

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

KATE BEZANSON, *Gender, the State and Social Reproduction: Household Insecurity in Neo-liberal Times*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006, x + 225 p., index.

In *Gender, the State and Social Reproduction*, Kate Bezanson examines the effects of economic restructuring during the 1990s on households in Ontario. During their time in power, the Ontario Conservatives made numerous changes which decreased the role of government and cut social spending. Bezanson's experience as both a research associate and policy analyst for the Speaking Out project enables her to take an in-depth look at legislative and regulatory changes and then illustrate the impact that these had at the micro level. The Speaking Out project was created in 1997 to document Conservative policy changes and the effect that these had on households throughout the province. Based on research produced from this project, Bezanson demonstrates the difficulties that Ontarians faced in their attempts to make ends meet in a new neo-liberal regime.

Bezanson raises many important questions in her work. For example, if it is the norm that all adults are workers and there are fewer supports for social reproduction, how does this work get done? Furthermore, considering the gendered nature of care work, how are men and women differentially impacted by neo-liberal reforms? More generally, what were the implications of these policies for Ontarians in their everyday lives?

In the introduction, Bezanson begins by discussing the Harris government's objectives and places them within the broader context of neo-liberal reforms happening globally. Additionally, she provides background on the Speaking Out project and begins to explore the concepts of neo-liberalism and social reproduction. Chapter two continues to explore the relationship between social reproduction and neo-liberalism. In particular, Bezanson notes the gendered nature of social reproduction. More specifically, she addresses the tensions that arise in a society which operates on an adult worker model and yet does increasingly less to mediate the work of social reproduction.

In chapter three, Bezanson describes the neo-liberal restructuring of Ontario under the Harris government. The author examines how areas such as governance, education, health care, income support and labour regulation were affected by these changes. Her use of examples, such as the death of Kimberly Rogers and the Walkerton scandal, are particularly

effective in demonstrating some of the potentially devastating impacts of neo-liberal reforms.

The following three chapters focus on interview data produced by participants of the Speaking Out project. These chapters illustrate the ways that households throughout Ontario experienced neo-liberal reforms in their everyday lives. Bezanson first provides the demographics of the households in the study and describes their sources of income and support. She then outlines how changes in social policy impacted areas such as child care, education, health care and housing in the lives of the individuals interviewed. Her discussion reveals that, while neo-liberal restructuring impacted households across class lines, women, the poor and the elderly were disproportionately affected and found it increasingly difficult to manage. Based on these observations, chapter six concentrates on the coping strategies utilized by low-income households in the context of shrinking social supports.

Bezanson concludes with three central findings. First, she explains that neo-liberal reforms decreased support for social reproduction which in turn meant more work for households, in particular, the women in these households. This created a vulnerability to falling standards of living at a time when jobs were scarce and social supports were rapidly disappearing. Second, in a neo-liberal context, the work of social reproduction largely becomes the responsibility of the family/household. When the family/household is unable to manage, the expectation is that they will go to the private market to purchase services. Third, Bezanson asserts that these changes indicate a changing gender order in which social reproduction continues to be structured overwhelmingly through women's unpaid labour, while at the same time, a dual earner model is considered the norm (162).

Based on extensive research, *Gender, the State and Social Reproduction* effectively demonstrates the difficulties households across Ontario faced when confronted with a neo-liberal regime. Bezanson's critical look at this specific historical moment in Ontario provides a wealth of data for analysis. Importantly, she highlights the value of the unpaid labour that people perform everyday and the failure of neo-liberal governments to acknowledge and support this labour in any meaningful way.

The strength of this book lies in the emphasis Bezanson places on her participants' experiences. In her introduction, Bezanson states that one of the goals of the Speaking Out project was to give voice to those affected by restructuring under the Harris government (14). Extensive sections of narrative ensure that she is successful in this aim.

Furthermore, this study has broader implications because, as Bezanson points out, shifts towards neo-liberalism are occurring at a global level (xi, 165). However, while the author is sure to note this comparison, this important parallel is not expanded upon. Given her experience in international development studies, I would have appreciated more

information relevant to this assertion in the conclusion. While this book is not meant to be a comparative analysis, some exploration of the significance of existing similarities was needed.

Gender, the State and Social Reproduction is an insightful book. Bezanson's case study provides rich data and allows the reader to critically assess the ways in which neo-liberal reforms affect the ability of families and households to make a living and/or sustain a lifestyle. Furthermore, the author analyzes the gender and class processes of neo-liberal restructuring. Thus this book is ideally suited for those with an interest in political economy, political sociology, the sociology of work, and gender studies.

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