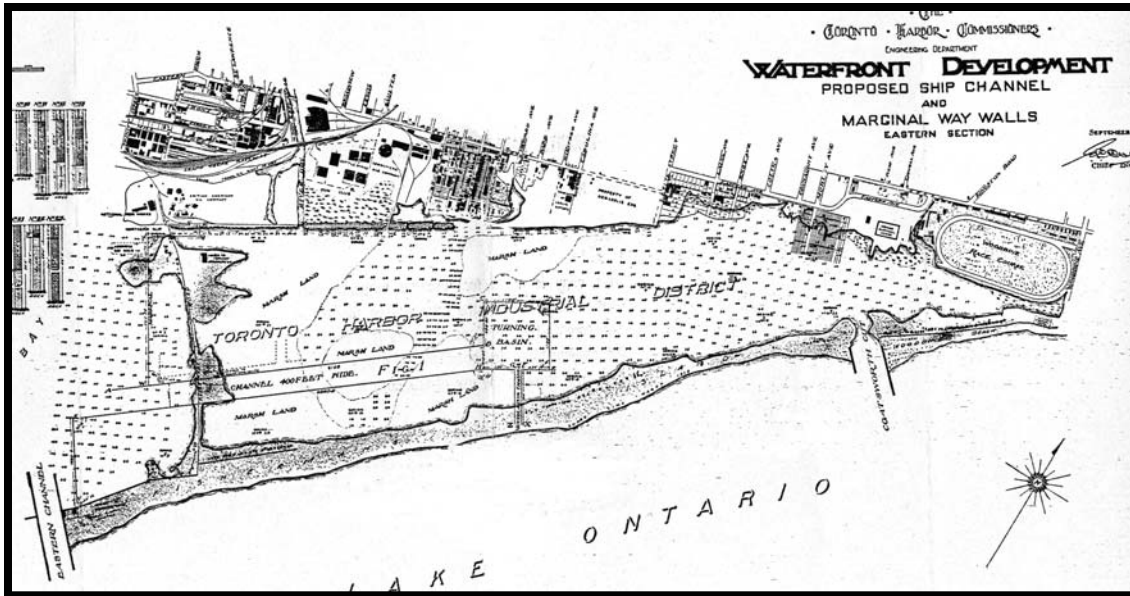
In terms of the first dimension, an industrial area of some 1,000 acres, the Port Industrial District was created. That is, labour and capital literally transformed an earlier form of socio-nature into a new and different fixed form as solid land was constructed by lakefilling—a project involving large-scale and radical forms of nature-society interactions.

The physical form of these nature-society relationships have been locked-in, or fixed, as vast amounts of capital resources, much of which stem from non-local industrial centres, are dedicated to the project for a very long period of time. And this new land form, we call industrial nature.

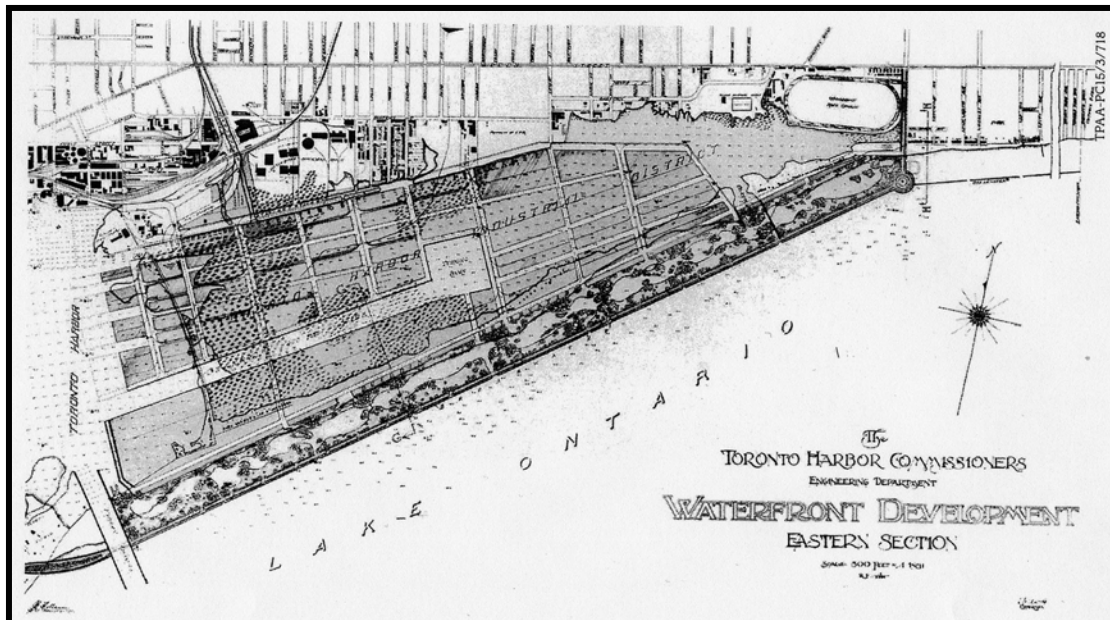
The second aspect of Harvey’s spatio-temporal fix is concerned with “opening up” new spaces. And this involves overcoming contradictions in existing social relations by establishing an ensemble of new social practices and institutions that facilitate and participate in developing a new regime of accumulation.

