Alternate Routes: A Journal of Critical Social Research, 35, 46-61 (2025)

The 'Contained Critique' of the Anti-poverty Advocacy Community and Ontario's 'Inclusive' Liberal Agenda

Wendy McKeen[1]

ABSTRACT: In the past three decades, governments and many social poverty advocates in Canada, and elsewhere, have embraced an 'inclusive' liberal model of social policy, known for its activist, employability orientation. This paper examines how, in this period, the social policy advocacy community in Ontario was involved in advancing this model. It draws from assemblage theory to focus on how their work served to 'contain the critique' of neoliberalism, limit the conditions for possibilities of 'thinking otherwise', and recasting the meaning of social policy, equity, social justice, and possibilities for meaningful change.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive Liberalism; Neoliberalism; Poverty Politics; Advocacy Community

Introduction

The 'social investment' approach - also referred to as the 'third way,' 'social liberalism,' or more recently, 'inclusive liberalism',[2] was embraced by many industrialized nations in the 1990s. The model was envisioned around the project of finding a balance between social and economic objectives; production and social reproduction; and ideally, be one that is adaptive, pragmatic, non-ideological, and effective in reducing social costs (Coulter, 2009; Graefe, 2020; Jenson, 2004; Jenson, 2009; Laruffa, 2018). While governments, politicians and intellectuals have been at the forefront of promoting and implementing this model, the social policy advocacy community has also been involved in doing this work, particularly, in developing and promoting visions and policy measures in the hopes of influencing government policy. The paper examines the work of the latter community in shaping and sustaining this model, and queries whether and how it makes space for policy-making that transcends neoliberalism. It presents the case as occurred in Ontario, Canada, over the 2000's and 2010's.

This paper draws from excellent critical empirical research, often from a political economy/structural perspective, on the role played by the social policy advocacy community in Ontario in this period (e.g. Hudson and Graefe, 2011; Graefe and Hudson, 2018; Mahon and Macdonald, 2008; Mahon and Macdonald, 2010; Mahon, 2008; Noël, 2006). The latter research methods tend to rely on observable evidence and primarily focus on social policy as the outcome of competing interests and unequal power relations. This paper seeks to provide a post-structural perspective on policymaking. Post-structuralism shares much with the structural approach but also puts a focus on how policy-making struggles, and the measures and discourses produced, are also working to 'create' reality, including, the meta-level recasting of the very concepts being debated, such as 'social policy,' 'citizenship,' 'poverty,' 'dependency,' and more.

This paper applies the post-structural approach as presented in 'assemblage theory.' This theory starts from the premise that social policy is 'assemblage,'- i.e. the act of bringing elements, such as discourses, propositions, etc., together in strategic ways with the aim of governing conduct in desired ways (Li, 2007a, Li, 2007b; Savage, 2018; Savage, 2020). According to assemblage theorist, Tania Murray Li, when oppositional actors engage in

---

[1] Wendy McKeen is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at York University; Co-Editor of the Canadian Review of Social Policy and has published several articles on the role of the social policy advocacy community in social policy debate.

[2] I use the term 'social investment' when discussing the 1990s, and turn to 'inclusive liberalism' when discussing the 2000's and 2010's.

collective advocacy, they often make compromises that result in 'containing' or 'censoring' their critique in order to win tangible outcomes and maintain their ability to stay in the game (Li, 2007a; Li, 2007b; Savage, 2018; Savage, 2020).

The research draws from the critical literature on welfare and poverty; material (reports, briefs, and commentaries) issued by key social policy advocacy groups and organizations over this period. It examines the mobilizing efforts of the social policy community in Ontario to uncover how, in key moments, their actions, taken together, were doing the work of assemblage – essentially, the work of organizing certain possibilities and visions into, and out of, anti-poverty policy making, in ways that served to 'contain the critique' (of neoliberalism) and give coherence and legitimacy to the inclusive liberal model, while obscuring the possibilities of doing policy 'otherwise' (Savage, 2020, 331). The ultimate purpose is to better understand the implications of this model in shaping the 'social.'

The paper starts with a brief explanation of assemblage theory and then focuses on the context surrounding the social policy advocacy community in the 1990s. It then turns to critically examine three key moments in the 2000's and 2010's, in which the social policy advocacy community was active in efforts to influence future social policy reform in Ontario, including: 1) the work of defining problems and solutions in the name of social investment; 2) the Task Force on Modernizing Income Security for Working-Age Adults (MISWAA) (2004-2006); and, 3) the 2017 report, "Income Security: A Roadmap for Change." The paper concludes with final reflections on the inclusive liberal model, its equity and social justice implications, and the possibilities for meaningful change.

Social policy as 'Assemblage'

As post-structural analysts have pointed out, social policies and social policy discourses do not describe reality - they create reality - particularly, how we understand social problems and solutions, and such concepts as poverty, citizenship, dependency, and 'the poor' (Garrett, 2018; Schram, 2015; Wiggan, 2012; McGimpsey, 2017). Assemblage theory takes the position that policy always exists in the form of assemblages (Savage, 2018): the work of drawing heterogeneous elements together "into particular *strategic relations* (his italics) with a particular desired impact" (Savage, 2020, 325) and sustaining these connections in the face of tension (Li, 2007b). Assemblage theory invites us to ask how certain policies are made to cohere and puts the attention on "the role of various actors and agents in creating the conditions of possibility for certain policies to emerge, while … obscuring possibilities for doing policy otherwise" (Savage 2020, 331). Assemblages are always "the outcome of agency and struggle" (Savage, 2020, 329, citing Li), and while the agency of political actors and organizations is always "situated" and "context dependent," humans always have agency and a capacity to make change (Savage, 2020, 331, citing McFarlane).

