

Reforming Social Justice in Neoliberal Times

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ABSTRACT *This article unfolds in three stages. First, it locates the emergence of modern conceptions of social justice in industrializing Europe, and especially in the discovery of the “social,” which provided a particular idiom for the liberal democratic politics for most of the twentieth century. Second, the article links this particular conception of the social to the political rationalities of the postwar welfare state and the identity of the social citizen. Finally, the article discusses the myriad ways in which this legacy of the social and social justice has been disrupted, although not yet fully displaced, by the economic orthodoxies and individualization that inform the contemporary neoliberal governing project in Canada. The result, the article concludes, has been the institutionalization of insecurity, which demands the renewal of a social way of seeing and a politics of social justice on local and global scales.*

Silenced and deflected for many years, rallying calls for social justice are growing ever-louder in the politics of the early-twenty-first century. The critical necessity of reviving an ethics of fairness and just distribution in the popular imagination and in governing practices, on local, national, and global scales, could hardly be more pressing. After more than two decades of experience, it has become abundantly clear that, while the neoliberal project has stimulated economic growth and flows of trade, finance, and peoples across borders, it also has rapidly deepened the gulf between the rich and the poor both within countries and across the North-South divide. The neoliberal project has taken on many different configurations across national settings, ranging from European third wayism to the primitive capitalism of emerging economies. Everywhere, however, this mode of governance has concentrated incomes and wealth among a few, squeezed the middle income strata, and fuelled unparalleled inequalities in income wealth, and life chances. If there is one consistent indicator of neoliberal governance, it is stalled, if not declining human development and well-being amidst unprecedented economic growth and wealth creation. It is a governing formula that is ripe with all manner of social injustices.

If we paint the history of capitalist development with very broad strokes, it is apparent that the 19th century was marked by the creation of wealth, the 20th century by its redistribution, and the early 21st century by its concentration and polarization. Canada has not been immune to this progressive polarization of the social fabric, although social and fiscal policies did cushion this process somewhat until recently. In fact, in the late 1990s, after more than a decade of cutbacks, Canada’s federal government began to reinvest in social policy and to explore new conceptual and policy frameworks, especially the new social-isms of social in/exclusion, social capital, and social economy (Brodie,

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2007). Since the election of the Harper government, however, this exercise in rethinking Canada's social architecture has simply grounded to a halt. Key federal policy units, which were immersed in research on social inclusion and social capital such as the Policy Research Initiative (PRI), have been redeployed to other projects, while social policy making has been either further fiscalized or devolved to the provinces. All of this is very much in keeping with Prime Minister Harper's long held conviction that the federal government should get out of the social policy field altogether – this despite the fact that the National Council of Welfare, the federal government's own reporting body, has recently described social welfare policy in Canada as “an utter disaster” (quoted in Calderhead 2006, p. 7).

This inaction is especially puzzling given the mounting weight of evidence demonstrating that the life conditions and chances of Canadians are increasingly polarized into haves and have-nots. Statistics Canada data, for example, indicate that, in 2004, the average earnings of the richest 10% of families with children was 82 times that of the poorest 10% of families with children: in 1976, the ratio was 31:1 (Yalnizyan 2007, p. 3). Moreover, Statistics Canada reports that household wealth is also rapidly evaporating for the vast majority of Canadian families. In 2005, the poorest 20% of Canadian families owed more than they owned and the net worth of the bottom 40% of families was negligible, while the top 10% of Canadian families accounted for 58% of the total household wealth in Canada (Kolkman 2007, p. A15).² One half of Canadians now indicate that they are one or two pay checks away from being poor (Hennessy 2006, p. 6). Yet, despite growing inequalities and insecurity, in the last decade alone, Canadian governments have collectively reduced program spending from 41% to 31% of the GDP and transfers to individuals from 11.5% to 7.8% of GDP (Scott, et al., 2006, p. 58).

