

Ann Porter

Gendered States: Women, Unemployment Insurance, and the Political Economy of the Welfare State in Canada, 1945-1997

University of Toronto Press 2003, 337 pp.

\$75.00 hardcover (90-08020 – 3523-x)

Ann Porter's analysis of women, unemployment insurance and the political economy of the welfare state in Canada from 1945 to 1997 is a study of the shift from the post-war Keynesian welfare state to the neo-liberal welfare state. Three questions frame the analysis: At a theoretical level, how does gender interact with other political economic forces in the formation and restructuring of the welfare state? What has unemployment / employment insurance meant for women? What is the process through which welfare state policy shifts occur? In addressing these questions she contributes important insights into several key issues that are central to welfare state analysis in the contemporary period; in particular, her analysis affirms the centrality of the shifting relations between state, market and family for understanding welfare state regimes.

Gender is understood in a broad and dynamic sense to incorporate 'the social relations that help define women's conditions and that structure relations between men and women' (5). It has to do with ideology, meaning, representation, with shifts in the relations between men and women, in women's paid and unpaid work, in ideology and in the way women have represented themselves in the political arena. Gender in all of these senses is seen as crucial to understand the development and change of the Canadian welfare state. She sees welfare state regimes as 'complex webs of forces in which the relationship between numerous variables – labour markets, unpaid work in the home, family structures, race and ethnicity, political struggles, state policies – can be considered as part of a dynamic whole in which the process of interaction and change is critical' (29).

Porter divides her analysis into two periods: 1940-1971 and the post-1971 to 1997 period. The welfare state was gendered in both periods. The 1940-71 period was the heyday of the Keynesian Welfare State (KWS) in Canada and elsewhere and is seen by many analysts as the 'golden age' of the welfare state. But this welfare state was profoundly gendered. It was a male breadwinner welfare state. Therein lay its contradictions and the seeds of its change. This structure came under pressure for reform as an increasing percentage of women entered the labour force and the issue of reconciling employment and family life was of increasing importance. Through lengthy pressure by women and the labour movement this period culminated in the inclusion of maternity leave as part of the UI programme.

The post-1971 to 1997 period was one of economic crises and restructuring of the economy and the

formal equality between men and women but the increase in economic polarization associated with the effective restriction of access to EI to those with stable jobs. The new gender order is characterised by formal gender equality but an equality that is subordinate to reliance on market forces and international competitiveness.

Porter's analysis of the process of change is built around an analysis of the tensions and contradictions arising within the nexus between the family, the market and the state and of how the complex of forces involving women on their own and in conjunction with others challenged these tensions and contradictions and how despite this political and economic forces led to a restructuring of the state, market, family relationship in a neo-liberal direction. The tensions and contradictions differ in the two periods as do the complex of forces. In the first period the key tensions and contradictions centre on the increase in dual earner family units in the context of a male-breadwinner welfare state. In the second period the contradictions centre on the fall-out of economic restructuring and the retrenchment of the welfare state, and the increase in formal gender equality in the context of increasing economic inequality.

The story that is told in this book echoes the change in other liberal welfare state regimes. Porter's contribution is to centre it on the changes in unemployment insurance system and later the transformation of the system into an 'employment-friendly' employment insurance system and the impact of these changes on women's relationship to the labour market and how they manage the employment-family relationship. This focus illustrates very effectively the centrality of the state, market, family relationship in the differentiation of welfare state regimes and the change in particular regimes over time.

Porter's study is a significant contribution to the analysis of the Canadian welfare state. She makes effective use of a wide range of primary and secondary sources and weaves a clear story around a cogent theoretical argument.

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Julia S. O'Connor's main areas of research are welfare states in comparative perspective and social inequality, gender and citizenship. Current research projects include a study of convergence in social policy in the EU in the context of increased globalisation of trade and financial markets and a study of knowledge of, and attitudes towards, the European Union in Northern Ireland in comparative context funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Previous reviews for the *CJS Online* include: Terrance Hunsley, *Lone Parent Incomes and Social Policy Outcomes: Canada in International Perspective* (1999); Ramesh Mishra, *Globalization and the Welfare State* (2001); Lynne Haney, *Inventing the Needy: Gendered Politics of Welfare in the US* (2002).