Tania Li's research on 'improvement schemes' as assemblage is particularly pertinent to the study of social policy and provides insight into the practices often used in the course of struggle over ideas and policy agendas, and how they can carve paths for some ideas to rise to the fore, while submerging other possibilities (Li, 2007a; Li, 2007b). While Li identifies several generic practices of assemblage, this paper focuses on two key practices: 'problematization' - identifying "how problems come to be defined as problems in relation to particular schemes of thought, diagnoses of deficiency and promises of improvement" (Savage, 2020, 331, citing Li); and "rendering technical", which amounts to reducing the messiness of the social world to "a set of relations that can be formulated as a diagram in which 'problem' (a), plus intervention

(b), will produce beneficial result (c) (Li, 2007b, 265). To render an issue technical is also to render it nonpolitical - excluding political-economic relations from the diagnoses and prescriptions and focusing on the capacities of the poor, who are seen as subjects to be improved (Li, 2007a; Li, 2007b).

It is important to clarify the limitations of this approach, however. Assemblage theory does not take account of the intentions or the strategies behind the actions taken in the process of collective policy-making situations involving competing ideologies and interests. It therefore leaves out the complexities and dilemmas actors often face in making decisions or seeking compromises, especially when it involves engaging with the state. The purpose of this paper is not to cast judgment on any of the actors involved, or the decisions they made, but gain a better understanding of how their actions were the work of assemblage, carving paths in sustaining the 'social investment' model. The paper turns below to provide a very brief account of the situation of the social policy advocacy community in the 1990s, just prior to the period examined in this paper.

Background: 'Social Investment' and the Social Policy Advocacy Community

The new era of 'social investment' emerged over the 1990s in Canada, and in the face of growing poverty, unemployment, inequality, and the threat of social cohesion. It was based on the idea of bringing social policy and economic policy together to find a compromise or balance between the economic and social spheres, between social justice and economic competitiveness; efficiency and equity; and left and right politics. This approach was solidly established in Canada by the mid- and late-1990s with the federal government's turn to restructure Canada's social policy system in alignment with the social investment approach, with the objective of reducing social costs.

Many social policy experts and advocates were also drawn into this approach over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. Under the neoliberalism of the 1980s, many social movement organizations lost credibility and status, and social policy advocacy groups also experienced a decline in credibility, funding cuts, and were effectively sidelined as participants in social policy debates and policy-making initiatives (McKeen, 2004). This situation also occurred in Ontario under the right-wing and austerity-focused neoliberal Harris government that was in power from 1995 to 2003.

By the mid- and late-1990s/early 2000s, however, 'social investment' had become the dominant social policy model in Canada, and many social policy advocacy organizations and actors had been drawn into the debates, and for many this was welcome relief after the many years of being marginalized (Noël, 2006).

To be clear, the 'social policy advocacy community' was never homogenous or static; it included a range of actors (e.g. social policy advocacy groups, individual consultants, community-groups, social policy research institutions, unions, charitable foundations, and, at times, business), and this varied over time and place. Research has shown that these actors also varied with respect to credibility and power, with the key dividing lines being between the more centrist, liberal-reformist actors and organizations, and the more social democratic actors; the former having more market-oriented interests, and the latter, more social justice oriented and greater willingness to challenge neoliberal thinking (Graefe and Hudson, 2018; Freiler and Clutterbuck, 2017). Below I examine three key moments in the mobilization of this community.

Poverty: Manufacturing Solutions and Problems

As Noël has described, in the late 1990s/early 2000s the issue of poverty "caught fire," and an array of social policy and anti-poverty actors and institutions converged on the issue of poverty reduction (Noël, 2006, 317). Several key non-profit and non-governmental social advocacy organizations, many funded by a handful of non-profit charitable foundations with interests in addressing poverty, turned to developing new ideas and visions for social policy reform. Several high-profile organizations and individual social policy advocates became involved in designing a "new social architecture,"[3] that would address the new 'social risks' associated with the rise of the new global knowledge-based economy and had contributed to the growth of precarious low-wage labour, and growing poverty and unemployment.

Other contributing factors were new family structures, an aging society, shifts in immigration, challenges faced by historically disadvantaged populations, etc. The aim of the new social architecture was to create a system that would protect people from these social risks, especially by improving the lives and prospects of the working poor and working-age adults; investing in children as future citizens and workers; and reducing poverty, especially child poverty and the intergenerational transition of poverty. These goals were also seen as important and necessary for promoting social cohesion and enhancing economic efficiency and a healthy economy (Mosher, 2014; Coulter, 2009; Jenson, 2009).

The organizations and advocates involved in this work called for a new modernized 'social architecture' that gave more recognition to the "make work pay" model, which they saw as a core value of Canadians, and what Canadians wanted (e.g. Jenson, 2004; Stapleton, 2004b; Stapleton 2004b; Battle, *et al.*, 2005; Battle, *et al.*, 2006); a model that would improve prospects for the working poor; invest in children as future workers; and reduce poverty, particularly, child poverty. The idea was to ensure that everyone had equal opportunities and access to paid work, that a person working full-time, full year would have a decent living wage. The preferred design for a new 'social architecture' was to deconstruct or reduce, and ultimately eliminate, the social assistance program, and build up an income security system that would provide a level of income security to all working-age adults with low incomes, whether paid work or not, including welfare recipients, largely through income supplementation programs for low wage workers (e.g. various tax credit programs (similar to child benefits) and others).

Indeed, a key element in the 'social architecture' material, including the multiple publications of key policy experts and commentators in this period, involved extolling the deficiencies of the social assistance program, specifically, its ineffectiveness in helping recipients make the transition from welfare into paid employment and 'self-reliance.' This came to be known as the "welfare wall" – referring to built-in disincentives that were seen as effectively 'trapping' welfare recipients, such as: eligibility criteria that stripped recipients of their financial assets; the loss of health, vision, and drug benefits that recipient's would face when leaving welfare for paid work; and the high rate of clawbacks that are applied to any employment earnings recipients receive.

[3] Including the Canadian Policy Research Network's (CPRN); the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, and John Stapleton, long-time public servant in Ontario social services and policy consultant. To be clear, some social policy advocates were skeptical of the social investment model and the idea of a new social architecture (Jackson, 2004; Townson, 2004).