I argue that the THC is best understood as one of the institutions within such an ensemble. And the political struggles by which this institution was established reveal much about underlying social relations and the ideological positions of the dominant groups in society.

II. Images of Waterfront Planning and Land Creation



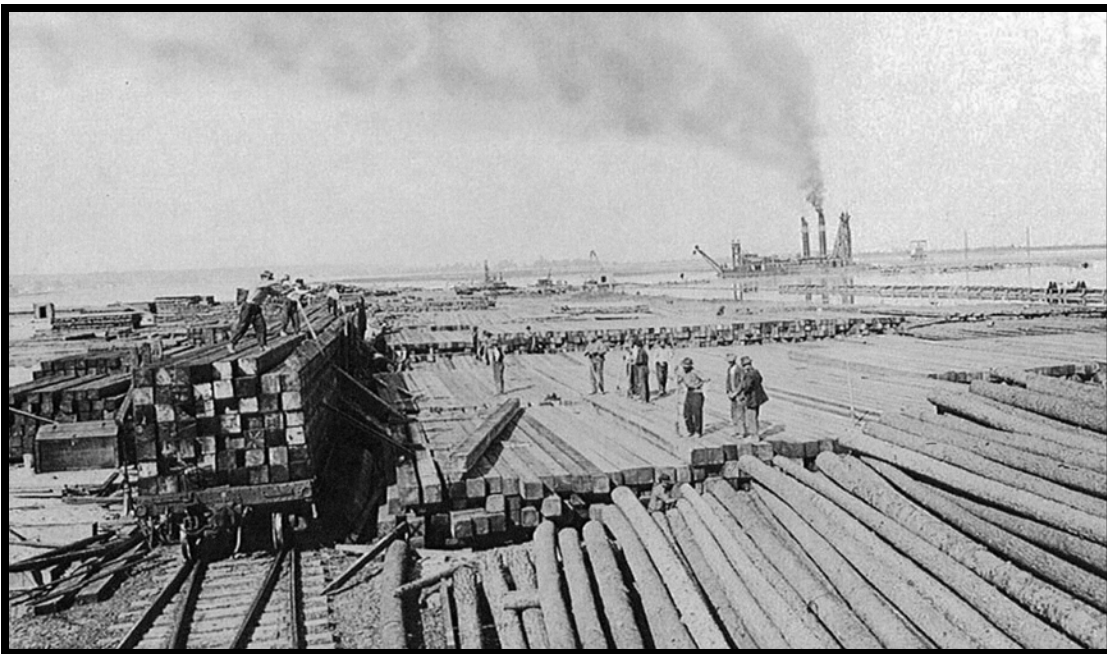
Outline of the Toronto Harbour Commissioners 1912 Plan for the Eastern Section of the waterfront is overlaid on of earlier shoreline.



The Toronto Harbour Commissioners plan for the Eastern Section of the waterfront, from the 1912 Waterfront Development Plan



The Toronto Harbour Commission constructed an extensive series of pipes to move dredgate as part of the land creation process in the Port Industrial District.



The Toronto Harbour Commission used lumber from trees harvested as far away as British Columbia for construction of the sea walls in the Port Industrial District.

II. Conclusions

My aim in this paper has been to understand how a particular form of socio-nature, the Port Industrial District, was produced through intertwined human and non-human processes and how this new land-form supported wealth accumulation in Toronto during the early twentieth century. As Hudson notes (1996: 1) “the reclamation of land for urban development is much more common than is generally realized and...far from being a phenomenon which occurs only in special circumstances, is a normal process of city expansion.” It is this “normal process of city expansion” that has led us to examine the historical case of land creation on Toronto waterfront.