These trends contrast markedly with what Canadians think that their governments should be doing. An Environics poll, conducted for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in the fall of 2005, for example, showed that 76% of Canadians thought that the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, 67% believed that the majority are not benefiting from economic growth, and 86% wanted the government to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor (Yalnizyan, 2007, pp. 1-2; Hennessey, 2006). Similarly, a Strategic Council poll, conducted for the Globe and Mail and CTV prior to the release of the 2007 federal budget, indicated 50% of Canadians thought increased spending on social programs was the most important priority for the government, in contrast to 19% that endorsed tax cuts and 13% that favoured debt reduction (Globe and Mail 2007, p. A4).³ In another poll, conducted in 2004, 74% of Canadians agreed that it was possible to fight social inequalities, with 28% indicating that income inequalities were the most serious (Leger 2004, p. 3).

These data obviously raise disturbing questions about the relationship between citizenship and social justice in these neoliberal times. And, indeed, there have been revived philosophical debates about how we might rethink and recover the emancipatory

² Revisiting Wealth Inequality was released in December 2006.

³ Strategic Council Poll of 1000 Canadians conducted for the Globe and Mail and CTV. According to pollster Allan Gregg, “Normally [a strong economy] creates a sense of optimism and very buoyant mood, but that's not there ... people believe wealth is being shared unequally plus we've allowed our social safety net, our health care, educational system, the quality of our cities to unravel.”

and ethical promise of citizenship equality and social justice in the contemporary era (see for example Isin, 2008; Fraser and Honneth, 2003). This article follows a different track, examining the ways in which our ideas about citizenship and social justice have been historically configured by previous governing orders and by ongoing transformations in dominant political rationalities. Political rationalities, most simply, are shifting and always contested “procedures for representing and intervening” (Miller and Rose, 1990, p. 7) - particular ways of seeing that privilege specific vocabularies, styles of truth telling and truth tellers (Foucault, 2003, Rose, 1999; Dean, 1999). The following explores three themes. First, the idea of social justice is traced back to industrializing Europe and the discovery of the “social,” which, I argue, has provided a particular idiom for liberal democratic politics for more than a century. Next, this particular idea of the social is linked to the rationalities embedded in the postwar welfare state and the identity of the social citizen. And, finally, the article outlines how this legacy of the social is disrupted, although not submerged, by economic orthodoxy and individualization, both of which are at the heart of the neoliberal governing project.

The Social Way of Seeing

The concept of social justice is frequently deployed, if not as a universally intelligible and applicable term, then, at least, as an imperative of social organization that can trace its lineage back to Aristotle’s ideas about distributive justice or the moral teachings of Thomas Aquinas (Jackson, 2005, pp. 356-359). The term “social justice,” however, entered our collective vocabulary far more recently, emerging out of the social and political landscapes of laissez-faire capitalism (Barry, 2005; Jackson, 2005). Indeed, the first book bearing the title “Social Justice” did not appear until 1900 (Miller, 1999, p. 5). The general consensus is that our modern understanding of social justice emerged in the late 18th century “as a child of the industrial and French revolutions” (Jackson, 2005, p. 367), was popularized in the 19th century as western thinkers and societies became increasingly animated about the ethical foundations of modern societies and the role of the state in advancing social goals, and entered into mainstream politics in the mid-twentieth century, when advanced liberal democracies, variously informed by social liberalism and social democratic politics, embraced some form of the welfare state.

It is probably safe to say that the preponderance of writing about social justice focuses on the principles of justice rather than the origins and content of the social. We tend to take this term as a given. Social historians, however, tell us that our contemporary understanding of the social, as being synonymous with society and the collective, was shaped during the multiple transformations associated with the emergence of industrial capitalism. Although in early modernity, the social conveyed the ideas of sociability and fashionable living, the term was subsequently and progressively used as “a vital descriptor” of human uniqueness, community, and agency, and attached to the decidedly modernist projects of progress and the perfection of the human condition (Schwartz, 1997, p. 277).

As Karl Polanyi described in *The Great Transformation*, the idea of the social grew in complexity in response to laissez-faire governance and its inherent incapacity to comprehend, let alone ameliorate the human costs exacted by early industrial capitalism.