Indeed, a number of publications were issued by several high-profile experts in social policy, poverty, and social assistance that forcefully argued that the welfare system was irredeemably "broken" and not worth fixing; a failed program that should be deconstructed (Stapleton 2008; Stapleton, 2004a, 16, 18; Stapleton, 2004b, 17); it created a "welfare wall"; welfare recipients were "tangled in welfare"; it was a subtle form of "micro-colonialism" that disempowered and deterred recipients from acting to improve their lives (Battle, *et al.*, 2005, 433); it was "outdated," "archaic," "paternalistic," "punitive," "deeply stigmatizing"; treated recipients "as dependents, as quasi-children/criminals," it was "simply a poor program" and "not amenable to fixing up" (Battle, *et al.*, 2005; Stapleton, 2004b); and it was unpopular with the public; and "not what Ontarians, Canadians want or value." The solutions put forward were for the gradual dismantling of social assistance (varying sometimes, with a promise to temporarily increase the effectiveness of the program), and the creation of a new 'social architecture' that puts the emphasis in the value of paid work (Graefe, 2008).

Certainly, this material contributed more some understanding of some of the problems and potential solutions in addressing poverty and social justice and provided important insight into some of the serious flaws of the welfare system (i.e. the complex and unfair regulations, the surveillance and moral regulation of recipients, lack of support and training programs, and more. Indeed, many of these issues had been brought forward in previous government reviews and had been raised by many anti-poverty advocacy groups that had long pushed for solutions.

The narrative, however, was doing more than just presenting reality; it was also working to create it. Indeed, the narrative was far from being 'politically neutral' and 'evidence based.' The repetitive claims about the 'welfare wall,' and that the social assistance program was broken, also served to render the program and surrounding issues, as purely technical concerns. They cast the program as a broken machine that was not equipped to deal with 'new risks,' or challenges, and that there was an automatic and simple technical fix to this "design" problem – it being the preferred new 'social architecture' plan that entailed eliminating the program (Stapleton, 2004a). By the same token, the narrative served to objectify welfare recipients as passive, unfulfilled commodities and in need of 'improvement.'

In this way, the narrative presented a 'contained critique' by obscuring power relations – the power that governments, and their political allies, had wielded as a way to preserve the principles of 'less eligibility' and 'perversity' (i.e. ensuring benefits for welfare recipients are maintained at levels inferior to those of the lowest paid workers; and the idea that the more money given to people, the more they become lazy and undisciplined). One example that stands out was the state's targeting of 'welfare mothers' as suitable candidates for 'work incentive' measures while also failing to deliver on the promised childcare and other supports that would have made this a viable option for mothers; and its campaigns to vilify welfare recipients as enemies of the state and taxpayers, and dehumanize them by casting them as lazy and unworthy (McKeen, 2020; Evans, 1996; Little, 2012; Gavigan and Chunn, 2007; Maki, 2011; Mosher, 2014; Marks, *et al.*, 2016).

The narrative also obscures social inequities and the realities of inequality - for example, in failing to recognize the important role welfare has played, and continues to play, as a vital safety net for populations affected by discrimination and inequitable social structures (i.e. women, single mothers and their children, racialized populations, Indigenous people (Mosher, 2014; Caragata, *et al*., 2018; Maki, 2011; Smith-Carrier and Lawlor, 2017; Smith-Carrier, 2017; Gaszo, 2015; Little, 2012; McKeen, 2020; Jackson, 2009). Also negated, are the past political struggles of anti-poverty and welfare rights groups, women's groups, anti-racist

organizations, and community groups to protect and improve the conditions for recipients, often in the face of government-imposed austerity. Indeed, this practice of 'problematization,' matched with 'a particular scheme of thought' and 'promise of improvement,' was reiterated over the next two decades and, as I argue, served to narrow the parameters of poverty debate in Ontario and limit the possibilities for alternative policy ideas and agenda to emerge. The paper turns next to the MISWAA Task Force initiative and the way it served to condition the possibilities for certain ideas to come to the fore, while obscuring others.

Task Force on Modernizing Income Security for Working-Age Adults

The Task Force on Modernizing Income Security for Working-Age Adults (MISWAA) emerged in 2004, and when poverty was high on the public radar and both government and non-government actors had embraced the inclusive liberal approach. It was sponsored by Toronto City Summit Alliance (TCSA) an alliance of liberal-minded business, city leaders, and "centrist policy analysts" in Toronto, with interests in strengthening the competitiveness of Toronto's economy and "upgrading of the labour force's "human capital" (Hudson and Graefe, 2011, 4; Graefe and Hudson, 2018, 318), and funded by the Atkinson Charitable Foundation, as well as others.

Its advocacy approach was to collaborate across a wide cross-section of constituencies in order to achieve a broad consensus on a plan and proposal, based on shared values and principles. The membership included representatives from business (e.g. the Toronto Dominion Bank), labour (i.e. Canadian Labour Congress (CLC)), policy institutes (e.g. C.D. Howe institute, Caledon Institute of Social Policy), academia, independent policy consultants, and advocacy organizations (e.g. the Workers' Action Centre (WAC), Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC), Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC)), community-based legal services).[4]

MISWAA's final report, "Time for a Fair Deal," bares the stamp of a more centrist approach.[5] MISWAA's objective was to achieve a "just society" and "fully productive economy" by way of moving working-age adults and recipients of welfare into the labour force (TCSA, 2006, 12; Graefe and Hudson, 2018). It reiterates the narrative that the income security system is "deeply flawed," and that "any person should be financially better off working than not working" (TCSA, 2006, 52), and it puts the core focus on addressing the needs of low-income working-age adults by incentivizing paid work and eliminating the 'welfare wall' for those on welfare. The plan put forward largely aligned with the 'social architecture' template (Graefe and Hudson, 2018, 319).

It called for the creation and implementation of two new income supplementation programs - a new tax benefit for 'all' low-income working-age adults, and a working income benefit for low-wage wage-earners (TCSA, 2006), and to move the benefits for children allotted to families on welfare into the National Child Benefit program, where it would be added to income supplements that would go to all low-income working-age adults, whether on welfare

[4] Other significant members included: Scotia Bank Economics, Conference Board of Canada, Canadian Policy Research Network, Canadian Council on Social Development, St. Christopher House, Citizens for Public Justice, the Daily Bread Food Bank, and Neighbourhood Legal Services.