Political events leading to the establishment of the THC, and their discursive representations, reveal much about how this new institution and its plans for a spatio-temporal fix were the basis for a major urban expansion promoting industrialization as the primary logic for wealth accumulation. Supporters of the THC articulated a ‘waterfront problem’ for the public that relied on a powerful organization largely free of local and national government control as the primary institution to carry out production of a major urban expansion. The filling-in of what was then represented to be a foul-smelling wasteland and breeding ground for all sorts of diseases was the centre-piece of plans for producing the Port Industrial District.

The Port Industrial District, a particular form of socio-nature that we have called industrial nature, synthesizes many highly intertwined human and biophysical processes. Within that physical land form are embodied capital-intensive and mechanized production processes, an ideology that regards the environment as a resource, and political practices that support the dominant sector of an economic system in which social relations are guided by the continual striving for profitability by manufacturing commodities from socio-nature and the work of labour.

Our historical analysis of the THC and its Port Industrial District strengthens Harvey’s hypothesis about the role of spatio-temporal fixes in helping to resolve crises of overaccumulation and expands its range of application. As Schoenberger (2004: 428) noted, a spatio-temporal fix opens up new territories by productively soaking up excess capital and transforming its geography. The production of land is a particular case of such a spatio-temporal fix, and one which is quite usual in urban-waterfront expansion. What we might call a ‘land-creation fix’ restructures waterfront geographies in three specific ways: first, it produces a commodity (land) that can be bought and sold and thus has an exchange value; second, the produced land has a use value as an input for production processes (in our case, as an industrial

landscape); and third the territory created by the produced-land provides for new spatial relations in the city.

And as Harvey suggested, new institutional arrangements tend to accompany the emergence of a spatio-temporal fix. The Toronto Harbour Commission was indeed such an institutional innovation with a multi-scale legislative dimension and an ability to attract and manage investments for creating land. The THC influenced, and was influenced by, broader patterns of economic and regulatory patterns. In particular, its organizational structure—greatly influenced by the urban reform movement of the time—institutionalized publicly unaccountable decision-making and solidified a close relation between businesses and city politics based on special interests¹.

In addition to illuminating the ways crises of overaccumulation are temporarily resolved through geographic restructuring, the notion of a spatio-temporal fix enables us to consider relationships between the institutionalization of social relations and the production of a new form of socio-nature. As Harvey (1996: 184) so concisely noted, “One path towards consolidation of a particular set of social relations... is to undertake an ecological transformation which requires the reproduction of those social relations in order to sustain it.” The case of Toronto’s waterfront development at the beginning of the twentieth century shows how important the establishment of the THC was for both consolidating a new set of social relations, and producing a new set of spatial relations in the city.

The establishment of the THC represented more than the founding of a new organization that could solve an ‘integrated waterfront problem’ by providing infrastructure and a site for an industrial district. It defined an ideological frame in which the ‘waterfront problem’ was rationalized and managed. It exercised political power in specific social contexts, challenging the liberal representation of institutions as mechanisms that generate ideologically neutral decisions. The establishment of the new organizational structure with its special regulatory and development powers was integral to the production of the Port Industrial District. It made possible the production of a major urban expansion through the creation of a new industrial form of socio-nature.

1. For a discussion of the urban reform movement in Canadian cities see the chapters by J.

Weaver, P. Rutherford and J. Fingard in (Stelter and Artibse, 1979).