According to Polanyi, laissez-faire liberalism, similar to contemporary neoliberalism, promoted an “uncritical reliance on the alleged self-healing virtues of unconscious growth” (1957, p. 33). But, this strategy of enabling “the market mechanism to be the sole director of human beings and their natural environment” invited “the demolition of society” (1957, p. 73). Market driven governance, according to Polanyi, was a unique political construct, never before encountered in the productive or reproductive organization of human societies (1957, p. 69), and its consequences forced people, in effect, to “discover” society “behind the veil” of the market economy. In particular, pauperism and the rampant poverty associated with early industrialization “fixed attention on the incomprehensible fact that poverty seemed to go with plenty” – a revelation, Polanyi argued, was “as powerful as that of the most spectacular events of history” (1957, pp. 84-85). These newly realized juxtapositions between economy and society and wealth and poverty informed a particular form of politics that would animate western democracies for the next century, leading Polanyi to conclude that “social not technical invention was the intellectual mainspring of the Industrial Revolution” (1957, p. 119).

By the mid-nineteenth century, radical thinkers had fused the adjective “social” with the noun “problem”. In early nineteenth century Europe, the social problem was unequivocally cast in the singular and attributed to the unconstrained and unequal distribution of wealth and power of early industrial capitalism (Schwartz, 1997, p. 279). Indeed, the idea of *le probleme social* quickly spread across Europe, animating the 1848 Revolution in France, the essays of such leading thinkers as British liberal John Stuart Mill, and the policy platforms of continental social democratic parties (Rose, 1999, p. 117; Schwartz, 1997).

Also deeply invested in the political struggles of the time, Marx was adamant that *le probleme social* was and should remain exclusively understood as the exploitive relationship between capital and labour. Marx worried that the phrase would be pluralized as a raft of social problems and co-opted by the middle class, indeed, by “any man who has a sympathetic heart for the misery of his brothers” (quoted in Schwartz, 1997, p. 279). For Marx, the political mutation of *the* social problem into social problems promised only to conceal the fundamental realities of class exploitation, and, thus, erode its revolutionary potential.

Despite Marx’s anxieties, the social problem was soon redefined and pluralized, both as competing interpretations of *the* social, and as a proliferating field of social problems. During these years, modern society developed, as conservative social historian Gertrude Himmelfarb explains, its “moral imagination” (1984). A plethora of voluntary organizations sprung up in civil society, offering hope and help to those deemed to have a problem, and were worthy of help, among them, the addicted, poor, abandoned, prostituted, insane, delinquent, and morally and spiritually impaired. Quite independently from the state or the rule of law, this movement for social reform created its own discourses, apparatuses of knowledge, modes of intervention, and fields of expertise. Social reform was understood as the mark of a civilized society because, as was often repeated, only modern societies were sufficiently advanced morally and technologically – the only ones “modern enough” – to care about the marginalized and to devise strategies for intervention to change their condition (Schwartz, 1997, pp. 282, 288). In the process,

the social way of thinking, representing, and intervening was embedded as a “distinctive idiom” in western politics (Rose, 1999, pp. 26-27).

The idea of social justice provided the critical moral and philosophical underpinnings for this new language of politics. By the end of the 19th century, social justice had become the rallying call for social democratic parties across Europe (Barry, 2005, p. 5), which had gained political force as civil and democratic rights were progressively extended to the working classes and their organizations. The social justice project revolved around several key assumptions, beginning with the liberal promise of citizen equality. More fundamentally, however, the idea of social justice rested on the premise that justice was a virtue that could be applied both to the collective and the individual and, moreover, that social institutions and social positions could and should be assessed as being just or unjust (Jackson, 2005, p. 358). As Barry puts it, “the justice of unequal relations between employers and employees could be called into question, as could the distribution of income and wealth arising from capitalist institutions” (2005, p. 5). In contrast to liberalism’s promise of individual dignity, autonomy, and rights, the economic inequalities generated by unregulated market forces were deemed as being unjust, the product of structural flaws that modern “just” societies could ameliorate through redistribution (Barry, 2005, p. 5). Social justice thus had a “substantial political content,” which recommended the alleviation of poverty and the reduction of inequalities “as a matter of justice rather than charity” (Jackson, 2005, p. 360).

This critical distinction between justice and charity rested on the identification of structural or systemic inequalities, which, in turn, demanded redistribution of collective resources by society as a whole, and most obviously through the state (Raphael, 2001, pp. 233-236). Various principles of justice might be evoked to justify this commitment – for example, social need, the assertion of collective over individual interests, compensation for structural changes, or the pursuit of citizen equality (Jackson, 2005, p. 360; Williams, 1989, p. 32). The point to be underlined here is that dominant constructions of social justice required that the state rather than individuals or charitable organizations “had the responsibility for shaping and enforcing the chosen distribution of social resources” (Fleischacker, 2004, p. 7).

