

Foreword

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We live in times when it is very difficult — not impossible but very difficult — for ordinary citizens to ferret out the truth about important public events. The picture is too often incomplete and fuzzy. By contrast, this book by Bill Warriner and Ian Peach brings into better focus a recent period of Canadian social policy and the politics of Canadian federalism.

The implementation of social policies has been no less impenetrable than that of other areas of public policy. Government budgets are shrouded in obscurity. Finding accurate data on tax expenditures in some provinces can be a challenge. It is equally difficult to work your way through governments' resource taxation and royalties; typically they are a labyrinth of exceptions and concessions that may, or may not, have encouraged development but certainly benefit resource companies. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and its provincial affiliates create "people's budgets," which give a clearer picture of government finances, but the challenge is huge.

In the same vein, this work by Warriner and Peach does us a useful service. It clarifies the social policy process. It takes us behind the postmodern cacophony of media stories, public relations spins and personalities to show us more deeply the structures and processes of Canadian federalism and, using a case study, how policy is formed in such a system.

"Fuzziness" is a methodological issue so some brief comments on the methodological implications of this careful study are in order.

Social and political amnesia may show epochal tendencies, but for the last three or four decades it has been on the increase. The problem of knowledge is not one confined to the masses. Scientists, experts, officials and academics have struggled over what constitutes knowledge and how it is formed. How has our way of thinking changed, particularly in the social sciences, that area that especially informs social policy and trains social policy practitioners? Indeed, we have seen a major upheaval in our methodologies and in the way we generate knowledge.

It used to be, when we were confronted with obscurity, confusion or competing claims, that we asked for "just the facts." For much of the last century, positivism had the franchise on facts, particularly in the United States. This approach to knowledge insists that reality lies exclusively in the empirical realm. Positivist social scientists spend a lot of time getting their measurements right, that is, valid and reliable, without exercising much thought about what might be going on in the deeper structures beyond the realm of observations. Indeed, they deny that such a deeper reality exists. This

Foreword

approach appeared to produce a straightforward foundation for knowledge — it had to square with observations.

Positivism explained things by describing them — a cause was simply the regular occurrence of two or more things together. But some spun elaborate theories or causal explanations nonetheless. Parsons (1951) often used obscure concepts to theorize that society was a functioning system, superior to its individual people, and with a tendency to maintain a steady state, perhaps a will to live. While not logically entailed in Parsons' structural functionalism, it is a short leap to claim that leading nations in the world, such as the United States, must be functioning pretty well and deserve to be modelled as exemplars of healthy societies (Hoselitz, 1960; for a critique see Frank, 1967). As well, it trained a host of policy practitioners for the United States and other governments and arguably informed American policies during the Cold War and beyond (Buxton, 1985).

Positivism brought forth its critics. Underclass representatives noticed that its grander theories centred the ideas of the ruling class. Feminists showed how they privileged the lives of men, underdevelopment theorists how they legitimized imperialist powers and regions, African-Americans and other dominated ethnic and racialized groups how they legitimated the rule of whites, or more precisely, dominating groups. In the face of positivism's claim that it was value free, not only were the theories shown to be biased, they were shown to play a role in maintaining ideological hegemony in capitalist and other unequal and divided societies.

In the hands of postmodernists such as Foucault, this critique revived an old suspicion. If the foundations of knowledge in the tradition of positivism were not possible, then, foundationalism itself became suspect. From this perspective, claims cannot be true or false. Instead, we hold claims because we are committed to them, think they are important, like them or they are part of our moral upbringing. For Foucault (1980), knowledge and power are closely associated. There are knowledges that dominate and colonize subaltern "others." This, in turn, brings into existence resistance and other knowledges. It is not a matter of one or the other knowledge being true. In the postmodern view, all knowledge is relative; we must be suspicious of explanations, the social policies that they spawn and even the state that puts them into practice.