[5] The Task Force's Co-chairs were David Pecaut, head of TCSA, and Susan Pigotte, CEO of St. Christopher house, and its working group was co-chaired by Jill Black, consultant, and John Stapleton, MISWAA Research Director, and St. Christopher House Fellow. The Report does not indicate the author(s) but seems to have involved a process of circulating drafts to receive feedback by members.

or in paid employment (Graefe and Hudson, 2018; Jackson, 2009). It also called for a number of changes to the social assistance and other programs, which were generally seen as positive steps forward.[6]

MISWAA is known for its success in influencing the Ontario government to implement the Ontario Child Benefit program, and more generally, as a turning point in bringing forward coherent social policy discourse, and one that broke with the neoliberal/neoconservative social policy approach of the previous (Harris) government (Graefe and Hudson, 2018; Hudson and Graefe, 2011; Barata and Murphy, 2011). The focus here, however, is on MISWAA as a moment of assemblage – one that served to 'contain the critique,' and obscure the possibilities for other (more progressive) ideas to be heard.

Certainly, the members of the Task Force shared certain values and goals – such as, a commitment to making changes that would respect people living in poverty, achieve tangible reforms, that would help improve the economic security of working-age adults living on low incomes. However, a close reading of the MISWAA Report shows that the process was fraught with tensions and disagreements. This is made clear in the "alternative views" that were put forward by some members as found in the appendix of the Task Force's final report (TCSA, 2006, 44-49). These members included representatives from academia and anti-poverty advocacy organizations, some being community-based agencies that work on the front line with people with low incomes and/or are receiving welfare.[7] As a group, they were more willing to challenge neoliberal ideas (Graefe, 2008). While they were a small minority of the membership, their views were shared with many constituencies and agencies outside of MISWAA, including, for example, ISAC, Campaign 2000, ISARC, the Ontario Coalition of Social Justice, and others (ISAC, 2003).

While most of these members endorsed many of the Report's recommendations and acknowledged MISWAA's role in bringing new public attention to the issues of income security, welfare, and poverty, they were critical of many of the proposals put forward in the Report, particularly, regarding income supplementation programs and the failure to consider raising benefit rates for welfare recipients (TCSA, 2006, 48, 47).[8] For example, there were also a number of criticisms of the wage supplement programs, for example, they were seen as creating disincentives for increases in wages, statutory benefits, and social assistance benefits (TCSA, 2006, 45, 47);[9] disadvantaging women by basing them on household, rather than, individual incomes; and because they give little to people without earnings (TCSA, 2006, 33).

Most of these members also strongly opposed the Task Force's endorsement of the provincial clawback of child benefits from welfare recipients, and the proposal to take child benefits out of social assistance as discussed. Some critics saw these measures as discrimination of welfare recipients, and potentially concealing the real causes of child poverty (i.e. the lack of affordable childcare, good jobs, and good wages) (TCSA, 2006, 45, 47, 49).[10] They also opposed the report's strong emphasis on the 'welfare wall' and the need to increase work incentives for welfare recipients. Lightman (and others) saw this as ignoring the strong evidence that showed that work incentives were not the main problem, and as promoting the

[6]For more information, see, Graefe and Hudson, 2018.

[7] These members included: WAC; ISAC; ISARC; Reverend Susan Eagle, City Councillor, London, Ontario; Ernie Lightman, Professor, School of Social Work, University of Toronto; and Hugh Mackenzie, Independent consultant and social policy researcher.

[8] WAC; Mackenzie.

[9] ISAC, Mackenzie.

[10] ISAC, Mackenzie, Eagle.

view that welfare recipients were deficient and in need of coercion to enter the market, likely resulting in getting recipients into short-term, insecure, precarious employment (TCSA, 2006, 45, 46, 49).[11]

Some of these members were critical of the lack of specificity on certain recommendations related to reforming employment insurance, raising minimum wages, some welfare rates, employment standards, as compared with the much greater specificity given to the recommendation on the supplementation plans (TCSA, 2006, 49, 48).[12] With respect to the process, one critic pointed to the inability to vote on recommendations, or any consensus procedure, which meant that input from members was limited to an 'individual' view, as seen in the Report's appendix (TCSA, 2006, 49).[13]

I turn here to examine how MISWAA was a moment of assemblage in sustaining the connections that make up the inclusive liberal approach; containing the critique of neoliberalism; and obscuring the possibilities for more progressive ideas to be heard. Indeed, from the beginning, MISWAA's goals are expressed in vague and 'common sense' terms that serve to erase politics – for instance, achieving a "well-functioning" safety net, developing "pragmatic" proposals, a "fair deal", and making recommendations that are "affordable" and are "acceptable to the general public" (TCSA, 2006, 17). While the Report acknowledges the presence of the 'alternative perspectives,' it minimizes their visibility, and gives the impression that MISWAA members were largely aligned, and had been successful in working through their differences, and in making "compromises and trade-offs" (TCSA, 2006, 52).

The criticisms with respect to raising welfare benefits and introducing a new income supplement program were, in many ways, reduced to technical and apolitical issues. For example, the Report presents the tensions over the issues of raising welfare benefits and setting an income benchmark for a working individual as differences of opinion between individual members over what counts as adequacy, and as a case of "agreeing to disagree," all of which screens out the politics.[14] As Professor Lightman comments, the term "affordability" was used only when referring to the issues around welfare and poor people, but not when it came to a discussion of the tax deductions, exemptions, credits and other provisions in the tax system that benefits everyone else. He also pointed to the lack of data collection and modeling with respect to the income supplementation plans, particularly with respect to the question of who would, and who would not benefit very much (TCSA, 2006, 45, 46).