The Social Citizen

In the early decades of the 20th century, these principles were embraced by ever-wider segments of the political spectrum, and, following the Great Depression of the 1930s, embedded in the ethos and ambitions of social liberalism, the technologies the welfare state, and constructions of the iconic social citizen. While postwar welfare states differed widely in the ways that they implemented the prescriptions of social liberalism, all embraced three foundational principles that marked a radical departure from the political rationalities of laissez-faire liberalism, which, by the 1940s, was widely condemned as a failed experiment in governance. First, social liberalism redefined the relationship between the state and the market. Postwar welfare states operationalized the idea that the state was responsible for the just distribution of social resources and that the market could and should be regulated in order to maximize economic and political stability and the collective wellbeing of all citizens. Moreover, the ideals of social justice and citizen

equality prescribed that certain goods – for example, education and health care – should not be entrusted to the capitalist market because it was incapable of ensuring fair distribution. Second, and importantly, social liberalism prescribed that all citizens could make claim to a measure of equality, social security, and collective provision as a right of citizenship, independent of their status in the market or their personal character. Social citizenship required positive obligations from the collective to provide resources for the welfare of individuals. Finally, social liberalism demanded that public administration be infused with a new ethos of planning, impersonal procedures, and new technologies of governance, among them progressive taxation and the pooling of resources and risk through social insurance (Young, 1990, p. 67; Plant, 1998, p. 58; Brodie, 1997) – what Lord Beveridge described a “new type of human institution” (quoted in Lund 2002, 110). The social citizen was an historical icon, the product of over a century of discursive and political struggles around the inherent gap between liberalism’s promise of citizen equality and the structural inequalities of capitalism. For citizenship theorists, T. H. Marshall foremost among them, social citizenship rights enhanced the practical worth of liberal political and civil rights, which could only be hollow promises if citizens were hobbled by the indignities and insecurities of poverty. The extension and protection of the full range of citizenship rights, in turn, nourished “a direct sense of community membership based on loyalty to a civilization which is a common possession” (Marshall, 1964, pp. 40-41) – in other words, social rights provided the foundations for national solidarity and cohesion. In Canada, in particular, social citizenship discourses were interwoven with an emerging narrative of pan-Canadian nationalism: postwar social programs were represented as the glue of commonality among Canadians, which distinguished them, at least according to the nationalist myth, from their less caring and less sharing American neighbours (Brodie, 2002).

Of course, the practices of liberal welfare regimes such as Canada’s fell far short of the moral and substantive aspirations of social liberalism. If there is one universal in politics, it is precisely that “reality always escapes the theories that inform programs and the ambitions that underpin them” (Miller and Rose, 1990, pp. 10-11). Critics of the welfare state have generated a long list of fault lines, among them: the promise of universal social citizenship rights eluded most citizens, except perhaps the white male breadwinner (Esping-Anderson, 1990); an almost singular focus on economic redistribution veiled other systemic barriers to citizen equality such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and able-ism (Williams, 1989); little discursive space was available for equality claims-making grounded in recognition of cultural difference (Young, 1990); the radical potential of social justice was diffused by alternative formulations such as equality of opportunity (Armstrong, 2006); process was prioritized over outcome, leaving structures of inequality unchallenged; and, perhaps most critically, the ethos of social justice was displaced by the bureaucratic technical performances of Keynesian economics (Dean, 1999). Paradoxically, these performances would later give legitimacy to professional economists to colonize the policy making process (Fine, 2001).

Yet, as accurate as these and other critiques undoubtedly are, they underestimate or miss entirely what is perhaps the most critical innovation and legacy of social liberalism and a century of popular struggles around the idea of social justice – notably the myriad ways in which the social way of seeing and the social idiom was embedded in identity formation, including the social citizen, the framing of political legitimacy and

claims-making, and the practice of advanced liberal democratic politics. Social liberalism's promise of citizen equality, its promotion of collective intervention to mediate structural inequalities, and its commitment to social planning and social justice informed a particular performance of liberal-democratic politics – one which was “dependent upon the identification of a group with a shared identity,” which could be shown to have been “denied their full and proper legal and/or human rights.” This kind of politics, moreover, presumed the existence of a welfare state because it assumed immutable linkages between social rights, social equality, and social progress (Smart 1995, p. 107).

