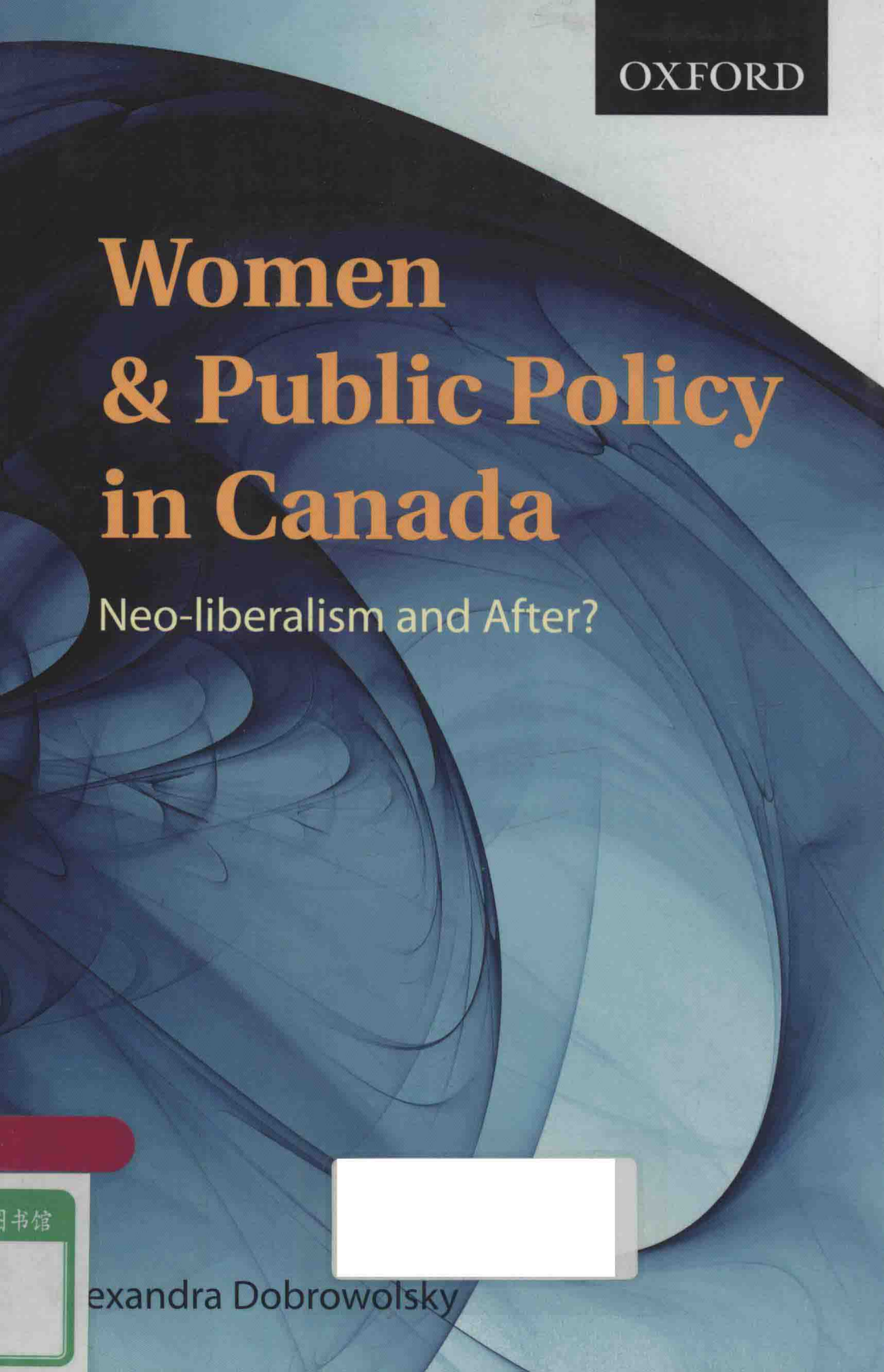
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Alexandra Dobrowolsky

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Neo-liberalism and After?

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This book is dedicated to my mother, Halyna Dobrowolsky; my sisters, Roma Dobrowolsky and Sonia McCaul; my nieces, Kalina and Emma McCaul and Alexa Gilbert; and to the memory of my late nephew Michael Devlin.

Contents

Introduction:

Neo-liberalism and After?