Lightman was also critical of the special attention the report gives to TD Economics' work on the impact of the 'marginal effective tax rate'[15] on welfare recipients, which serves to "confirm enabling assumptions" and construct the issue as technical, and as having technical fix, namely, increasing work incentives (TCSA, 2006, 46). This technical and politically neutral worldview also helps to smooth over the contradictions within the Report - for instance, in appearing to be on the side of welfare recipients by showing a desire to help the increase their 'capacities' and support their 'aspirations,' and by acknowledging that welfare benefits were

[11] Lightman, ISAC, Eagle.
[12] Eagle, WAC.
[13] Eagle.
[14] Based on research, one of the reasons the more centrist advocacy actors have tended to resist raising welfare rates is because they are seen as a possible threat to the goal of achieving the larger plan to transform the income security system (see Hudson and Graefe, 2011; and Freiler and Clutterbuck, 2017). This may have also been an influence in the case of MISWAA.
[15] This compares the value of receiving welfare benefits, with what recipients who enter paid employment stand to lose in increased taxes and foregone benefits.

not enough to cover the basics of life, yet giving support to federal and provincial clawbacks from welfare recipients and refusing to recommend increases to welfare benefits.

To be clear, this analysis does not take account of the intentions or strategies of the actors involved in this process and is not in any way a judgment of the decisions that they made. The purpose here is to draw attention to the impact that these practices, together, had in "closing down debate on how and what to govern, and the distributive effects of particular arrangements by reference to expertise" (Li, 2007b, 265). They closed down the possibilities for serious discussion of the real needs of welfare recipients, and the material impact of their proposals on those affected. These practices served to close off considerations of political-economic relations and reduce the messiness of the social world to a set of relations where problem 'A' (the system is 'broken' and 'useless') plus intervention 'B' (a new social architecture emphasizing the value on paid work) equals outcome 'C' (a 'well-functioning' social safety net), all of which reinforces and sustains this social liberal model while obscuring the possibilities of thinking 'otherwise.' The paper turns next to a report that, while not implemented, reflects the inclusive liberal mindset that prevails today among many advocates and politicians (excluding the current Ford government).

The Roadmap Report: Practices, Discourses and Implications

In 2016, Ontario's Liberal Wynne government appointed three working groups tasked with developing concrete recommendations that would provide a ten-year 'roadmap' for reform of the income security system, including recommendations for a future holistic, client-centred social assistance system. The focus here is on the work of the 'income security reform working group.'[16] Its membership included social policy actors and advocacy groups that had been active in the 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction, and the Ontario Social Assistance Review Advisory Council (SARAC), and have been seen as influential in producing the approach taken to income security reform (Hudson and Graefe, 2011).[17]

The final report, "Income Security: A Roadmap for Change," largely reflects the inclusive liberal, employment-focused approach of the earlier reports – including the 2010 SARAC Report and the 2012 report by the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario (ISRWG, *et al.*, 2017). Its goal is to reform the income security system to help low-income people reach their full potential, achieve social and economic inclusion, and "contribute to the social fabric of our communities and the economic wellbeing of our province" (ISRWG, *et al*., 2017, 1).

Its policy recommendations are aligned with SARAC's proposals - to restructure the income security system by eliminating or reducing the role of the social assistance program and building a basic platform of programs that would provide financial support for all low-income working-age adults, whether employed or receiving welfare benefits. The latter entailed introducing a new portable housing benefit for low-income people; enhancing the federal Working Income Tax Credit program; and expanding and extending essential health benefits (dental, vision, hearing, and medical transportation) to all low-income adults. It also involved moving the benefits for children (for families on social assistance) outside of the program, to

[16] The two other working groups were First Nations income security, and urban Indigenous table on income security reform.

[17] They included representatives of the Metcalfe Foundation; United Way, Income Security Advocacy Centre; Voices of the Street; Colour of Poverty; Ontario Municipal Social Services; and some from business and municipal governments.

be spread across programs that support all low-income people; and to transform social assistance into a simpler, less coercive and punitive program, in keeping with the proposals of Social Assistance Review.

Many within the broader social policy advocacy community viewed the proposed increases in welfare benefits as insufficient, lacking in urgency, and having unacceptably long time-horizons (e.g. SPNO, 2017; ISAC, 2017; OPSEU, 2017). They welcomed, however, many of its recommendations, and its recognition of 'historical disadvantages,' 'systemic racism and discrimination,' and past trauma; its commitment to the guiding principles of income adequacy, rights, reconciliation, economic and social inclusion, equity and fairness (i.e. historical systemic disadvantage and structural racism), respect and dignity, and its attention on the needs and experiences of Indigenous peoples, racialized people, people with disabilities and other marginalized populations (ISRWG, *et al*., 2017; ISAC, 2017).

It is important, however, to recognize the ways this initiative was also moment of assemblage, in its work to advance certain understandings of poverty and its solutions, while ruling out more critical alternatives. Indeed, as many critical scholars and advocates have observed, while the principles and goals expressed in the Report appear to promote a more caring, humane, and progressive approach to social policy, they actually serve to create a mantle of 'niceness' and neutrality that obscures the deeply political, neoliberal capitalist principles and goals underlying the approach (Coulter, 2009; Gill, 2021; Laruffa, 2018).

Indeed, the Report's references to the issues of equity, equality, fairness, respect, dignity, gender, race, and disability, are treated as 'perspectives' or 'lenses' (e.g. used in measuring outcomes, or guiding behavior of front-line workers), rather than as integral to the framing of the plan.[18] While the 'Roadmap' report discusses the hardships people face due to various social and economic shifts, and recognizes that some populations are more vulnerable than others, they are reduced to issues to be attentive to, and to be fixed by providing 'tailored solutions' for populations 'at risk.' Indeed, the more powerful guiding principles and assumptions of the Report are the neoliberal ideas that human beings have value only for their wage potential; they are 'human capital' to be invested in, and managed.

This can be seen most clearly in the Report's focus on reforming social assistance, which was one of its main solutions. Using a "human-rights-based equity lens" the plan was to change the culture of the program to promote one of "trust," "collaboration," and "problem-solving" (ISRWG, *et al*., 2017, 93). Front-line workers would become 'case-collaborators' and 'problem-solvers' who would quickly intervene to reinforce "the person's self-perception as an independent individual with workforce attachment" (ISRWG *et al.* 2017, 10, 93, 96); and help them problem-solve "every issue that may present a barrier to work" and to develop a "tangible," "clear," "realistic" plan for entering the workforce, and 'equip recipients to reaching their full potential,' to fully participate in society (ISRWG, *et al*., 2017, 96, 97, 2, 90).