Despite, its omissions and exclusions, then, the universal and moral framing of the social and, especially the construction of social citizenship opened discursive space and granted legitimacy to the practice of immanent critique, constituting a moral and political “lever that was later used by a variety of the social movements of the excluded” (Yuval Davis 1999, p. 121). Social liberalism, in other words, provided language for the systemically disadvantaged to talk back to the state, to make claims as citizens who had been actively denied its promise of social justice, and to mandate the state to regulate and ameliorate structural assaults on individual and collective wellbeing. As the next section describes, neoliberal governing practices, and especially neoliberal social policy reforms target precisely this social way of representing and intervening.

The Neoliberal Social Imaginary

Contemporary political life in Canada, and, indeed, across advanced liberal democracies, is riddled with gaps, disconnects and ruptures. There are gaps between what Canadians want government to do and what it actually does, between policy prescriptions and social needs, and between our national narratives and our lived experience. Citizens are treading water in a sea of uncertainty, which is agitated by a collision of world views and a struggle over the very meaning of such politically grounding concepts as the public, citizenship, equality, and justice. This is an era of conjunctural politics in which one political rationality, one way of seeing, representing, and intervening, is attempting to submerge and exceed another.

This is a prolonged politics, where change is neither complete nor achieved without contestation, and often yields only partial victories or unsustainable ambiguities. Over the course of a generation, the ascendancy of the neoliberal governing project in Canada and elsewhere has systemically eroded the foundational assumptions of social liberalism and overhauled the governing technologies of the postwar welfare state. One Canadian government after another has abandoned the vision of social citizenship, social security, and social justice, offering in their place a new social imaginary that pinpoints the market, one buoyed by the logics of neo-classical economics, as the primary, if not “natural” source of both individual wellbeing and freedom, and political legitimacy.

Although neoliberalism is often likened to laissez-faire liberalism, it is in many ways far more radical and invidious than its predecessor (so much so that one wonders whether the “liberal” part of this label is warranted). Two arguments inform this claim. First, laissez faire rested on the early liberal construction of separate spheres – a societal pluralism that understood the public, the market, and the private sphere of domestic

relations and individuation as having distinct functions, hierarchies, rules and value structures (Walzer, 1984; Bowles and Gintis, 1986). Laissez-faire understood that the state, however minimalist, had a different mandate than the other two pieces of the liberal puzzle. The liberal state was uniquely challenged to intervene in economic and domestic life, and to provide public goods that either did not conform to market logics, or could not be entrusted to market mechanisms, including market failure.

In contrast to laissez-faire, neoliberal fundamentalists envision a state that both elevates the market over all else and adopts market logics to guide its own conduct. The state, in other words, is expected to ask what is efficient, itself a contestable term, instead of what is right, fair, or possible. In theory and practice, the neoliberal state is implored to engage in a continuous process of auto-critique “centred on the question of whether it is possible to govern less or more economically” (Armstrong 2006, p. 57). This utopian conceit demands that government, in effect, repeals itself by constructing and disciplining self-governing and self-sufficient individuals who live in the mythical econometric space where all other things are equal.

Second, the neoliberal social imaginary strives to embed market logics into the everyday calculations of who we are and how we should live our lives. As Brown argues, “neoliberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy.” It extends and disseminates market values to all institutions and social action, and rewards individuals and institutions for enacting this vision (2005, pp. 39-40). This too is a radical departure from laissez-faire. Adam Smith and the Enlightenment theorists “could never have conceived of a society in which the sphere of individual economic calculation has expanded into the whole domain of social relationships” (Jordan, 2005, p. 164). As Jordan further explains,

They would all have taken for granted that the context of social life would remain a set of institutions (families, communities, nations) with a collective logic of independence and sharing. They would not have expected individual autonomy and choice to construct or sustain that order.... (Ibid.)