Alexandra Dobrowolsky

In many ways, the years approaching 2010 are reminiscent of the tumultuous 1970s. With the extreme fluctuations in oil prices, the rising cost of basic foods, like bread and rice, and the world threatened by the repercussions of a recession in the US, one is starkly reminded of the oil shocks, shortages, and stagflation (a combination of inflation and high unemployment) that stultified many countries in the 1970s and shattered the post-war Keynesian consensus. In its place, by the late 1970s, through the 1980s, and into the 1990s, a new economic and political paradigm—*neo-liberalism*—took hold and was consolidated. Does today's socio-economic and political turmoil, then, suggest cracks in, or even a crisis of, neo-liberalism? Have we seen any evidence of 'post–neo-liberal' priorities, or projects that offer policy directions 'after neo-liberalism'? Or, as some have argued, is 'neo-liberalization' simply 'rolling out' and penetrating ever wider social spaces and mindsets (Peck and Tickell 2002)? The authors in this collection critically examine recent neo-liberal as well as potentially 'post–neo-liberal' trajectories (that is, competing, contingent, and contested ideas, institutions, instruments, and identities) in a range of policy areas and consider their implications for a diversity of Canadian women.

At its core, neo-liberalism refers to a highly influential market rationality that has grown in depth and scope to encompass a daunting array of economic, political, social, and cultural phenomena. Across both the global North and South, neo-liberalism gained sway as a complex 'composite ideological structure'. That structure

> is not simply an expression of free-market libertarianism, nor is it just an outgrowth of neoconservative moral authoritarianism, but it reflects both. Neoliberalism was not only a reactionary response to fiscal and debt crises, nor is it merely a handmaiden of financialization and corporate globalization, but it is both. Neoliberalism-in-general is a loose and contradiction-laden ideological framework. (Peck 2004, 403)

Neo-liberal ideas advanced in the 1970s and developed into formidable state projects in the 1980s and 1990s. In countries around the world, the promulgation of neo-liberal policies resulted in the

> bleeding of social services, reduction of state governments . . . the ongoing liquidation of job security, the increasing elimination of a decent social wage, the creation of a society of low-skilled workers, and the emergence of a culture of permanent insecurity and fear . . . [that often hid] behind appeals to common sense and alleged immutable laws of nature. (Giroux 2008, 7)

More recently, however, some analysts have begun to question the exhaustive reach and extensive hold of neo-liberalism. Indeed, some have asserted that, as a concept, neo-liberalism is now 'entirely overworked' and even a 'cliché' (Smith 2008, 156–7). John Clarke pinpointed the nature of the problem when he wrote that the term neo-liberalism

> has been stretched too far to be productive as a critical analytical tool. Neo-liberalism suffers from promiscuity (hanging out with various theoretical perspectives), omnipresence (treated as a universal or global phenomenon), and omnipotence (identified as the cause of a wide variety of social, political and economic changes. (2008a, 135)

Although it may be overstating the case to call neo-liberalism a cliché, most would now agree that neo-liberalism is not an unchanging, immutable force and that it plays out in different ways in different places for different people. We have seen not only 'variations of neo-liberal discourses, technologies, and interventions' around the world, but also, increasingly, 'the changing repertoire of neo-liberalism over time' (Clarke 2008a, 140). For instance, Sylvia Bashevkin's research shows how the Canadian Conservative governments that first advocated neo-liberal state projects in the 1980s and early 1990s produced something more akin to neo-liberalism 'lite' in comparison to the early, heavy-handed approaches adopted by Conservative leaders in the United States and Britain. In those two countries, the coercive and punitive aspects of neo-liberalism were very real and were often combined with neo-conservative moralistic dictates that put women 'on the defensive' (Bashevkin 1998) and targeted specific, disadvantaged groups, among them lone mothers (2002). In contrast, Canadian neo-liberalism at the federal level, initially at least, contained less of this social-conservative and targeted punch. Moreover, Canadian neo-liberal blows came faster and harder after the Mulroney and Campbell Conservatives left office, that is, under the Liberals, particularly the Chrétien government in the mid-1990s.

