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**BOOK REVIEW**

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Sheila Neysmith, Kate Bezanson & Anne O'Connell, ***Telling Tales: Living the Effects of Public Policy***. Black Point, NS: Fernwood Press, 2005, 232 pp., \$24.95 paper.

Reviewed by **Mike Bratton**, University of Windsor

Neysmith, Bezanson, and O'Connell (2005) document the everyday impacts of neoliberal economic restructuring in Ontario. Between 1997 and 2000, the authors carried out four rounds of interviews with 40 households who were living the effects of numerous social policy shifts brought about by the Conservative 'common sense revolution.' As one might expect, "the narratives of the households interviewed for this study demonstrate how welfare state restructuring affects quality of life" (8). While there is a long-standing debate on the political left about the contradictions inherent in a welfare state, there is mounting evidence that welfare state dismantling has had deleterious effects on society's most disadvantaged. The key themes identified by Neysmith, Bezanson, and O'Connell include:

*the scope and speed with which economic and social policy changes affect peoples lives; the multidimensional effects of income security; the harm resulting from dominant expectations of a work career; the mechanisms that maintain social exclusion; how the myths of family and community deny access to social services; and how social policies affect people's subjectivity, critical capacities and ultimately their identities (8).*

Writing primarily for graduate and undergraduate students of social policy, the authors provide useful discussion questions at the end of each chapter. These thought provoking questions assist in engaging readers to ensure that the significant issues (grounded in household narratives) receive the in-depth consideration they legitimately warrant.

*Telling Tales* provides detailed and informative insights on the lived realities of those impacted by policy shifts. Qualitative understandings of this nature are of critical importance in an era where neoliberal policies are legitimized with 'trickle-down' economic logic (assuring us that 'a rising tide lifts all boats'). The political right often posits the claim that their economic and social policies ultimately benefit everyone. Consider the words of former Ontario premier Mike Harris on the night of his re-election in 1999:

*I very much disagree with those who say 'well if there is a winner somebody has to lose'. That's nonsense. When we grow and prosper and get stronger – everybody wins (CTV).*

The detailed narratives that constitute *Telling Tales* provide an informed and in-depth exploration of “the outcomes of income security” (46-73) that run counter to the political messages extolling the ideological virtues of unfettered markets. The end result is empirical and extraordinarily compelling qualitative evidence that there are, to borrow the insightful metaphor of Mel Hurtig (1999: 82), “sinking rafts [among the] rising yachts.” The outcomes, as depicted by the authors, are material, social and cultural.

One respondent, following the 21.6% benefit level reductions to social assistance, and a declined request for dietary supplement from social assistance, articulated the very undesirable reality she was facing:

*If you look in my cupboards you'll see that they are absolutely bare. I don't have anything right now because I ran out of funds. I don't eat or I just have one meal a day. That's not good for me, but that's all I can do, that's all I can afford, so that's what I do (30).*

The unenviable social repercussions that are often endemic to living life in material deprivation were articulated by another respondent:

*Like the choir [a social activity that did not cost money] and everything, it keeps me active and it keeps my mind going and I feel like I am not vegetating. But I have no friendships from any of these things that I do because I can't go out and socialize afterwards because it takes money to be able to do those things (30).*

In light of the household narratives, Neysmith, Bezanson, and O'Connell invoke an insightful yet underutilized concept that hopefully will become more common in policy formation and analysis. “Privileged irresponsibility” is considered to be problematic when “those who are relatively privileged are granted by that privilege the opportunity to simply ignore certain forms of hardship that they do not face” (Tronto, 1993 cited on p.13). If the profoundness and importance of the concept of ‘privileged irresponsibility’ is recognized and appreciated by readers, and the authors’ depictions and arguments are powerfully geared toward this end, then the book should be considered a must read for those concerned about what has happened to our poorest and most vulnerable people.

## References

- Hurtig, M. 1999. *Pay the Rent or Feed the Kids: The Tragedy and Disgrace of Poverty in Canada*. Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart.
- CTV (1999, June 3). *Election broadcast* [Television broadcast]. Toronto, ON: CTVglobemedia.