The transformations envisioned by neoliberalism are mirrored in, among other things, the New Public Management, risk assessment, outcome-based policy, fiscalized social policy, active welfarism and so on, but their reflection in these and other policies is only partial. It is invariably impeded, challenged and distorted by the residuals of the descending governing order. Previously cultivated identities, political consensus, and cultural ideals, which are deeply embedded in social life, and tell us who we are and what we stand for, constitute obstacles to the promotion of a new governing order, and its particular way of representing and intervening (Clarke, 2007). Raymond Williams further explains:

The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings and values, which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived

and practiced on the basis of the residue ... of some previous social and cultural institution or formation (1977, 122; quoted in Clarke, 2007).

In addition to residues, an ascendant political rationality is also challenged by emergent risks, frictions, and ruptures that neither it nor its predecessor projected or imagined. As John Clarke explains, the dominant, residual and emergent “exist in a dynamic inter-relationship with each other ... the dominant is always engaged in processes of trying to sustain and extend its dominance through diverse strategies – demobilizing, marginalizing, incorporating, and reworking alternative possibilities” (2007).

Clarke enumerates several ways in which contemporary neoliberal governance subordinates the previous performances of the social. Among them, *erasing* involves the simple elimination of many postwar social programs while *privatizing* and *subjugating* consists of assigning formerly public goods and services to private market providers and imposing the market logics of private profit and supply and demand on previously decommodified public goods. Other strategies of subordination include: *narrowing* or downsizing and targeting social programs to specific groups that are identified as being at risk; *functionalizing* or redesigning social programs so that they primarily address the needs of neoliberal labour markets rather than personal wellbeing; and *fiscalizing* or transforming social policies that required program planning and service providers into tax credits and deductions, which purportedly allows citizens “choice” in meeting their social needs. The latter strategy of subordinating the social is closely linked to both *reinventing* the ethos of public management to better reflect the alleged efficiencies of markets, and *economizing*, or encouraging citizens to identify as consumers of public services, and to embrace market logics in their everyday calculations with the goal of becoming self-sufficient (Clarke, 2007; Brodie, 2008).

There are numerous examples of the diverse and mutually reinforcing strategies of subordinating the social in neoliberal times, many of which have met widespread public condemnation and resistance. There are, however, two neoliberal ways of representing and intervening, neoclassical economic doxa and individualization, which are pivotal. The rest of this article examines how these governing strategies systematically disarticulate the historical and political interface between citizenship, social provision, and social justice. (Ong, 2006, p. 161).

Neoclassical Economic Doxa

As already noted, political rationalities embody particular styles of truth-telling, which harness identities to specific social imaginaries, legitimize certain truth tellers, and delegitimize others. Indeed, the ascendancy of any political project hinges on whether or not its foundational assumptions - its way of seeing - achieve the status of doxa – “an unexamined frame for all further cognition” (Bauman, 2000, p. 30). Political identities, styles of politics, and governing aspirations are formed and re-formed, that is given new shape and meaning, through doxa. The neoliberal project is grounded in the doxa of classical economic theory, which is commonly understood as being antagonistic to the social broadly defined, not the least because of its unwavering commitment to methodological individualism, which reduces humanity, in all its diversity, historicity,

and complexity to a singular and abstract formulation of individual utility maximization. This style of truth telling is “based on an initial act of abstraction” that “dissociates a particular category of practices, or a particular dimension of all practice, from the social order in which all human practice is immersed” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 1). It requires, as an article of faith, that we accept “all other things as being equal” when our lived experiences tell us precisely the opposite (Rose, 1999, p. 30).

This chasm between economic orthodoxy and the social is not new. It has propelled movements for social reform and social justice as well as the politics of redistribution for the past two centuries. What is distinct to this era is the extent to which economy orthodoxy has spilled over its academic and disciplinary boundaries, progressively enlarging “the territory of economic theory by a series of redefinitions of its object” (Gordon, 1991, p. 43). Until quite recently, economics, both in theory and application, has tended to live a life quite apart from the other social sciences which, in turn, were content to leave it alone to talk to its world of hypotheticals and formal models. Increasingly, however, orthodox economics has itself taken a social turn, progressively colonizing the social sciences, especially at the point where they intersect with public policy. While it is widely recognized that neoliberal economists conquered finance ministries and central agencies some time ago, social policy making also has progressively fallen under economics’ seductive claims to “scientific” certainty, neutrality, and universalism (Clarke, 2004, p. 89). Economic orthodoxy now informs the very conceptualization of social problems and the generation of public policy solutions (Fine, 2001).