Beyond some concession to the different manifestations of neo-liberalism, however, there is less consensus when it comes to the status of neo-liberalism in Canada today. Several contributors to this volume firmly believe not only that neo-liberalism has solidified, but that its scope has spread. From this perspective, just as structural factors like the relations of capitalism are ultimately

determinative, so too have neo-liberal, individualizing, market-driven mandates become hegemonic. Some go even further, arguing that neo-liberalism not only becomes more embedded over time, but is normalized and extends beyond political and economic policy initiatives, infiltrating social imperatives as well (see, for example, Harder in this volume). In other words, at present,

> new ways of thinking, new political formations, and new institutional forms . . . can be characterized as neo-liberal because they involve both the *direct* expansion of the scope and reach of corporate capital and the *indirect* 'economization' of areas of social and political life. (Clarke 2008a, 136)

Conversely, other contributors shed light on several contemporary developments in Canada and abroad which, in their view, illustrate that more has been going on than just neo-liberalism, end of story. From this vantage point, not only inconsistencies and interruptions in neo-liberalism, but even digressions from neo-liberalism are possible and will likely become more apparent over time.

Just as there are varieties of capitalism (Hall and Soskice 2001), there have also been radically different varieties of liberalism (O'Connor et al. 1999; Mahon in this volume). An acceptance of the spatial and increasingly temporal variability of neo-liberalism helps us to theorize it as a 'multi-vocal and contradictory phenomenon' (Larner 2000, 21). Moreover, as Ong observes:

> A context specific inquiry allows us to capture how opposing interpretations and claims can and do interrupt, slow down, deflect, and negotiate neoliberal logics and initiatives. The temporality of transmission, translation, and negotiation in this fluctuating space is fraught with political complication, contingency, and ambiguity. (2006, 17)

With a suitable theoretical lens and the close study of policies, anomalies in neo-liberalism can be seen at 'macro', 'meso', and 'micro' levels in studies that home in on specific policies, institutions, ideas, interests, and identities and their interrelations (Vickers 2008). Canada's federal system is illustrative. Despite fairly standardized federal fiscal arrangements (some of which betray a neo-liberal logic, like the Canada Health and Social Transfer, discussed below), Canada still 'has a patchwork of varying provincial programs, characterized by diverse institutional arrangements and bases of entitlement, as well as varying levels and forms of expenditures' (Prentice 2004, 194). This reflects the sway of different sets of political actors in different socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts at the sub-national level. Careful contextual analyses at such 'meso' levels (Vickers 2008), then, are more likely to show that 'attempts to install neo-liberal strategies, techniques, and politics have been far from uniform or uniformly successful' (Clarke 2008b, 259).

It is also not surprising that, with close attention paid by analysts to context and the specifics of space and time, there are also those who have identified new perspectives beyond straight neo-liberalism, such as 'inclusive liberalism'

(for a definition and discussion, see Mahon in this volume), or 'social investment' (see Jenson in this volume). Although the latter will be detailed below, suffice it to say for now that after Canada's neo-liberal high-water mark in the mid-1990s, changing ideas, representations, and policy instruments at most raised the possibility of a paradigm shift away from neo-liberalism, or at the very least, introduced discourses that reflected something more than 'pure', unadulterated neo-liberalism. Therefore, as social investment discourses in Canada (and elsewhere) became more pervasive at the end of the 1990s and well into the 2000s, the prospect of changes in, and even departures from, neo-liberalism emerged.

Of course, the nature and extent of change is deeply disputed, as the various chapters in this volume make clear. For example, as many contributors point out, the social investment perspective shares some patently neo-liberal preoccupations. In fact, some analysts have referred to social investment priorities as being akin to a 'neoliberal wolf in lamb's clothing' (McKeen 2007). Yet, as other contributors to this volume attest, the similarities to neo-liberalism do not necessarily rule out the possibility of some inconsistencies or noteworthy differences. And, if we analyze social investment and other potential changes to neo-liberalism, the idea that neo-liberalism is not monolithic becomes more plausible.

This exploration of both continuity *and* change is timely and relevant, especially when leading state and social policy studies are often prone to highlight the former. Consider studies that emphasize the resilience of welfare states, deeply entrenched policy legacies, or leading 'path dependent' policies (Pierson 1994; Bonoli 2003). Although this literature is insightful and still highly influential, it is susceptible to the critique that its exclusive focus on continuity 'misses discontinuities that are also occurring' (McBride and McNutt 2007, 179). It also tends to give short shrift to the influence of a wider range of political actors, beyond the 'usual suspects' (Dobrowolsky and Saint-Martin 2005). And so, while acknowledging the tenacity of neo-liberal logic and projects, this collection turns our attention to the dynamics and dimensions of change (see also Powell 1999; Hemerijck 2002; Jenson and Saint-Martin 2003, 2006; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Jenson 2008) and to the roles played by a broader array of political actors.