While social structures such as inequality, racism, historical disadvantages, and systemic discrimination are acknowledged in the report, they are rendered as personal 'barriers' or 'challenges' that 'individuals' with low incomes must learn to overcome (ISRWG *et al.* 2017; Smith-Carrier and Lawlor, 2017; Mosher, 2014; Schram, 2018). Despite good intentions, this individualization of poverty means that any failures are attributed to the lack of effort and personal deficiencies of individuals (Laruffa, 2018; Garrett, 2018; Schram, 2015; Whitworth,

[18] This analysis is borrowed from Janet Mosher's critical analyses of other social policy reports (Mosher, 2014). The one exception of this is inclusion of the working group, 'Urban Indigenous Table on Income Security Reform'.

2016), many of whom come to believe that they are the problem (Reininger and Castro Serrano, 2021).

As Schram (2015) has argued, the approach effectively reproduces the binary of "the deserving autonomous, self-sufficient individual and the undeserving dependent" (2015, 89; also see Schram 2018). As many have argued, this effectively creates the conditions for "inclusive exclusion" wherein welfare recipients are forced to take almost any job under almost any condition - effectively regimenting them into low-wage labour, where they come to be seen as the "working poor" (Schram, 2015; Schram, 2018; Garret, 2018, citing Winslow and Hall; Whitworth, 2016; Zon and Granofsky, 2019).

This technical and apolitical rendering of the issues shifts the focus away from the subject's well-being, and onto administrative, cost-benefit interests, which can be seen in the increased focus on "measurable outcomes." This is demonstrated in the Report's narrative on lone mothers and welfare. Lone mothers are presented as a 'success' story based on the fact that increases in federal and provincial child benefits had led to a significant drop in the numbers of lone mothers on welfare (from 46% of the cases in the late 1990s, to 28% in 2016/17), and in the numbers applying for welfare in the first place (ISRWG *et al.*, 2017).

While this may be true, this rendering fails to take account of the actual messy realities of the lives of lone mothers in poverty (indeed, the Report barely mentions women at all). In theory and practice this concept renders social policy technical and apolitical and reinforces the neoliberal notion that welfare recipients are 'failed' or untapped human capital, but still manipulable, and able to adapt their behavior and improve their human capital with the help of the state. This rendering ('failed human capital' + 'support' = 'transition into a job and out of poverty') erases the real-life circumstances of diverse and marginalized populations (including women), and "perpetuates the neo-liberal silencing of equality," structures of power, and the need for substantial equality and social justice (Mosher, 2014, 171).

Conclusion

Poverty policy does not fall from the sky; it is manufactured and sustained by the choices made by politicians and governments and is often influenced by or reliant on the knowledge and creativity of the non-governmental anti-poverty advocacy community. Critical political economy research has given us important insight into the politics of policymaking over the past several decades as Ontario shifted to an inclusive liberal approach to social policy, including the role played by the social policy advocacy community in advancing the inclusive liberal social policy model. This paper is meant to contribute to the latter discussion by exploring the activities of the advocacy sector through the post-structural lens of 'assemblage' – taking the view that their activities function not only to improve the social policy and income security system, but to some degree, 'create' or re-work 'reality,' including, the fundamental concepts of 'social policy,' 'citizenship,' 'poverty,' 'dependency,' and more.

This work has shown how, in key moments, key situated actors engaged in various generic 'practices of assemblage' that were productive in creating and sustaining the inclusive liberal policy approach. The practice of 'problematization' (social assistance is 'broken'), strategically attached a promise of improvement ('new social architecture'), served to construct social policy in technical and apolitical terms – as discussed further below. This inclusive liberal scheme of thought was sustained and reinforced through the work of MISWAA, wherein actors engaged in generic practices of assemblage that obscured, and

closed down, the challenges posed by those with alternative views. The inclusive model was also reinforced and maintained by the 'Roadmap' Report, and in many ways, is an exemplar of the underlying common-sense logic of Ontario's current social policy-making approach.

To be clear, many critical scholars view the inclusive liberal approach, with its interests in investing in citizens as workers and addressing social justice, as having potential for making space for alterative development strategies that challenge the boundaries of neoliberal capitalism (see Graefe, 2018; Graefe 2020; Mahon and Macdonald, 2008; Mahon and Macdonald, 2010; Noël, 2006). This paper presents a more troubling picture in this regard, in presenting the ways that inclusive liberalism's economistic, technical, apolitical framing of reality works to thwart such challenges, and continues to reaffirm and sustain neoliberal capitalism as a default-logic (Schram, 2018, citing Henry Giroux, 2015).

This framing narrows the parameters of poverty and social policy debate by promoting the notion that the only good social policy is one that provides an economic 'return on investment' (Schram, 2018; McGimpsey, 2017), and that political choices around social policy are not something to be considered and debated (Laruffa, 2018). In privileging paid employment over all other activities and ways of life, and independent competitive worker-citizens above all other citizens, it effectively perpetuates the exclusion of populations and people who do not fit easily into this model (and often for reasons beyond their control). This puts the responsibility for poverty onto the shoulders of individuals, while making policies that mostly ignore the actual messy realities of their lives. In doing so (and despite good intentions and strategic planning), this technical/apolitical 'improvement' approach reinforces and maintains a system of social policy founded on inequality - the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' - and completely counters the objectives of achieving real equity, as sought by equity- and social justice-seeking movements.