As a result, economic orthodoxy is no longer positioned in opposition to the social but, instead, presents itself as the preferred intellectual apparatus to frame our thinking about the social and government. In particular, we are increasingly implored to assess governmental institutions and policies in terms of their costs and benefits to individuals (Jordan 2005, p. 158) and to eschew previous formulations of social justice or citizenship equality as being ideologically driven or economically inefficient. Economic orthodoxy invests its pedlars with the legitimacy of scientific neutrality, simultaneously positioning its challengers as being as spurious, self-interested, and partial. As social policy advocates can readily attest, one can either accept the terms of economics’ narrow conceptual framework (and thereby confirm its legitimacy and reinforce its hegemony) or be relegated to the sidelines of the debate. This doxa, however, is a performance of a particular way of seeing – it is not so much a description of how the world is, as an image in which the world is being made (Massey, 1999, p. 40).

Economic orthodoxy demands allegiance to a series of profoundly political corollaries that have been progressively embedded in the ethos of contemporary policy-making. These include, but are not limited to the ideas that policy should be oriented toward: the withdrawal or abstention of the state, especially in economic regulation; a shift into the private sector of public services (e.g. contracting out); the conversion of public goods into commercial goods and citizens into consumers or clients; a renunciation of the power of the state to reduce inequalities; a glorification of individual self-help and responsibility; and undermining representations of the state as a collective authority and an agent of social solidarity (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 11).

These prescriptions for governance are profoundly political and thus comprise the fault lines for resistance and revisionings of the social from the perspectives and

commitments of the residuals and the emergent. This counter-politics, however, often fails to appreciate that the neoliberal project gains its force, not only from the performances of powerful economic and political actors and the demoralization of popular forces, but also from its promise of individual freedom and empowerment, which has proven seductive even to those most abused by this conceit. Neoliberalism, in a sense, promotes its own vision of social justice – one which, following from economic doxa, brackets out the influence of structure and systemic barriers to citizen equality and social justice, revolving, instead, around the primacy of individual choices and open systems that empower people to make their own choices about how they will live their own lives. Justice, within this context, demands that economic rewards and societal resources are linked to ambition, effort, and the prudent exercise of individual choice, rather than, for example, to citizenship status (Armstrong, 2006, p. 71). This model also assigns personal, rather than collective, responsibility to those who, through their own imprudent choices, have forfeited their claims to individual choice and freedom. In sum, neoliberalism's model of justice endeavours to supplant the residual political goals of social equality, social security, and social wellbeing with makers of social progress that are only intelligible when viewed through the lens of neoclassical economic doxa.

Individualization

The infiltration of the postwar terrain of social governance with neoliberal political rationalities reaches into individual conduct, and prescribes the citizen-subject of a neoliberal order (Brown, 2005, p. 42), largely through discourses and strategies of individualization. While commensurate with the methodological and ontological individualism of orthodox economics and classical liberalism, individualization, or what Beck characterizes as part of a broader contemporary compulsion “to live a life of one's own,” is a distinct process that is quite unique in the practice of modern governance (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, pp. 22-26). As he explains, individualization has a different meaning than individualism, which lies at the heart of the neoliberal conception of social justice, and is more broadly understood as self-actualizing or self-seeking behaviour. Individualization is a disciplinary and dividing practice that places steeply rising demands on people to find personal causes and responses to what are, in effect, collective social problems. In Beck's view, we are all now compelled to find a “biographic solution” to systemic contradictions (Ibid, xxii). Responsibility for social crises, which find their genesis in such macro processes as the globalization of production, geopolitical and environmental displacement, racism, or unequal gender orders to name a few, is shifted onto the shoulders of individuals. Living a life of one's own interpolates the entrepreneurial self who takes personal responsibility for her successes and her failures, most critically the failure of not being able to go it alone (Brodie, 2007).