To be sure, the contributors to this volume do agree upon some fundamental issues. Firstly, the contributors emphatically agree that Canadian women, in general, have not fared well under neo-liberalism and that certain groups of women have had a much harder time than others. Whereas some women's situations have undoubtedly improved, we see growing differences between women. Secondly, few, if any, of the contributors to this volume would suggest that social investment policies have advanced women's socio-economic and political status (see also Dobrowolsky and Jenson 2004; Dobrowolsky 2006). In

fact, the exact opposite may be the case (see Jenson in this volume), and again, some women are even more prone to marginalization (see also Dobrowolsky with Lister 2006; as well as McNutt and Hawryluk, and Altamirano-Jiménez in this volume). Women, overall, have increasingly been made invisible; that is, they disappear from the policy agenda, but certain groups of women are 'instrumentalized', because some women's identities are used strategically by the state and in the media (see Dobrowolsky 2008b and Abu-Laban in this volume). Thirdly, no one in this volume claims that there has been a linear progression from neo-liberalism to social investment policies (see Collier in this volume) nor a straightforward move from neo-liberalism to something else, for that matter. Yet, all the authors in this collection do acknowledge new developments. In particular, all remark upon the return of 'the social': from the profusion of references to 'social risks' to the preponderance of 'social inclusion and exclusion' and 'social cohesion' discourses.

On this last point, however, analyses also vary considerably. Some remind us that the re-emergence of a vocabulary around the social runs counter to the main tenets of neo-liberalism and therefore supports the position that a distinctive social investment perspective has materialized. Conversely, others argue that such discourses still, ultimately, perpetuate the forces of neo-liberal marketization. They illustrate this with reference to the constrained ways that goals like social cohesion are pursued in some of Canada's once-revered and widely emulated policies, for example, health (see Armstrong in this volume) as well as immigration and multiculturalism (see Abu-Laban in this volume). Still others draw attention to the paradoxes involved when governmental concern over faltering social cohesion has not been made manifest in key policy areas, even those that are attracting great attention and concern of late, such as climate change (see McNutt and Hawryluk in this volume).

The debate runs deep over whether we are seeing substantially different dynamics at play in, and beyond, neo-liberalism. Yet to reach an agreement on this highly contentious concern is not the intent of this volume. Rather, the aim is to open up the conversation by advancing more nuanced, context-specific studies that evaluate the contemporary state of women and public policy in Canada from many vantage points from varied perspectives, and through several lenses and layers of analysis. It is only by exploring continuities, changes, and contradictions that we can re-assert the vital role of political struggle, broadly conceived. By treating neo-liberalism as more contingent and contested, by keeping neo-liberalism more 'open', we are prodded to consider alternatives and to think 'about what is not neo-liberal and thus the possibility of living without neoliberalism' (Clarke 2008a, 145).

But before we discuss such matters further, more background about what neo-liberalism is and how it has unfolded in Canada would be beneficial.

Fleshing Out Neo-liberalism

It is widely acknowledged that neo-liberalism first took hold in the United States and Britain, where it was spearheaded by two conservative leaders, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, respectively. Given intensified globalization, neo-liberal ideas and practices quickly spread to parties of other political stripes (see, for example, Hay 1999), and influential political actors adopted them in other places of governance (George 2000; Peck 2004). The result was substantial political, economic, and social transformations around the world:

> There has everywhere been an emphatic turn towards neoliberalism in political-economic practices and thinking since the 1970's. . . . Almost all states, from those newly minted after the collapse of the Soviet Union to old-style social democracies and welfare states such as New Zealand and Sweden, have embraced, sometimes voluntarily and in other instances in response to coercive pressures, some version of neoliberal theory and adjusted at least some policies and practices accordingly. (Harvey 2005, 2–3)

Neo-liberalism has many complex elements, and although the emphases shift over space and time, its most distinctive traits can be distilled as follows. First and foremost, the term neo-liberalism 'denotes new forms of political-economic governance premised on the extension of market relationships' (Larner 2000, 5). For neo-liberals, the market must remain unfettered and thus 'free mobility of capital between sectors, regions, and countries is regarded as crucial' (Harvey 2005, 66). Furthermore, with the economy as the driver, both 'the political' and 'the social' take a back seat. The space for politics shrinks, not only in terms of the size and scope of the state, but also with respect to the legitimacy of collective action. In place of collective struggle, neo-liberalism heralds the individual. These premises explain why Margaret Thatcher declared, 'There is no such thing as society'!

