

BOOK REVIEW

Productivity and Prosperity: A Historical Sociology of Productivist Thought, by Karen R. Foster. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. \$34.16 CDN., paper. ISBN: 978-1487520571. Pages: 3-292.

Reviewed by Susan Marie Martin¹

Productivity, prosperity, and progress are handy words for politicians: who can possibly argue against a platform that promises any or all on that list? These terms are, of course, relative. However, think about how productivity works on one's psyche: it is not at all uncommon for it to be used as a measure of quality in so many areas of life. Output at work, household tasks, self-improvement regimes, and fitness goals are measured by young and old using challenges on social media, and apps that graph progress. Few are comfortable taking on the label 'unproductive'.

Karen R. Foster argues that, as an economic concept, productivity is neither good nor bad; instead it is "dangerous" (6), perhaps the best characterization of the term I've encountered. Foster, an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Dalhousie University, is also the Canada Research Chair in Sustainable Rural Futures for Atlantic Canada. Her book, *Productivity and Prosperity: A Historical Sociology of Productivist Thought*, explores the danger of both the concept and its application, and the implications across time of its use as an economic tool.

In a post-Enlightenment world, science and expertise have come to solidify this and similar concepts, and to define others that work with it such as health and welfare. Early in the text, Foster cites the work of Margaret Somers and, by her admission, "leans hard" on Somers's concept of an "ideational regime"; thus, she explores productivity's development as an ideology built on "public narratives and assumptions that have become widely taken for granted in the political culture" (7). Drawing, too, on Foucault's concept of governmentality, she demonstrates, solidly, how productivity and economic measures are used by the government of Canada, among others, to guide the conduct of individuals in that economy as workers, producers, and consumers.

For any researcher wanting to understand governmentality, and how it is that governments can extend their reach beyond centres of power into the lived experience of citizens using seemingly innocuous policies, Foster's case studies of Statistics Canada, the National Productivity Council, and the evolution of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, provide detailed and thorough genealogies of these branches of government, and the ideological underpinnings of each. Furthermore, she demonstrates how each has constructed productivity as critical, ultimately, for the wellbeing and prosperity of the citizenry.

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The opening chapters are exhaustive and fully prepare the reader for the case studies that follow. For those who turn to *Productivity and Prosperity* primarily to understand how both concepts have shaped the Canadian political landscape, economic imperatives, and workplaces, these two chapters may read as too thorough. To those readers, I suggest that this text be thought of as two: turn to it for the exploration of the local, and return to the opening chapters when ready to replicate the case studies in new projects.

To this end, Foster's work is an invaluable theoretical resource and critical to understanding how it is that an abstract location like 'the market' has taken on a life of its own, and an entity that responds to human economic activity positively or negatively. In Chapter 1, "The Discovery of Productivity", she examines the historical and global context across centuries that has constructed an economy as a "fixed space" with boundaries that conform to national boundaries (44). Indeed: in the 21st century it is difficult to believe that it has ever been anything but a fixed space. However, having searched the phrase "Canadian economy" in Google Books, Foster found that it "does not appear anywhere in the 8 million English-language" books the platform has digitized "until 1930" but "increases in frequency" from there and rises "most sharply around 1940, 1960, and 1980" (70).

The second chapter, "Managing and Measuring Productivity", traces how governments and business leaders created managerialism when confounded by the fact that "the industrial world", moving into the twentieth century, "seemed a more chaotic plan than the pre-industrial world" (49). Managerialism here is defined as "the reorganization of relations between workers and employers, and ultimately workers' loss of control over the labour process itself" (51). Again, Foster's work in this chapter is a thorough history of ideas and the processes that grew out of them, historically and globally, but the transition to the Canadian context is signposted, and she reveals that many business-centred policies and practices may have their roots earlier in the country's history. For example, John Falk, director of McGill University's Department of Social Work in 1918, believed his discipline could bolster economic productivity if it supported "the maladjusted to productive states", and a strong economy was needed to alleviate poverty rather than turning to social reform (60).

The three case studies set down a genealogy of each institution, and are of value to historians and sociologists who research and write about the history of work, labour, society, and economics. The chapter on the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, now Statistics Canada, is one example how gathering and disseminating data about economic activity can work at a subliminal level on a population; in Foster's words, "the presumed link between productivity and prosperity permeates stories, theories, and conversations that do not, on surface, appear to have much to do with productivity at all" including those as disparate as shorter workdays and stand-up desks (89).

The rest of the chapter surveys the deepening of the link between productivity and prosperity with the goals of government policy to the point that, at least in government circles, there was no turning back. With time and the advent of bodies such as the OECD, and later its KLEMS² framework as a source of indicators, there was a move to international harmonisation of economic measures. This move was, in turn, embraced by StatsCan at, it would appear, the expense of made-in-Canada indicators.

Although not mentioned, Foucault's proviso that even the most well-intentioned policies can do harm, came to mind repeatedly while reading *Productivity and Prosperity*. This text predates the outcomes of the Brexit referendum and America's Presidential Election of 2016; as such, it is worth revisiting to question how those events problematized international cooperation and alliances documented. As Canada and much of the world came to embrace international 'norms', Foster demonstrates how privileging the link between productivity and prosperity, enshrined in macroeconomic policies, has bred individualism among citizens. For the times we are in, the intersection of productivity with COVID-19 protocols makes this analysis particularly timely as the Canadian government and Canadian workers, small business owners, and corporate Canada navigate an economy in flux and crisis at the hands of a virus.

² K-apital L-abour E-nergy M-aterials S-ervices.