Individualization is increasingly embedded in strategies for social policy reform, which both promote the illusion of choice and are designed to shape citizens into self-sufficient market actors who provide for their needs and those of their families (Brown 2005, p. 42). These innovations represent a fundamental shift in thinking that subordinates, if not explicitly rejects two critical assumptions that informed social

governance for much of the twentieth century: first, social structures systematically advantage some groups of citizens and disadvantage others; second, social policy appropriately corrects for systemic barriers and inequalities.

Yet, the individualization of contemporary social and political life is also rife with a series of paradoxes that undermine the legitimacy and stability of the neoliberal project and open space for re-forming social justice in a neoliberal era. First, as Beck notes, individualization invites people “to constitute themselves as individual: to plan, understand, design themselves as individuals and, should they fail, to blame themselves. Individualism thus implies, paradoxically, a collective lifestyle” (1998, p. 28). This invitation extends to members of groups, which by all indicators are structurally disadvantaged; they are collectively individualized with the expectation that they elect to rise above systemic barriers or, in the words of Canada’s Policy Research Initiative, depart the “identity markers” that confine them to the ranks of the “persistently poor” (Brodie, 2008).

However, these prescriptions are a mirage. As Bauman explains, “How one lives becomes the *biographical solution to systemic contradictions* – or rather, this is what the hapless individuals are authoritatively told and come to believe to be the case (in fact, a ‘biographical solution to systemic contradictions’ is an oxymoron: it may be sought, but cannot be found” (2002, 68). Beyond, this logical fallacy, the language of choice, which underpins individualization strategies, not only exceeds the grasp of the possible for most of us, but is itself illusory. Again, Bauman refines this point – “the factors that constitute [one’s] individuality – confinement to individual resources and individual responsibility for the results of life choices – are not themselves a matter of choice ... More often than not, control over life is the way in which the story of life is told, rather than the way in which life is lived” (2002, p. 69).

Finally, and importantly, individualization strategies are often couched in the language of epochal necessity - as a singular and necessary response both to the present postmodern and post-industrial moment that no longer corresponds to the one-size-fits-all identities and life courses of previous eras and to the relentless pressures of technological change and economic globalization. These conditions, we are repeatedly told, demand that people find expression and security through flexibility and adaptation. Yet, without some pooling of the risks that collectively challenge us as flexible actors, the individualized life is an extremely risky and insecure life. There is a palpable difference between flexibility and precariousness, between being empowered to adapt to structural change, and being abandoned to devise personal strategies to survive forces beyond our control. By denying the language and legitimacy of collective claims-making, grounded in our shared experience of systemic vulnerability, individualization, in effect, represents the “institutionalization of insecurity,” and, for Bauman, “a mode of domination grounded in the precariousness of existence” (2002, p. 68).

Conclusion

The ultimate paradox of our neoliberal times is that the historically unprecedented human capacity to enhance and secure human wellbeing, locally and globally, should generate such degrees of precarious existence for the vast majority of humanity, indeed for all

things living. This elevation of “social insecurity into a positive principle of collective organization” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 12) is neither inevitable nor, for that matter, productive or efficient. Rather, it is grounded in an unsustainable fundamentalism that must be contested as such. Echoing Polanyi’s indictment of laissez-faire, Ronald Wright observes in his *Short History of Progress* that “the idea that the world must be run by the stock market is as mad as any other fundamentalist delusion – Islamic, Christian, or Marxist” (2006, p. 22). It is a fundamentalism that has not displaced the residuals of over two centuries of struggles for citizenship equality and social justice. It is also a fundamentalism that is unable to comprehend and actively fuels the emergent crises of the early 21st century, among them, global warming, rampant insecurity, the polarization of the North and the South, and pervasive antagonism to neoliberalism’s imperial designs. And, it is a fundamentalism which, having failed to deliver on its core promises of wealth, wellbeing, and freedom, increasingly governs as if we live in a “state of exception” (Agamben, 2005). By raising the spectre of alien threats to our physical safety, it attempts to bypass the critical questions of justice, relying instead on secrecy, surveillance, and coercion. In the face of all of this, the necessary task of reforming social justice may very well hinge upon our collective insistence on putting the social back into our way of seeing and contesting neoliberal times. Contemporary politics invite us to seriously reflect upon a time-worn adage: if you wish peace, care for justice (quoted in Bauman, 2007, p. 5).

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