References*

- Barnett, J. M. (1971) Ashbridge's Bay. *Ontario Naturalist* December, 24-26.
- Braun, B. (2005) Environmental issues: writing a more-than-human urban geography. *Progress in Human Geography* 29.5, 635-50.
- Brenner, N. (1998) Between fixity and motion: accumulation, territorial organization and the historical geography of spatial scales. *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space* 16.4, 459-81.
- Brenner, N. (2000) The urban question as a scale question: reflections on Henri Lefebvre, urban theory and the politics of scale. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24.2, 361-78.
- Bunce, S, and Desfor, G. (2007) Introduction to 'Political ecologies of urban waterfront transformations. *Cities: The International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning* 24.4, 251-58.
- Canada (1911) *The Toronto Harbour Commissioners Act-1911*. 1-2 George V, chapter 26.
- Canada (1927) *Commission to Investigate the Transactions of the Toronto Harbour Commissioners*. Toronto Port Authority Archives.
- Careless, J. M. (1984) *Toronto to 1918: An Illustrated History*. James Lorimer, Toronto.
- Castree, N. (1995) The nature of produced nature: the materiality and knowledge construction in Marxism. *Antipode* 27.1, 12-48.
- Castree, N. (2002) False Antitheses? Marxism, Nature and Actor-Networks. *Antipode* 34.1, 111-46.
- Castree, N. Braun, B. (eds.) (2001) *Social Nature: Theory, Practice and Politics.*, Oxford and New York.
- Castree, N., J. Essletzbichler and N. Brenner (2004) Introduction: David Harvey's The Limits to Capital: two decades on. *Antipode* 36.3, 401-05.
- City of Toronto (1911) *Minutes of City Council 1910*, Appendix C. City Printers, Toronto.
- Cousins, E. L. (1921) Toronto harbour improvements. *World Ports* 9 May, 59-80.
- Cousins, E. L. (1948) The Port of Toronto: the development of a major port of the lakes of Canada. *The Dock and Harbour Authority* September, no pagination.
- Crouzet, F. (2001) *A History of the European Economy, 1000-2000*. University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville and London.

-
- Demeritt, D. (1996) Social theory and the reconstruction of science and geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 21. 3, 484-503.
- Desfor, G. (1988) Planning urban waterfront industrial districts: Toronto's Ashbridge's Bay, 1889-1910. *Urban History Review* 17. 2, 77-91.
- Desfor, G. and Keil, R. (2004) *Nature and the City: Making Environmental Policy in Toronto and Los Angeles*. University of Arizona Press, Tucson.
- Desfor, G. and S. Prudham (2006) Deep water and good land: socio-natural transformation of Toronto's industrial waterfront. Presentation to the Association of American Geographers, Chicago.
- Drache, D. (ed.) (1995) *Staples, Markets, and Cultural Change: Selected Essays of Harold Innis, 1894-1952*. McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal.
- Drummond, I. (1987) *Progress Without Planning: The Economic History of Ontario from Confederation to the Second World War*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Gandy, M. (2002) *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City*. MIT Press, Cambridge and London.
- Goheen, P.G. (1979) Currents of change in Toronto, 1850-1900. In G.A. Stelter and A. F. J. Artibise (eds.), *The Canadian City: Essays in Urban History*, MacMillan, Toronto.
- Gourlay, R. (1914) Basic Principles for a water-front development as illustrated by the plans of the Toronto Harbour Commissioners. Address to the National Conference on City Planning, Toronto, May. THCA Archives: RG 1/5, box 2, folder 15.
- Haraway, D. (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs and Women—The Reinvention of Nature*. Free Association Books, London.
- Harris, R.C., Gaby, F.A. and Cousins, E.L. (1915) *Radial Railway Entrances and Rapid Transit*, Report to the Civic Transportation Committee, City of Toronto, Brigdens Ltds., Toronto.
- Harvey, D. (1982) *Limits to Capital*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Harvey, D. (1996) *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. Blackwell, Oxford and New York.
- Harvey, D. (2003) The 'new' imperialism: accumulation by dispossession. In L. Panitch and C. Leys (eds.), *Socialist Register 2004: The New Imperial Challenge*, Merlin Press, London.
- Heynen, N. and Swyngedouw, E. (2003) Urban political ecology, justice and the politics of scale. *Antipode* 35.5, 898-918.

Heynen, N., Kaika, M., and Swyngedouw, E. (eds.) (2006) *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism*. Routledge, London and New York.

Hudson, B. (1996) *Cities on the Shore: The Urban Littoral Frontier*. Pinter, London and New York.

Jessop, B. (2004) Spatial fixes, temporal fixes, and spatio-temporal fixes. [accessed at <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/sociology/papers/jessop-spatio-temporal-fixes.pdf>, April 2, 2007].

Kaika, M. (2005) *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature, and the City*. Routledge, New York and London.

Keil, R. (2003) Urban political ecology. *Urban Geography* 24.8, 723-28.

Keil, R. (2005) Progress report—urban political ecology. *Urban Geography* 26.7, 640-51.

Kyte, K.C. (1910) *Old Toronto: Excerpts from Landmarks of Toronto by John Ross Robertson*, MacMillan, Toronto.

Laclau, E. and C. Mouffe (1985) *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Verso, London and New York.

Laclau, E. (1990) *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. Verso, London and New York.

Latour, B. (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*. Harvester Wheatsheaf, London.