The postmodern approach has a subtle attraction. It deconstructs grand theories, showing how their "totalizing" explanations and "universal" causes are contradictory and oversimplifications. It may even appear to be liberating when it unmasks the privileged status — or truth — of conventional and official knowledges, thereby legitimating the voices of colonized and dominated peoples. But this is a backhanded form of liberation. On this account, all forms of oppression are equally important and have an equal right to be

heard and accommodated. Further, in practice, those giving voice to a particular oppression are competing against others. Each becomes suspicious of the others' claims. Grounds for adjudicating between claims become limited and tend toward force rather than respectful, reasoned and democratic discourse. Instead of building liberatory solidarity among dominated peoples, it breeds individualism and ineffective isolation. It surely frustrates the work of democratic policymakers, who must search through shrill voices and quiet voices to find truly important needs. After all, things *are* caused, and some causes *are* more important than others. Social policy formation must get the order of causes right if it has any hope of being effective.

According to Jameson (1991), postmodernism fits well with the current stage of multinational capitalism dominated by the global marketplace and speculative finance. With it come the decentring of the subject as an autonomous agent and the end of collective projects. Even the common national language by which such projects could be framed is replaced by micro languages and the micro politics of identities — racial, ethnic, gender, religious and others. Market alienation grows to the point where we consume the image, the spectacle or the pseudo-event and we scarcely know use-value, only exchange-value. Amin (2006) shows how postmodernism makes the development of resistance to liberal globalization both difficult and uncertain.

As the neo-liberal ideology began to legitimate the end of the Keynesian welfare state and downsized government, a process that Warriner and Peach describe well in chapter one, people increasingly became suspicious of government, of experts and bureaucrats, of other social groups, of each other. With no convincing way to judge competing claims, new forms of fundamentalist religious faith became a substitute, leading on the world stage to what Achcar calls “the clash of barbarisms” (Achcar, 2002).

Neo-liberalism began to be reflected in state policies in the mid-1970s but by the 1980s and 1990s it was in full bloom. Curiously, the civil servants that put the National Child Benefit into place didn't seem to notice! Or more likely, and no less important, they were able to peer through the ideological fog to stay focused upon two central elements of Canadian reality: the importance of social programs and the unacceptably high number of children in poverty, and threats to Canadian federalism.

In her “Reflection” at the end of chapter six, Martha Friendly remembers her persistent question: “Is this as good as it gets?” Not only is this a useful question in the campaign for better social programs, it is an important methodological question as well. For one thing, it expects some evidence; what proportion of children are in poverty, what are the conditions under which children grow up, and so forth. What is more, the question recognizes that we need to do some deep theoretical thinking in order to figure out

Foreword

the evidence and to understand the experience; what is child poverty, what caused it to be like this, what are its fundamental tendencies? Finally, the question is asked within a certain political, economic and cultural context. It is value-laden, as are those of us who ask it. It does not expect that the answer will be outside society or value-free or that the answerer, attempting some “God trick,” will step outside of social conditions to proclaim the truth on child poverty. Rather, it expects that, using our powers of observation and reason and drawing upon our best social practices of dialogue, criticism, reflection and restatement, we will arrive at a true understanding of child poverty, its causes and tendencies, that will allow us, collectively, to improve the situation. If our understanding turns out to have been wrong, then the question expects that, collectively, we will fix it. The question does not expect that “anything goes” for an answer, even though social commentators may sometimes, perhaps increasingly, proffer answers on minimalist standards of reason and observation. It expects an answer that is true.

Martha Friendly’s question also has a certain dialectic embedded in it. On the pessimistic side, as the authors show in chapters one and two, child poverty and the condition of Canadian federalism could be much worse. With the rise of transnational corporations, “free” trade and more thorough-going global competition, what is to stop the rise in poverty and the withering of the state? When workers and, arguably, farmers and parts of the middle class, were (and are) pitted against each other globally, it was hard to see how the “race to the bottom” had any way-stations on the way down. On the optimistic side, the question demands our commitment, our human agency and our hope to make things better.

As the story unfolds during the 1980s and 1990s, a core group of government officials might also have been asking “Is this as good as it gets?” The processes of globalization in its current version took hold, growth in the low end of the wage scale stagnated, income disparities widened, and Canada’s child poverty rate grew. Similarly, the politics of federalism in Canada took a hit; the federal government, often unilaterally, cut domestic programs and offloaded costs to the provinces, and a Quebec referendum to separate came very close to passing. An unlikely force, Canada’s provinces and territories, which in the past and since have not often agreed or even regularly talked to each other, attempted to correct the situation. They constructed intergovernmental structures and processes for developing and considering alternative proposals, negotiating and reaching conclusions for action. This in itself offered a new version of Canadian federalism, one in which the provinces could develop and advance a national agenda as opposed to a conflicting collection of provincial and territorial agendas. They found ways to engage the federal government in this process. The National Child Benefit was the first program to appear from this new ensemble. The National Children’s

Agenda also benefited from it. The Social Union Framework Agreement, while pursued vigorously, showed some of the weaknesses of the new mechanisms. But, I will let the authors tell the story!

What can be said of the study that follows? To my mind it is neither postmodern nor positivist. Certainly it relies upon observations and experience but, unlike positivism, the explanation doesn't end there. More in the tradition of critical realism (Archer, Bhaskar and Collier, 1998; Danermark et al., 2002), the authors have given us a reasoned explanation by which we can begin to understand observations about poverty rates, the intricate workings of assistance delivery systems, the web of intergovernmental structures and meetings, and more.

Not paralyzed by competing claims, the authors peer far down into the causal processes of the Canadian political economy to show us where alleviating child poverty fits in. It is, fundamentally, a wage supplement, a way-station of sorts for low-income working families who are dealt a very poor hand by the forces of globalization. Of course, it is also a wage subsidy to employers who are unable or unwilling to pay wages sufficient to bring families out of poverty.

Still, it is at root a social program focused upon helping families with children to mitigate the effects of poverty. Done adequately, it assures them decent shelter, food and education, and it helps children to grow up in environments where their human potentials have some reasonable chance of being realized. These are use-values. No doubt, using some alienated arithmetic, money values could be attached to them, but it would give us merely a vague appearance of deeper human needs. These use-values are justified not by the inhumanity of the markets but because they are fundamental to the human condition and essential to the collective well-being of human societies (Polanyi, 1957).

Perhaps Medicare and public health, public education, public housing and transportation, and other parts of our state-supported social services and public infrastructure can be seen in the same light. If, traditionally, we have tried to mitigate the effect of global markets by demanding better wages and working conditions, a higher minimum wage or, in agriculture, higher commodity prices and marketing boards, the authors' analysis suggests an alternative politics of resistance, demanding a stronger state with stronger social services and infrastructure, and joining forces internationally with those who have similar interests. Is this a return to the post-World War II "welfare state" or is this something new? Can such a state be financed without a revolt by capital and if not, what then? It is well beyond the scope of this study to answer such fascinating questions, but it ought to make us think about them.

Finally, unlike positivists or postmodernists, Warriner and Peach do

Foreword

not offer legitimation to imperial projects, corporate domination or the interests behind globalization. On the contrary, their study offers a critical analysis of these forces at work in important economic and political corners of Canadian society. In that sense, it is a product of the social conditions in Canada. It is value-laden. It examines its object of study from a certain standpoint. It is written by two experienced and respected civil servants and policy practitioners, so, of course, it takes that standpoint. But, more broadly, it addresses poverty and federalist policy formation from the standpoint of those who resist domination and globalization. Notably, against those of us who have been dumbed down, are suffering political amnesia or are lulled into complacency and the attitude that “there is no alternative,” this study shows that things can be done, changes can be made, new structures can be put in place. It is a story about how people acted to bring about change and conserve important collective values. The subject is not decentred in this narrative.

Critics may dismiss the National Child Benefit and the National Children’s Agenda as inadequate. It is true that programs to “eliminate” poverty can be more pastiche than real and defences of Canadian federalism can be merely spectacle and media speak. But Warriner and Peach demonstrate that this was not true for the National Child Benefit, National Children’s Agenda and the Social Union Framework Agreement. Of course, programs may not live up to their expectations; conditions change, the challenges and effects of global markets intensify. This does not mean that suspicion will suffice or that despair is convincing. It simply means that the programs and Canadian federalism, once again, need to be strengthened.

Postmodern cynicism is not helpful here. We can take some comfort in knowing, at least, that when push comes to shove, there still is a cadre of democratic civil servants who know how to put social programs in place and make Canadian federalism work. We need to encourage these people and train more of them for future crises and struggles. This book will help with that task.

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