Finally, and less visible, is how this policy approach is shaping the 'social,' notably, how we understand the economy, poverty, social policy, humanity, care, social justice, and more. As several critical thinkers have argued, in treating human beings as commodity objects we cover over the trauma of poverty and human exposure to vulnerability (Schram, 2015, 108, 99; McGimpsey, 2017, 79, citing Butler; Laruffa, 2018), all of which steers us away from having human compassion and caring; treating people with dignity and respect; and recognizing our own complicity in perpetuating other people's poverty (McGimpsey, 2017). These erasures can lead to policy decisions being made on the basis of 'who matters more' and 'who matters less.' The repeated unwillingness of key social policy advocates to raise social assistance benefits at a time when welfare recipients are living in deep poverty (and have been for decades) may be a case in point.[19]

Governments have seemingly also increased their willingness to harm or deprive whole categories of people in 'the here and now' for the sake of maintaining the privilege, power and wealth or deservingness of the others (Gill, 2021). Just one example is how the response of governments to pandemic failed to recognize inequitable impact it was having for disadvantaged populations, and in the case of the emergency response benefit, discriminated against, excluded, and ignored the most vulnerable populations; as Pin, *et al.* (2023) put it, it "reinforce[ed] the resonance of moral deservingness as a frame for allocating income support" (420, also see Scoffield, 2022) - and there are many more recent examples.

[19] Welfare recipients have lived below the deep poverty threshold for over 24 years (Laidley and Tabbara, 2024, 148, 149).

Many critical theorists see hope for change in opening space for discussion of genuine and meaningful alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. As Williams (2021, citing Solnit) offers, it is important to recognize that profound change can happen, and it involves telling other stories about who we are, what we want, and what is possible (173). It is possible to have a society, economy, and social policy that recognizes and respects difference, acknowledges and values care, human interdependence, want, and vulnerability, and gives everyone the capacity to choose lives worth living (Mosher, 2014, 189, citing West).

References

Battle K., Mendelson M. and Torjman, S. (2005). The Modernization Mantra: Towards a new architecture for Canada's adult benefits. *Canadian Public Policy*, 31 (4): 431-437.

Battle, K., Mendelson, M. and Torjman, S. (2006). *Towards a New Architecture for Canada's Adult Benefits*. Ottawa, Ontario: Caledon Institute of Social Policy. https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/594ENG.pdf

Barata, P. and Murphy, C. (2011). Foundations for Social Change: Reflections on Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy. *Canadian Review of Social Policy/Revue canadienne de politique sociale*, 65/66: 16-30.

Campaign 2000. (2007). *Summoned to Stewardship: Make Poverty Reduction a Collective Legacy.* https://campaign2000.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2016/03/SummonedToStewardship.pdf

Carragata, L., Cumming, S., Watters, E. (2018). Ameliorating Adversity: Supporting Resilience in Low-income Lone Mothers. *Sociology and Anthropology* 6 (8): 633-643.

Coulter, K. (2009). Women, Poverty Policy, and the Production of Neoliberal Politics in Ontario, Canada. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, 30: 23-45.

Evans, P. (1996). Single Mothers and Ontario's Welfare Policy: Restructuring the debate. In Brodie J. (ed.), *Women and Canadian Public Policy*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Company Canada, pp. 151-171.

Freiler, C. and Clutterbuck, P. (2017). Poverty Free Ontario: Cross-community advocacy for social justice. In N. Mulé and G. DeSantis (eds.), *The Shifting Terrain: Non-profit Policy Advocacy in Canada*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, pp.172-199.

Garrett, P. M. (2018). *Welfare Words: Critical Social Work and Social Policy*. London: Sage Publications.

Gavigan, S. and Chunn, D. (2007). From Mothers' Allowance to Mothers Need Not Apply: Canadian welfare law as liberal and neo-liberal reforms. *Osgoode Hall Law Journal*, 45 (4): 733-771.

Gazso, A. (2015). Gendering Social Assistance Reform. In D. Béland and P-M Daigneault (eds.), *Welfare Reform in Canada: Provincial social assistance in comparative perspective*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 273-287.

Gill, J. K. (2021). Unpacking the Role of Neoliberalism on the Politics of Poverty Reduction Policies in Ontario, Canada: A descriptive case study and critical analysis. *Social Sciences*, 10: 485.

Graefe, P. (2008). Poor Prospects: McGuinty's Poverty Strategy. *Socialist Project, Relay*, 24: 11-14.

Graefe, P. (2009). Breaking the Cycle or Going Around in Circles? *Socialist Project, The Bullet.* https://socialistproject.ca/2009/01/b173/

Graefe, P. (2015). Social Assistance in Ontario. In D. Béland and P-M. Daigneault (eds.), *Welfare Reform in Canada: Provincial social assistance in comparative perspective*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 111-125.

Graefe, P. (2020). Political Economy of Social Policy in Canada. In H. Whiteside (ed.), *Canadian Political Economy*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, pp. 278-296.

Graefe, P and Hudson. C-A (2018). Poverty and Policy in Ontario: You can't eat good intentions. In G. Albo and B. Evans (eds.), *Divided Province: Ontario politics in the age of neoliberalism*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, pp. 309-333.

Hudson, C-A. and Graefe, P. (2011). The Toronto Origins of Ontario's 2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy: Mobilizing multiple channels of influence for progressive social policy change. *Canadian Review of Social Policy/Revue canadienne de politique sociale,* 65/66: 1-15.

Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC). (2003). It's time for an income security system that works. Newsletter, Toronto, ISAC. https://incomesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Newsletter_-_Plain_Talk_-_Spring_2003_-_PDF.pdf

Income Security Reform Working Group, First Nations Income Security Reform Working Group and Urban Indigenous Table on Income Security Reform (ISRWG, *et al.*). (2017). *Income Security: A roadmap for change.* Toronto: Government of Ontario.

Jackson, A. (2009). Are Wage Supplements the Answer to the Problems of Working-Poor Women? In M. Cohen and J. Pulkingham (eds.), *Public Policy for Women: The State, Income Security and Labour Market Issues*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 291-310.

Jackson, A. (2004). *Asset-Based Social Policies – A "New Idea" Whose Time Has Come?* Caledon Institute of Social Policy, Caledon Commentary, March.

Jenson, J. (2004). *Canada's New Social Risks: Directions for a New Social Architecture.* Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Policy Research Networks, Social Architecture Papers, Family Network.

Jenson, J. (2009). Lost in Translation: The Social Investment Perspective and Gender Equality. *Social Politics,* 16 (4): 483-446.

Laidley, J. and Tabbara, M-D. (2024). *Welfare in Canada, 2023.* Toronto, Maytree Institute of Social Policy. https://maytree.com/changing-systems/data-measuring/social-assistance-summaries/ontario/

Laruffa, F. (2018). Social Investment: Diffusing ideas for redesigning citizenship after neo-liberalism? *Critical Social Policy* 38 (4): 688-706.