Neo-liberalism calls for state cutbacks: downsizing, deficit and debt reduction, devolution, and deregulation are dominant ideals and practices. The market is maximized, and the state minimizes its role with respect to social well-being. As public space contracts, more scope is given to the private, including the assigning of individual solutions to societal problems. Individual 'choice' and self-sufficiency are championed. Individuals' duties and obligations are trumpeted over deeper and broader citizenship rights, like social rights, to which the welfare state was committed under Keynesianism (Marshall 1965). Under neo-liberalism, those who rely on the state are considered wastrels and scroungers, and those mobilizing for an active state and alternative agendas are written off as pesky 'special interests'. Neo-liberalism's reduced state responsibilities and its program 'streamlining', along with deregulation and privatization, have also effectively resulted in off-loading onto the family. And, given the

gendered construction of social reproduction, women are usually compelled to take up much of the slack.

As Larner carefully explains, neo-liberalism can be variously construed. It can be viewed as a *policy framework*, 'marked by a shift from Keynesian welfarism towards a political agenda favouring the relatively unfettered operation of markets' (2000, 6). In addition, it can be considered to be an *ideology* where the approach to neo-liberalism is more 'sociological' and 'in which a wider range of institutions, organizations and processes are considered' (2000, 9). Neo-liberalism can also be interpreted as *governmentality* (a neologism of governance and rationality coined by Michel Foucault—see Murray 2007, 162) where, beyond ideology, discourses are involved, and discourse is understood

> not simply as a form of rhetoric disseminated by hegemonic economic and political groups, nor as the framework within which people represent their lived experience, but rather as a system of meaning that constitutes institutions, practices and identities in contradictory and disjunctive ways. (2000, 12)

So, for example, Wendy Brown contends that neo-liberalism is not merely 'a bundle of economic policies with inadvertent political and social consequences' but that it represents a 'social analysis that, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire.' As a 'regulating strategy of governance, neo-liberal rationality exercises its hegemony as an administrative project that defines all aspects of life ... extending market values to all institutions and social action' (2005, 38, 39–40).

In this book, all three definitions can be found, and references to all three dimensions of neo-liberalism will be made in this introduction. An awareness of these many meanings is vitally important because, as Larner suggests:

> Most immediately, we are alerted to the possibility that there are different configurations of neo-liberalism, and that close inspection of particular neo-liberal projects is more likely to reveal a complex and hybrid political imaginary, rather than the straight-forward implementation of a unified and coherent philosophy. Moreover, in making visible the claims of those all too often portrayed as the 'victims' of welfare state restructuring ... [one can] emphasize that new welfare state arrangements emerge out of political struggle, rather than being imposed in a top down manner. (2000, 12)

And so, let us briefly review how neo-liberal policy frameworks, ideologies, and governmentality became manifest in Canada.

Here, as elsewhere, marketization, trade liberalization, privatization, deregulation, downsizing, and devolution became the economic and political norms of the 1980s, and well into the 1990s in both ideology and policy. As has been profusely documented, women bore the brunt of the neo-liberal restructuring that took place. For example, they grappled with extensive job losses in areas hit hardest by free trade (Gabriel and Macdonald 1996; Macdonald 2003), the

result of the Mulroney government's crowning neo-liberal achievement: the 1989 Canada–US Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The free-trade agenda was then expanded, resulting in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was subsequently endorsed by the Chrétien government, despite earlier Liberal denunciations of the FTA. The Canadian state remained oblivious to the negative impact that free trade had on women, particularly women who were already marginalized (Gabriel and Macdonald 1996). It also ignored the fact that women, in general, relied disproportionately on programs that were rescinded or privatized as a result of neo-liberal state projects. Women also had to contend with heavier workloads, the consequence of juggling multiple responsibilities in increasingly more precarious paid employment, as well in their unpaid work in the home and in their communities (Brodie 1996; Bakker 1996; Evans and Wekerle 1997; Bashevkin 1998, 2002; Cossman and Fudge 2002; McKeen and Porter 2003). Beyond gender, intersecting identities such as race, ethnicity, Indigeneity, disability, and class, as well as other notable differences such as citizenship status, contributed to growing inequalities, not only between women and men, but between women as well.