Lukes, S. (1974) *Power: A Radical View*. Macmillan, London.

Marr, W. L. and D.G. Paterson (1980) *Canada: An Economic History*. MacMillan, Toronto.

Marston, S. A. (2000) The social construction of scale. *Progress in Human Geography* 24.2, 219-42.

Marston, S. A. and Smith, N. (2001) States, scales and households: limits to scale thinking? A response to Brenner. *Progress in Human Geography* 25.4, 615-19.

Mellon, F. (1974) The development of the Toronto waterfront during the railway expansion era, 1850-1912. Unpublished PhD. Dissertation, Department of Geography, University of Toronto.

Middleton, J. E. (1923) *The Municipality of Toronto: A History*. Volume 1, The Dominion Publishing Company, Toronto and New York.

Norrie, K. and O'ram, D. (1996) *A History of the Canadian Economy*. Harcourt Brace, Toronto.

O'Connor, M. (1994) Codependency and indeterminacy: a critique of the theory of production. In O'Connor, M. (ed.), *Is Capitalism Sustainable*, Guilford Press, New York and London.

O'Mara, J. (1976) Shaping urban waterfronts: the role of Toronto's Harbour Commissioners, 1911-1960. Discussion Paper No. 13, Department of Geography, York University, Toronto.

Peck, J and H. Yeung (eds.) (2003) *Remaking the Global Economy: Economic-Geographical Perspectives*. Sage, London.

Pozo-Martin, G. (2006) A tougher Gordian knot: globalisation, imperialism and the problem of the state. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19.2, 223-42.

Robbins, P. (2002) Obstacles to a first world political ecology? Looking near without looking up. *Environment and Planning A*. 34, 1509-13.

Schoenberger, E. (2004) The spatial fix revisited. *Antipode* 36.3, 427-33.

Seton, E. T. (1940) *Trail of an Artist-Naturalist: The Autobiography of Ernest Thompson Seton*. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.

Smith, N. (1984) *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space*. Blackwell, Oxford and New York.

Somerville P. (2004) State rescaling and democratic transformation. *Space and Polity* 8.2, 137-56.

Stelter, G. A. and A. F. J. Artibise (eds.) (1979) *The Canadian City: Essays in Urban History*. Macmillan of Canada, Toronto.

Swyngedouw, E. (1996) The city as a hybrid: on nature, society and cyborg urbanization. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 7.2, 65-80.

Swyngedouw, E. (2004) *Social Power and the Urbanization of Water: Flows of Power*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

The Globe (1906) Iron smelters will come here. *The Globe* October 11, 12.

The Globe (1907) Moose mountain furnaces will make a Canadian Pittsburg in Toronto's marsh. *The Globe* October 12, 1.

The Globe (1910a) Scheme killed, says Mr. Gage. *The Globe* December 2, 1, 4.

The Globe (1910b) In the civic arena. *The Globe* December 3, 8.

The Globe (1910c) Development of Toronto's harbor. *The Globe* December 31, 4.

Thomas N. (2007) Global capitalism, the anti-globalization movement, and the Third World. *Capital and Class* 92, 45-78.

Toronto Harbour Commissioners (1912) *Toronto Waterfront Development, 1912-1920*. Toronto Harbour Commissioners, Toronto.

The Toronto Daily Star (1910) Toronto's harbor. *The Toronto Daily Star* June 18, 6.

The Telegram (1910a) Advance Toronto. *The Telegram* December 3, 14.

The Telegram (1910b) "Oh, shut up" said McBride repartee at council meeting. *The Telegram* December 6, 1.

Uitermark, J. (2002) Re-scaling, 'scale fragmentation' and the regulation of antagonistic relationships. *Progress in Human Geography* 26.6, 743-65.

Whatmore, S. (2002) *Hybrid Geographies*. Routledge, London and New York.

While, A., Jonas, A. and Gibbs, D. (2004) The environment and the entrepreneurial city: searching for the urban 'sustainability fix' in Manchester and Leeds. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 28.3, 549-69.

Wickson, T. (2002) *Reflections of Toronto Harbour: 200 years of Port Activity and Waterfront Development*. Toronto Port Authority, Toronto.

Zunino, H. M. (2006) Power relations in urban decision-making: neo-liberalism, 'techno-politicians' and authoritarian redevelopment in Santiago, Chile. *Urban Studies* 43.10, 1825-46.

* The Toronto Port Authority Archives was previously known as the Toronto Harbour Commissioners Archives.