

**Kate Bezanson.**

**Gender, the State, and Social Reproduction: Household Insecurity in Neo-Liberal Times.**

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Feminist scholarship in political economy has convincingly demonstrated that the economic and political discourse of neo-liberalism has re-shaped the state / labour market / family / household / community nexus experienced by Canadian citizens. In this text, Bezanson offers a comprehensive and compelling contribution to this area of scholarship. Drawing on the results of a mixed methodology study, Bezanson makes the effects of the Conservative government's neo-liberal restructuring on Ontario households "real" and palpable over the period 1995-2000. Specifically, the results of the study provide the evidence for Bezanson to argue that the model of market, family / household and community life that has emerged with neo-liberalism, the "dual earner female carer model" (p. 165), is one that enables the state to continue to assume that women are primarily responsible for social reproduction, and rarely endorse the provision of more support for unpaid work.

The concepts of neo-liberalism and social reproduction are carefully connected in the early chapters and provide the theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis. For Bezanson, neo-liberalism acts as an "ideological and economic canvas" (p. 7) upon which to trace changing distributions of power and resources among states and citizens. Additionally, Bezanson explains that neo-liberalism transforms conditions of capital and household social reproduction and gender relations of paid and unpaid work. She deftly addresses the scholarly ambiguity surrounding the term "social reproduction." For Bezanson, social reproduction is all provisioning processes that sustain life on a daily and generational basis and operate at the levels of market, state, and families and households (p. 25-26).

The state's changing role in mediating conflicts created by paid work and/or capitalist accumulation and social reproduction is a central organizing theme throughout the text. Citing broader structural and economic change as the harbinger of the post-1970s neo-liberal discourse, Bezanson explores how the demise of the Fordist-Keynesian state reconfigured class, race, and gender relations and, thus, the relations of capital and social reproduction. Neo-liberal discourse has replaced the values of collective solidarity and shared risks, endorsed to some degree under the Fordist-Keynesian state, with greater prioritization and valuation of free market competition, as well as individual responsibility, flexibility and employability. Bezanson draws particular attention to the "adult-worker model" that increasingly underpins "active" social policy. Corresponding with changing gender relations (e.g. women's increased participation in the labour market), both women and men are perceived as adult workers with similar rights and privileges. Here, Bezanson could more fully explore how shifts in welfare state architecture are paralleled by simultaneous transformations in women's and men's social citizenship and claims-making (or lack thereof) on the state. Nonetheless, she does provide a general sense of the form of social citizenship supported within the Fordist-Keynesian state and shows how it has increasingly been replaced with the newer market citizenship of the neo-liberal state.

Bezanson also locates the undertaking of the mixed-methodology study within one of the paradoxes of the new gender order of neo-liberalism: gender is both eroded and intensified. This paradox is evinced by her revealing discussion of the processes of familialization that infiltrate neo-liberal

restructuring. Bezanson argues that although Canadian women participate in the labour market much like men do, they continue to retain responsibility for the private and “invisible” work of social reproduction. So while social policy tends to view women as autonomous workers (de-familialization), the very practices and decisions in policy transfer the work of social reproduction onto women (re-familialization). Indeed, in prioritizing individuals’ market capacity and a smaller state, as well as withdrawing from social commitments (e.g. social policies and programs), neo-liberalism shifts the costs of social reproduction away from the state and onto families.

Situated in this theoretical context, Bezanson undertakes a detailed examination of the specific legislative and policy changes that occurred from 1995-2000. With the Harris government, cutting costs, devolving responsibility and de-centralizing power were common restructuring strategies. Legislation such as the Red Tape Reduction Acts (1998, 1999, 2000) was passed with little discussion and citizen engagement, and municipal responsibilities were dramatically reorganized through the 1996 Savings and Restructuring Act. Bezanson reveals how several other processes of restructuring were at work in the policy areas of education, health care, social assistance, and labour organization (e.g. privatization, familialization, decentralization, commodification, and criminalization). For example, with health care reform, services were removed from hospitals and transferred to home care but it was households that experienced these new costs of privatization and familialization as home care programs were not adequately funded and supported. Social assistance benefit rates were cut by 21.6% in 1995, entitlement relationships were increasingly commodified (e.g. individuals’ receipt of assistance was made contingent on employability efforts), and recipients were subject to criminalization through such measures as the welfare fraud hotline and ‘spouse in the house rule.’ Bezanson convincingly argues that it was particularly the processes of privatization and familialization that demonstrate how the state’s role in mediating labour market insecurity and social reproduction drastically changed with neo-liberal restructuring. The tensions and stresses created by new market and state relationships were increasingly assumed to be absorbed by families and households.

In the latter half of the text Bezanson examines how people’s lives were affected by these changes through the use of qualitative and quantitative data from the Speaking Out project, funded by the Atkinson Charitable Foundation and managed by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Data gathered from the 41 households (127 members), involved in the study from January 1997 to January 2000, reveals that ‘putting together a living,’ from wages and salaries, federal and provincial transfers and private transfers (e.g. RRSPs), was increasingly complex during the period of neo-liberal restructuring. For example, 40% of the households experienced a drop in income and support from state and market sources. Low-income households developed unique strategies to cope with the effects of policy change, including adhering to strict budgets, increasing labour market participation, and doing without basic goods. One of the highlights of the text is Bezanson’s use of interview quotes or general narratives and detailed case studies. Through these, she reveals low-income households’ everyday realities of coping with increased costs (e.g. education fees) and fewer state supports. For example, the case study of Anne, a lone mother of four children under age seven, clearly reveals the profound hardships faced by mothers who must negotiate and manage their market attachment and caregiving while experiencing low social assistance rates, lack of formal day care spaces, and reduced access to health care benefits.

This is an engaging and informative text that persuasively shows that neo-liberal restructuring has exacerbated, fortified, and sharpened the contradiction between paid work and unpaid work for Canadian households — primarily to the detriment of women. The tangible quality and interdisciplinary appeal of this text means it is a highly suitable read for any upper-level undergraduate or

graduate-level courses in political science, sociology, women's studies, or social policy that delve into poverty, political economy, and/or feminist critiques of gender relations within the transforming welfare state. For the more experienced scholar, the text offers primary research data that is theoretically and practically useful. Indeed, this is a text that successfully meets one of Bezanson's goals in its writing — it encourages other scholars working in complementary areas to fully recognize the utility of a social reproduction framework and therefore continue its employment in critical policy analysis.

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