Ironically, although Brian Mulroney's Conservatives used neo-liberal words, beyond free trade, most neo-liberal policy deeds were done by subsequent Liberal governments. As Whitaker notes, 'the Mulroney neo-liberal project, while strong on rhetorical formulation, was weak on consistency and follow-through' (2006, 7). Jean Chrétien's Liberal government, however, consistently followed through, methodically meeting neo-liberal policy objectives. The Liberals succeeded in ways that the Conservatives could not by

> deliberately eschewing the ideological rhetoric of their predecessors. Making no claims to a broader neo-liberal vision, downplaying the ideological antimonies of 'markets' versus 'politics', and avoiding rhetorical attacks on 'big government' and exhortations to 'free enterprise', the Liberals instead focused on practical results. (Whitaker 2006, 8)

Thus, despite the 'welfare liberal' promises contained in the Liberals' *Red Book*, on the basis of which they rode to power in 1993, the Chrétien government proceeded to take a sharp rightward turn. Chrétien's Liberals adopted a neo-liberal policy framework in many areas, from the economic domain (for example, adopting NAFTA) and political realm of the state (for example, drastically downsizing the civil service) to the social sphere (for example, 'streamlining' social services and slashing support to groups and movements in civil society) (for details see Clarkson 2005; and Smith 2005).

Undoubtedly there were members of the Liberal government who were not fully supportive of this embracing of neo-liberalism. For example, there were those who wanted to follow the alternative policy directions taken in the Social Security Review (SSR), conducted in the government's first year in office, many of which reflected more 'welfare-liberal', and in hindsight, 'social investment',

priorities. Nevertheless, Liberal Finance Minister Paul Martin's neo-liberal agenda—doing away with the deficit, curtailing spending on social programs, and promoting policy flexibility—ultimately took precedence. And so, it was under the Liberals, in the mid-1990s, that downsizing reached devastating levels:

> The federal government's policy change [was] widely seen as a disjuncture—an 'epiphany in fiscal federalism and national social policy' . . . or as the end of an era. . . . Yet it followed on years of policy tinkering or 'drift', which had prepared the ground and, arguably, made the departure less dramatic than it would otherwise have been. (McBride and McNutt 2007, 178)

From unemployment insurance rates to funding for advocacy groups, the cuts came fast and furious. As the chapters in this collection remind us, many core government programs and agencies were negatively affected, from the generous Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), which was replaced by the highly circumscribed Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST), to the the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW), which was abolished. The deleterious repercussions of these neo-liberal policy decisions on women have been documented in various studies, books, and articles; the purpose of this book is to describe and evaluate what took place *after* this period of intense restructuring.

From Neo-liberalism to the Social Investment Perspective

By the late 1990s, in response to worsening social conditions and political unrest, the definition of problems, policy priorities, and policy instruments began to be modified at both the national and sub-national levels. Provincial leaders were not happy with the reduced funds they received from the federal government as a result of the institutionalization of the CHST; Canadians, in general, had had enough of belt-tightening and lack of services; and most women's groups continued to oppose political agendas that were based purely on economic calculations. Moreover, and significantly, by this point, Canada had entered into an era of post-deficit politics. Having slain the deficit dragon, and with growing surpluses on which to draw, the Liberal government could now spend. It is here that the discourse of 'the social' is re-introduced.

To begin with, because the word 'spending' was associated with the 'tax and spend' Keynesian era, governments now spoke of 'social investments' in areas like health and education, where there were promises of not just societal but also fiscal returns (Dobrowolsky 2002; Lister 2003; Jenson and Saint-Martin 2003; Dobrowolsky and Jenson 2004, 2005; Dobrowolsky and Saint-Martin 2005; Dobrowolsky and Lister 2008). From this perspective, because Keynesianism was marred by profligate consumption, social investment would be marked by production, now and into the future. Put simply, the overarching objective of the