Li ,T. M. (2007a). *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, development, and the practice of politics.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Li, T. M. (2007b). Practices of Assemblage and Community Forest Management. *Economy and Society,* 36 (2): 263-293.

Little, M. H. (2012). Just Another Neoliberal Worker: Tracing the state's treatment of low-income mothers. *International Journal of Sociology of the Family,* 38 (1): 1-17.

Mahon, R. (2008). Varieties of Liberalism: Canadian Social Policy from the 'Golden Age' to the Present. *Social Policy & Administration,* 42 (4): 342-361.

Mahon, R. and Macdonald, L. (2008). "*Gender, Poverty and the Rescaling of Welfare Regimes: Toronto/Canada and Mexico City/Mexico."* Unpublished paper, prepared for presentation at annual meetings of the Canadian Political Science Association, Vancouver, June 3-6.

Mahon, R. and Macdonald, L. (2010). Anti-poverty politics in Toronto and Mexico City. *Geoforum*, 41 (2): 209-217.

Maki, K. (2011). Neoliberal Deviants and Surveillance: Welfare recipients under the watchful eye of Ontario Works. *Surveillance and Society*, 9 (1): 47-63.

Marks L., Little M., Gaucher, M., and Noddings, T. R. (2016). 'A Job That Should Be Respected': Contested visions of motherhood and English Canada's second wave women's movements, 1970-1990. *Women's History Review*, 25 (5): 771-790.

McGimpsey, I. (2017). Late Neoliberalism: Delineating a policy regime. *Critical Social Policy* 37 (1): 64-84.

McKeen, W. (2004). The Shifting Discourses of the Progressive Social Policy/Child Poverty Advocacy Community, Wither Social Justice? *Canadian Review of Social Policy/Revue canadienne de politique sociale*, 53: 88-107.

McKeen, W. (2020). Work Incentives for "Welfare Mothers" in 1970s Ontario: Screening Out the Political. *Labour/Le Travail*, 85 (Spring): 91-125.

Mosher, J. (2014). Human Capital and the Post-Scripting of Women's Poverty. In B. Goldblatt and L. Lamarche (eds.), *Women's Rights to Security and Social Protection.* Oxford and Portland, Oregon: Hart Publishing, pp. 67-189.

Noël, A. (2006). The New Global Politics of Poverty. *Global Social* Policy, 6(3): 304-333.

Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU). (2017). *Steering our course on the road to change.* https://opseu.org/news/steering-our-course-on-the-road-to-change-opseu-report-on-income-security-reform/17031/?utm_source=loop_img

Reininger, T. and Castro-Serrano, B. (2021). Poverty and Human Capital in Chile: The processes of subjectivation in conditional cash transfer programs. *Critical Social Policy* 42 (2): 229-248.

Savage, G. C. (2018). Policy Assemblages and Human Devices: A reflection on 'assembling policy'. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education,* 39 (2): 309-321.

Savage, G. C. (2020). What Is Policy Assemblage? *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 8 (3): 319-335.

Schram, S. (2015). *The Return of Ordinary Capitalism: Neoliberalism, Precarity, Occupy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Schram, S. (2018). Neoliberalizing the Welfare State: Marketizing Social Policy/Disciplining Clients. In D. Cahill, M. Cooper, M. Konings, D. Primrose (eds.), *Sage Handbook of Neoliberalism*. Thousand Oaks, California, Sage Incorporated.

Scoffield, H. (2022). Pandemic Response Revealed Societal Ills. *Toronto Star*, November 19, p. A12.

Smith-Carrier, T. (2017). Reproducing Social Conditions of Poverty: A critical feminist analysis of social assistance participation in Ontario, Canada. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 38 (4): 498-521.

Smith-Carrier, T. and Lawlor, A. (2017). Realising Our (Neoliberal) Potential? A critical discourse analysis of the poverty reduction strategy in Ontario, Canada. *Critical Social Policy* 37 (1): 105-127.

Social Assistance Review Advisory Council (SARAC). (2010). *Report of the Social Assistance Review Advisory Council*. Toronto: Ministry of Community and Social Services.

Social Planning Network of Ontario (SPNO). (2011). *Human Dignity for All: Working for a poverty free Ontario* (presentation slides) Toronto: SPNO.

Social Planning Network of Ontario (SPNO). (2017). *SPNO Response to Income Security: A Roadmap for Change.* https://www.spno.ca/news/latest/132-spno-response-to-income-security-a-roadmap-for-change

Stapleton, J. (2004a). Like Falling Off a Cliff: The incomes of low-wage and social assistance recipients in the 1990s. In D. Hulchanski and M. Shapcott (eds.), *Finding Room: Policy Options for a Canadian Rental Housing Strategy*. Toronto: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto.

Stapleton, J. (2004b). *Transitions Revisited: Implementing the vision*. Ottawa, Ontario: Caledon Institute of Social Policy, September.

Stapleton, J. (2008). *Income Security for Working-age Adults in Canada: Let's consider the model under our nose.* Toronto, Ontario: Metcalfe Foundation, November.

Toronto City Summit Alliance (TCSA). (2006). *Time for a Fair Deal: Report of the task force on modernizing income security for working-age adults*. Toronto: Toronto City Summit Alliance.

Townson, M. (2004). September 2004: A New "Social Architecture" For Canada? Planned redesign of social programs can spur privatization. *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.* September.

Wiggan, J. (2012). Telling Stories of 21st Century Welfare: The UK coalition government and the neo-liberal discourse of worklessness and dependency. *Critical Social Policy*, 32 (3): 383-405.

Whitworth, A. (2016). Neoliberal Paternalism and Paradoxical Subjects: Confusion and contradiction in UK activation policy. *Critical Social Policy* 36 (3): 412-431.

Williams, F. (2021). *Social Policy: A Critical and Intersectional Analysis.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Zon, N. and Granofsky, T. (2019). *Resetting Social Assistance Reform*. Toronto: Munk School of Social Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto.