Racialized Precarious Employment and the Inadequacies of the Canadian Welfare State

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Abstract

Although the rise in precarious employment within Canada is tied to the ascendency of neoliberalism, racialized persons have long been marginalized within the Canadian workforce and relegated to precarious workforce participation. Through an exploration of the relationship between precarious employment and racialized power structures, it will be demonstrated that while the moderate Keynesian welfare policies of the post–World War II era served to mitigate the experiences of those excluded from the workplace, racialized power structures were not fundamentally altered in that era. This critique offers a response to scholarship on the impact of neoliberalism that valorizes the welfare state without paying sufficient attention to its history of racial exclusions. It proposes new strategies to address these underlying inequalities within the existing structures of the Canadian workforce.

Keywords

precarious employment, Canadian welfare state, racialization

Introduction

The rise of neoliberalism within Canada in the 1980s, accompanied by the decline of the Keynesian welfare state, contributed to an increase in precarious employment; however, for marginalized members of the Canadian workforce, precarious employment is not a new phenomenon. The Canadian workforce and the policies of the post–World War II welfare state were built around the norm of a White male–breadwinner model, which perpetuated the experience of marginalization for racialized, as well as for female, workers. While neoliberalism has intensified the experience of precariousness and exclusion from the workforce for racialized Canadians, the solution to this exclusion cannot be found in advocating for a return to an inadequate system of moderate Keynesian policies that never challenged the racialized power structures. Accordingly, addressing this continued inequity and the racialization of poverty cannot be achieved simply through the pursuit of Keynesian welfare policies premised on market-oriented, rather than redistributive, aims.

This discussion draws on feminist political economists’ contributions to the understanding of precarious employment, in particular Vosko (2006), to explore the unchallenged exclusions structurally embedded within the Canadian welfare state. Feminist political economists have explicated the significance of the “gender contract” (Vosko, 2010; Williams, 1995) in the formation of the welfare state, which premised the employment norm on a gendered division of labor wherein men were given preference within the workforce and women were expected to take on reproductive labor in the home. Whereas gender distinctions were frequently explicit in the policy decisions of the welfare state framers, racial exclusions were less clearly articulated but no less embedded within workforce norms and the underlying liberal ideology. Through utilizing feminist critiques of the welfare state and explicating liberalism’s racial exclusions, this article seeks to demonstrate that while the moderate Keynesian welfare policies served to mitigate the experiences of those excluded from the workplace, racialized power structures were not fundamentally altered in this era.

The analysis is built on an account of the Canadian welfare state and the embedded racialization of the Canadian workforce. The racialization of poverty is then discussed in relation to the rise of precarious employment. Based on these explications, the limited redistributive aims of the Canadian welfare state are stressed, with a particular focus on the low commitment to full employment. Given the limited redistributive aims of the Canadian welfare state and the consistent employment discrimination facing workers of

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color, old strategies that glorify the welfare state without paying attention to the limitations of the market-based rationales that underpinned policy choices within that era, and the implications for racialized Canadians, are rejected. New strategies are proposed that eschew a color-blind approach to Canadian policy making and instead call for the use of racially aggregated data and racialized labor organizing to produce and sustain an attentiveness and responsiveness to racialized employment exclusions.

The Canadian Context

Canada is commonly classed as adopting a “liberal regime” version of the welfare state, along with other Anglo-American democracies and in contrast to European social democratic models (Myles, 1989). Finkel (2006) characterizes the impetus for the Canadian welfare state as arising out of a postwar demand from the citizenry for universal social programs. While the governments of the day recognized the political need to be responsive to public sentiment, many political elites were reluctant to fully embrace a progressive version of Keynes’s welfare state model, which would entail ongoing state intervention in the market and continual social support for all citizens.

Many members of the Canadian elite, including Mackenzie King [prime minister of Canada, 1935–1948], were sceptical about Keynes’s views, they argued that a headlong rush to expand the state’s role in the peacetime economy was a prescription for economic disaster, or socialism, or both. (Finkel, 2006, p. 128)

The discussions informing the policy decisions that introduced the Canadian welfare state were focused primarily on competing economists’ views of what was needed to stimulate and sustain market growth. As in other liberal Anglo-American democracies, such as the United States and Britain, the market was accepted as the primary organizing force within Canadian society. Smardon (2011) points out that “the form of Keynesianism followed in Canada . . . focused on stimulating private investment through lower interest rates or tax reductions rather than through deficit spending or redistribution of income from higher to lower economic classes” (p. 154). Without a redistributive focus, it is difficult to see how the formation of the welfare state in Canada was ever primarily aimed at assisting vulnerable Canadians.

In comparison with other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) welfare states, Canada has had a consistently high level of unemployment and has never sincerely pursued a full-employment objective (O’Connor, 1989), leaving segments of the population perpetually vulnerable to unemployment and poverty. “While some countries adopted a fairly statist, interventionist variant of Keynesianism, Canada adopted what turned out to be the ‘mainstream’ version of Keynesianism—at what appeared to be the midpoint in the tradeoff between planning and the market” (Campbell, 1991, p. 2). While labor advocates frequently laud the rise of the postwar welfare state within Canada as the “Golden Age” (see, for example, Abu-Laban & Gabriel, 2008), the full-employment objective was never earnestly pursued within Canada, and significant degrees of precariousness, marginality, and exclusion were accepted as norms of the Canadian workforce. Accordingly, Campbell (1991) groups Canada among the Anglo-American democracies that “have placed a value premium on the perpetuation of liberal democracies and market forms” at the expense of greater state intervention and social support (p. 25). Similarly, Smardon (2011) distinguishes Canada from the European social democratic models that have pursued greater wage equality and institutionalized collective bargaining: “In contrast to the more redistributive programs established in the Nordic welfare states, the Canadian welfare state was considered a supplement to the main determinants of growth and distribution in the private economy” (p. 155). Furthermore, Smardon highlights the significance of regional redistribution within Canada to national unity. In what was described as a country with “too much geography” (Barnes, 2007, p. 161) by former Prime Minister Mackenzie King, Canadian federal politicians have struggled to bind the country together with national policies that create a sense of social unity throughout disparate regions. Accordingly, routine redistribution of wealth between “have” and “have not” provinces and a national universal health care system have become embedded within Canadian federal policy and national identity.

Finkel (2006) labels the Canadian universal health care system the “saving grace” of the welfare state in the context of the rise of neoliberalism within Canada. Canada adopted national health care legislation in 1968 that secured federal funding for provincially administered health care programs (p. 308). While the rise of welfare programs in the late 1960s, including the introduction of universal health care, was conceived of by welfare advocates as the “first instalment” of redistributive policy, in retrospect this period “represented the high point of social reform” (Finkel, 2006, p. 189). The adoption of universal health care within Canada also limited the scope of precariousness for the most vulnerable members of Canadian society, as, unlike the situation in the United States, every Canadian citizen was afforded access, and continues to have access, to health care. However, while universal social programs foster solidarity, benefits are not targeted to those most in need (O’Connor, 1989); accordingly, Canadian health care legislation exemplifies the Canadian welfare state preference for national unity over redistribution. While the moderate Canadian adoption of universal social programs during the postwar period, in particular health care, served to mitigate the vulnerability of marginalized and precarious employed Canadians, Canadian policy makers resisted the implementation of programs that would entail the significant redistribution of wealth, ongoing state
interference in the market, or the material adoption of a full-employment objective.

**Embedded Racialization**

While the threat of precarious employment may increasingly be facing all members of the Canadian workforce, an approach that is attentive to social location recognizes that racialized and gender-based exclusion from the workplace is not an innovation of neoliberalism. “Capitalist development creates the places for a hierarchy of workers, but traditional Marxist categories cannot tell us who will fill which places. Gender and racial hierarchies determine who fills the empty places” (Wallis & Kwok, 2008, p. 16). Both women and workers of color are disproportionately overrepresented at the most precarious end of the continuum within the Canadian workforce. In “Conceptualizing Precarious Employment: Mapping Wage Work Across Social Location and Occupational Context,” Cranford and Vosko (2006) report that “White men are less precarious than White women, consistently across all dimensions, just as they are less precarious than both women and men of colour” (p. 60). Vosko (2006) argues that the exclusion of women from the Canadian workforce was historically premised on an assumed gender contract that cast men as breadwinners and women as caregivers. Thus, gender-based employment exclusion was justified largely on the basis of questionable assumptions about a supposedly natural division of labor based on sex. Racialized exclusion from the Canadian workforce was premised on different, though intersectional, assumptions and categorizations, and thus requires distinct analysis.

Race is a socially constructed, rather than a biologically based, concept, which categorizes people through a process of racialization (Vosko, 2006). Li (2008) describes the process by which society attributes social significance to groups on superficial physical grounds . . . as racialization; people so marked may be referred to as racial minorities in terms of their relation to a dominant group, which has the power to set terms and conditions of racial accommodation. (p. 21, emphasis in original)

Racial categories derive their social significance from differential treatment, stereotypes, and power structures that benefit and exclude on the basis of racial characteristics. There is a social hierarchy of race in Canada, “which is manifested in Canadians’ view of which groups are socially desirable or undesirable according to racial origin”; furthermore, these “racial groupings are associated with unequal earnings” (Li, 2008, p. 21). The hierarchy of race within Canada privileges people of European origin with White physical racial characteristics and disadvantages non-Whites. While all members of Canadian society can be described as racialized in as much as racial categories carry social significance for both White and non-White Canadians, the term racialized is frequently used to refer to non-White members of society who have been rendered as the “Other” by virtue of racial characteristics. As the racial categories are not based on legitimate genetic differences, Li (2008) contends that “the idea of race cannot sustain itself as a meaningful concept unless it is also supported by social actions which reflect the relevance of race” (p. 22). In Canada, the continuous relevance of race is observable through the economic, social, and political exclusion and disadvantage experienced by racialized groups.

Despite the centrality of race to the Canadian social order, Canadian political scientists have largely eschewed discussions of race and employed color-blind analyses. Color-blind approaches deny the significance of racial differences and assume a universalism that is inattentive to the political consequences of racial difference. The denial of the political significance of race is in part tied to a cherished Canadian myth about race, wherein “English-Canadians often consider race an American problem, although no systemic comparative studies exist” (Thompson, 2008, p. 531). Nath (2011) claims that “the absence of ‘race’ in Canadian Political Science is not straightforward because ‘race’ is often recorded as culture or ethnicity” (p. 166). Thompson (2008) holds that this “conflation or equation of race with ethnicity often diminishes the claims of racial minorities” (p. 527). When racial and ethnic identities are equated, the challenges encountered by racial minorities when striving for inclusion can be blamed on ideological differences and cultural practices that allegedly pose challenges for social integration. According to this account, despite the commendable diversity and inclusion efforts made by the state, certain members of racial/ethnic minorities cannot be integrated into the country because they cling to cultural practices or religious beliefs that are wholly incommensurate with the liberal, egalitarian commitments of the state.

The present discussion seeks to avoid the analytical conflation of race and ethnicity, wherein racialized workers are rendered as cultural or migrant “Others,” and instead recognizes a legacy of racial discrimination within the Canadian workforce that is not limited to the treatment of migrant workers but has been a perpetual feature of the Canadian workforce.

The consequences of the analytic submerging of “race” are extreme, ultimately erasing a particular class of political subjects, a particular technology of political power, as well as the material history of the Canadian state and the discipline’s implications in it. (Nath, 2011, p. 162)

The historical significance of race in Canada is crucial to an understanding of the sustained political exclusion and economic marginalization of racialized Canadians. As Abu-Laban and Nieguth (2000) specify, “race” was a “legal artifact” within Canada, as “historically, Canadian law has not been applied without ethnic and racial bias; in fact, Canadian
jurisprudence has often upheld practices of cultural and racial discrimination” (p. 477). Any attention to the historical (and current) practice of racial discrimination within Canada is met with resistance, in large part because it diverges from what Nath (2011) describes as “discourses of nationalism which posit a raceless past for Canada in contrast to the supposedly more deeply racialized and racist politics of the US” (p. 165). These discourses of nationalism cling to the myth that racism is an American problem, and that within Canada’s multicultural mosaic, racial and ethnic minorities are not limited by virtue of their racial or ethnic identities.

The Racialization of Poverty

The economic consequences of race can be understood in relation to what Galabuzi (2008) terms “the racialization of poverty,” which refers to “the disproportionate and persistent experience of low income among racialized groups in Canada” (p. 82). Racialized groups are overrepresented in precarious employment circumstances and perpetually occupy lower positions within the capitalist hierarchy:

The unequal market worth given to people of different racial origins is one indication of how the labour market has come to recognize the relative economic value of race. In this sense, race can be seen as having a market value in that the origin of some people adversely affects their economic returns in the labour market, while that of others improves the outcomes of their market participation. (Li, 2008, p. 22)

Cranford and Vosko (2006) describe income as arguably the strongest indicator of precariousness within the workforce, and in appreciating the relationship between precarious employment and race, it is significant that income disadvantage within Canada is racialized. “White Canadians, both foreign-born and native-born, show an income advantage over other groups,” while “foreign-born visible minorities have the lowest income average” (Li, 2008, p. 27). The economic advantage experienced by White foreign-born Canadians over non-White native-born Canadians reflects the fact that race cannot be conflated with ethnicity or understood to signify a departure from Canadian culture, education, or work experience. Das Gupta (2006) emphasizes that the issue of disproportionately disadvantaged people of color “is not restricted to immigrants but applies also to non-White, Canadian-born citizens” (p. 325). As Galabuzi (2008) reports, “In 1995, 35.6% members of racialized groups lived under the low income cut-off (poverty line) compared with 17.6% in the general Canadian population” (p. 87). After comparing earning differentials between Canadian-born “visible minorities” and White workers over five censuses, from 1971 to 1996, Pendakur and Pendakur (2007) conclude that “the labour market is neither colour blind nor moving towards that goal” (p. 168). As Canadian-born workers of color continue to experience economic exclusion, there is reason to assume that the racialized cycle of poverty is unlikely to spontaneously disappear for future generations.

It is significant that the economic exclusion experienced by racialized workers includes exclusion from unions and vocational associations. Cranford and Vosko (2006) report that “men and women of colour are less likely to be covered by a union contract than White women and men” (p. 61), while also noting that “union coverage is the first indicator of regulatory protection and control” (p. 50), and thus, union membership provides a degree of protection from contingency and precariousness that is not available to nonunionized workers. Citing a study conducted by Yates, Das Gupta (2006) claims that “workers of colour are more willing to join unions compared to the entire population of unorganized workers” (p. 318). Thus, there is a disconnect between the stated willingness of workers of color to unionize and the underrepresentation of workers of color in unionized positions. Jackson (as quoted in Das Gupta, 2006) acknowledges this disconnect but credits employer hiring patterns as the source of the underrepresentation of racialized employees in unions. Das Gupta (2006) challenges this assertion and claims that while systemic racism in hiring practices certainly contributes to the exclusion of workers of color, “systemic racism in the labour movement is indeed one contributing factor, among many, to the lower unionization rate of workers of colour compared to White workers” (p. 319). This systemic racism stems from the development of union membership within Canada and the relegation of racialized workers to the margins of the Canadian workforce.

People of color have historically been consigned to the least desirable jobs within Canada due to systemic discrimination and exclusion from professional sectors. Prior to the immigration policy changes of 1967, racialized immigrants were explicitly excluded from entrance into Canada or restricted in terms of entrance into Canada on the basis of race and ethnicity.

The precariousness of immigrants, people of colour, and Aboriginal workers, including women, in the labour market was produced by their precarious citizenship status in Canada—and that lack of citizenship was due, in turn, to their racialization, their gender, their immigration status, to all the legal and social locations they occupied. (Das Gupta, 2006, p. 320)

As excluded and marginalized members of Canadian society, racialized Canadians had limited social and employment options and were expected to perform under subhuman working conditions, at super-exploitative wages. . . . They were viewed as threats to the nation by their otherness and as threats to the organized working class by their racialized capacity and supposed “willingness” to work at wages below those paid to White workers. (Das Gupta, 2006, p. 321)

As workers of color were perpetually kept in positions of desperate and precarious social status, their survival within
Canadian society was premised on their acceptance of inferior working conditions. In turn, this acceptance created a schism between racialized workers and organized White male labor movements, as the presence of racialized workers willing to work for lower wages undercut the wage demands of organized White unions. Furthermore, as workers of color were seen as the “subhuman Other,” the presence of racialized workers within the workplace devalued the prestige of the work. Heron and Palmer (1977) describe how, during the early 20th century, “skilled workers retained much of their craft status, pride, and economic security through a thorough organization and control of the productive process” (p. 429). In this context, the inclusion of racialized workers was seen as negatively impacting the value assigned to the work and the wages provided.

Precarious Employment

One of the manifestations of the racialization of poverty is the overrepresentation of racialized Canadians in precarious employment circumstances. Appreciating the relationship between precarious employment and the racialization of poverty requires an examination of the dimensions of precarious employment, including the racial implications of these dimensions. Vosko (2006) describes precarious employment as encompassing “forms of work involving limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, job insecurity, low wages, and high health risks” (p. 3). In Cranford and Vosko’s (2006) essay, “Conceptualizing Precarious Employment: Mapping Wage Work Across Social Location and Occupational Context,” the authors are careful to differentiate between nonstandard work and precarious employment. “Nonstandard work” is commonly used as a “catch-all” term to describe employment relationships that deviate from the perceived “standard” employment relationship of a full-time permanent job, and includes contract, seasonal, part-time, and temporary employment as well as self-employment (Cranford & Vosko, 2006). This undifferentiated category obscures the disadvantages inherent in precarious employment by applying the same language to any modified work arrangement that could be the result of either choice or constraint. “Conflating non-standard forms of employment and precarious forms of employment masks nuances central to understanding labour market insecurity” (Cranford & Vosko, 2006, p. 47). While nonstandard work arrangements may be considered preferable and advantageous for those who self-select work that is not full-time or permanent, disadvantage is inherent in the concept of precarious employment.

As the term denotes, “precarious employment” is characterized by risk and uncertainty. Cranford and Vosko (2006) claim that “income is, arguably, the most important dimension of precarious employment” (p. 49). Income insecurity can result from low wages as well as from a lack of guaranteed earnings. A self-employed worker capable of billing well above the median wage with varied regularity of income may be nonstandard without experiencing precarious employment, while a permanent employee earning below the poverty line would be considered precarious. In addition to the importance of income, Cranford and Vosko stress access to a social wage that includes extended health and dental coverage, a pension plan, and life/disability insurance: “Employer-sponsored benefits are a component of the social wage with a significant bearing on precarious employment” (p. 49). As the provision of social services is increasingly linked to employment circumstances, rather than provided by the state, precarious employment entails limited access to health services and income protection in the case of illness and injury, whereas those individuals with nonstandard yet nonprecarious employment may not be impacted by these factors due to other dimensions of advantage. As precarious employment cannot be reduced to the standard/nonstandard work dichotomy, Cranford and Vosko describe Canada as being characterized by “a continuum of precarious wage work, where full-time permanent employees are the least precarious, followed in order, by full-time temporary employees, part-time permanent employees, and part-time temporary employees” (p. 47). While the continuum is constructed to reflect the relationship between work arrangement and precariousness, the authors continue to stress the importance of dimensions such as income and social wage, and use the continuum to highlight how precarious employment intersects with race and gender.

The rise of precarious employment in Canada is frequently linked to the ascendancy of neoliberalism, beginning in the late 1970s and accelerating rapidly throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This ascendancy occurred under both of Canada’s two most prominent federal parties, Liberal and Conservative, the only parties ever to form federal governments in Canada (Dyck & Cochrane, 2014). Abu-Laban and Gabriel (2008) characterize neoliberal ideals as placing an emphasis on “the ‘free’ market, economic efficiency, and unfettered competition” (p. 48). Under this lens, precarious employment is reframed as providing for necessary market flexibility, wherein companies and employers are able to respond to the changing demands of the market, unencumbered by job protection legislation or collective bargaining. Neoliberalism also marks a departure from the Keynesian welfare state and a transformation from the “public” to the “private” (Abu-Laban & Gabriel, 2008). In accordance with the valorization of market arrangements, precariousness is presented as serving a market function by undercutting labor demands for increased wages, health coverage, and better working conditions. In the early formations of the state-led neoliberalism, Finkel (2006) describes the Conservative Mulroney government as being heavily influenced by the Bank of Canada governor, John Crow, who endorsed a right-wing economist ideology and the principle of NAIRU (non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment).

The new orthodoxy at the Bank and in the business community became that, even when the economy was buoyant, monetary
and fiscal policy should ensure that 8 per cent of Canadians were both unemployed and recipients of minimal government funding through either unemployment insurance or social assistance. (Finkel, 2006, p. 291)

In a climate of perpetual unemployment, even precarious employment circumstances could be cast as preferable to the ever-present risk of unemployment. Thus, the rise of neoliberalism within Canada marked a shift away from tolerating unemployment and the attendant marginalizations, toward embracing a level of sustained unemployment as a positive feature of a well-functioning economy.

Crucially, neoliberalism is also characterized by a commitment to “privatizing property, utilities, and social programs, to reducing state expenditures and bureaucracy, increasing efficiencies, and to individual freedom from state regulation” (Goldberg, 2009, p. 337). This retreat from state interference both subjects all precariously employed workers to increasingly deregulated and unprotected employment conditions and also signifies a retreat from antidiscriminatory or employment equity measures that were targeted to ameliorate the employment conditions faced by racialized workers. Given the deregulating thrust of neoliberalism, the standard employment relationship is being dismantled in favor of market flexibility. While Vosko (2006) rejects the standard/nonstandard dichotomy as a means for classifying precarious work, she identifies the rise of nonstandard work in Canada as significant to precarious employment, as those with full-time permanent positions are the least precarious on the spectrum. “Employees with full-time permanent jobs still constitute the majority of the employed population in Canada, highlighting the continuing significance of the standard employment relationship. Yet full-time permanent jobs became less common over the 1990s and early 2000s” (Vosko, 2006, p. 21). Despite the decline in the standard employment relationship, the social wage and employment laws continue to be constructed based on the expectation of permanent full-time employment. “Consequently, labour and social protections are accessible to fewer and fewer workers, from occupational health and safety protections, to employment standards and collective bargaining rights, to employment insurance and the Canada/Quebec Pension Plan” (Vosko, 2006, p. 30). Thus, precariousness is intensified, as those experiencing limited access to full-time permanent employment arrangements are also denied social support, which has been made contingent on the “eroding norm of the standard employment relationship” (Vosko, 2006, p. 30). Furthermore, this norm also serves to sustain and perpetuate inequities constructed on the basis of existing workplace marginalization.

**Limited Redistributive Aims of the Welfare State**

It is in this historical context of limited inclusion of, and explicit hostility toward, racialized workers that the Keynesian welfare policies were pursued. Finkel (2006) describes the introduction of the welfare state in Canada, following World War II, as being promoted by citizens’ demands for government assistance and a calculating government’s interest in maintaining power and avoiding a national shift toward socialism:

Having experienced the anguish and militancy of Canadian workers during the Depression, the cautious prime minister [Mackenzie King] reasoned that a postwar return to Depression conditions could precipitate chaos and perhaps revolution. However, as a cautious man, King remained reluctant to commit his government to expensive social programs for which he would then have to impose taxes. (Finkel, 2006, p. 126)

This cautious balance caused the government to primarily pursue policies that would satisfy the demand for increased state support, without significantly disrupting the capitalist status quo. Finkel (2006) describes the period as being marked by an “extreme pessimism, in light of the Depression disaster, that the economy could ever produce jobs for all adults who wanted paid work” (p. 131). This pessimism, fueled by the conception that there was only limited space within the job market, contributed to the types of welfare state policies the federal government was prepared to pursue. McKeen and Porter (2003) identify the two key programs of the post–World War II Canadian welfare state as unemployment insurance (1940) and family allowances (1944). Both of these policies reflect a market orientation that is consistent with capitalism and an acceptance of limited access to the workforce. As Campbell (1991) reflects, “in all of this, the anticipated level of ‘economic redistribution’ was all but marginal” (p. 4).

The reluctance to pursue transformative or redistributive social policies was manifest in the employment strategies chosen and pursued by the government that reinforced the existing insider/outsider dichotomy among workers. “If the government hoped to restrain the wage demands of male breadwinners, it also hoped to create a monopoly for men over most jobs in the labour force, certainly over the better-paying jobs” (Finkel, 2006, p. 131). Accordingly, the government avoided social programs that would greatly assist women in joining the workforce and instead favored programs that limited organized labor’s demands for increased “family wages” by providing family allowances, a program that also sought to undercut the requirement for mothers to join the workforce to support the family.

While the period is often presented as the golden age of the welfare state, large numbers of minorities and women, especially those who were not engaged in full-time employment, were excluded from the full benefit of the welfare state, and thus the welfare state itself helped sustain and reinforce structural inequalities. (McKeen & Porter, 2003, p. 115)

Welfare policies, such as unemployment insurance, were structured according to an expectation of market participation,
and yet the systemic barriers that limited the ability of racial minorities and women to access full employment were left unchallenged and in some instances were reinforced.

The government’s postwar strategy was presented in the White Paper on Employment and Income (Campbell, 1991). While an earlier draft of the document committed the government to full employment, this language was considered politically untenable and was thus revised to “a high and stable level of employment and income” (Campbell, 1991, p. 3, emphasis in original). The compromise involved in tolerating some level of ongoing unemployment reflects an acceptance by the government that certain members of society would continue to experience barriers to employment. As detailed above, historically, within Canada, people of color have been deemed to be of low market value, and as such are more likely to encounter barriers to full-time, stable employment. By making the compromise, the government accepted a risk that would be disproportionately borne by already marginalized members of the Canadian workforce, namely, women and people of color. “The White Paper reflected a Keynesian approach which entailed a low level of government control and a commitment to the perpetuation of the market economy” (Campbell, 1991, p. 3, emphasis in original). With limited government interference in the marketplace, the historically entrenched bases of exclusion were left unchallenged. “Unemployment was seen as a technical matter that could be dealt with by technical means. Moral and ideological controversies were put to the side, and capitalism was absolved of blame for the Depression” (Campbell, 1991, p. 4). Accepting a moderate version of Keynesianism, Canadian policy makers sought to ensure market-based economic stability through limited interventions. These interventions were never intended to challenge the hierarchies produced by the capitalist system, but merely to ensure that the inequalities introduced and maintained by the market did not reach levels that invited public wrath.

Given the lack of redistributive aims, the Canadian welfare state should not be considered as opposing capitalism but instead as a means to make capitalism more palatable. Campbell (1991) describes Canadian Keynesianism as “the ‘liberal Keynesian’ variant, [reliant] on passive measures such as automatic stabilizers, focusing on private investment, and remaining consistent with neoclassical precepts” (p. 5). While it is certainly true that the retreat from the welfare state (from the 1980s onward) has increased the vulnerability of many Canadians in precarious employment circumstances (especially as access to unemployment insurance becomes increasingly limited), concerns about the impact of the rise of neoliberalism frequently reflect a lack of attention to the marginalization of vulnerable workers under the policies followed by the government during the supposed golden age. As Vosko (2006) notes, the unemployment insurance policy of the period played a critical part in inaugurating other lasting features of the standard employment relationship tied to the social wage; [and] the earliest Unemployment Insurance Act (1940) was designed to protect mainly male workers in jobs in industry and commerce from the ills of unemployment. (p. 8)

The Keynesian welfare state within Canada was never intended to challenge capitalist, racialized, or gendered power structures.

The politics of the welfare state has to be situated, first, within the context of the broader political-economic and social changes taking place over the course of the postwar period that have meant that the welfare state could not be maintained in the form in which it had developed (nor indeed, was it particularly desirable to do so, given its shortcomings in meeting the needs of woman and minorities). (McKeen & Porter, 2003, p. 123)

Accordingly, addressing the ills of capitalism, racism, and sexism requires searching for solutions beyond the welfare state.

Advocates for a return to a social welfare state frequently reflect a willingness to acquiesce in the maintenance of structural disadvantages that perpetuate the exclusion of the historically marginalized members of the Canadian workforce. In his account of the virtues of the new European models, Jackson (2006) describes one of the benefits of collective bargaining as its tendency to raise “the relative pay of workers who would otherwise be lower paid—women, minorities, younger workers, the relatively unskilled” (p. 282). In this statement, Jackson fails to differentiate between systemic barriers to employment facing marginalized workers and problems faced by those workers lacking specialized training or skills; this lack of differentiation reflects insufficient consideration of why women and workers of color experience disproportionately low incomes and incommensurate pay. As Vosko (2006) argues, “Casting and upholding the normative model of (White) male employment also involved securing the flipside of the standard employment relationship. By their nature, norms, and the material realities they aim to reflect, foster exclusions” (p. 8). As the policies of the welfare state were constructed in accordance with a gendered and racialized norm, they assisted in perpetuating the flipside of this norm, which entailed the exclusion of women and workers of color from the workforce.

Old Strategies

As the discussion in the previous section has shown, the Canadian welfare state policies never sought to disrupt the racialized employment hierarchies, nor did they adequately protect the most vulnerable members of the Canadian workforce. Accordingly, there is cause to be critical of approaches that espouse a commitment to more equitable access to resources among all Canadians by referencing welfare state policies as examples of laudable efforts to provide for all citizens. Many authors glorify the welfare state without paying...
attention to the limitations of the market-based rationales that underpinned policy choices within that era and the implications for racialized Canadians in particular. In their critique of the “selling out of diversity,” Abu-Laban and Gabriel (2008) claim that neoliberal rationales have narrowed the vision of diversity, which constitutes “a selling-out of an agenda based on pursuing substantive equality for those marginalized by race/ethnicity, gender, and class” (p. 52). Rather than accepting a “business-case for diversity” model, Abulaban and Gabriel implore Canadian policy makers to reject the view that neoliberal expansion is inevitable and call for “alternatives to neo-liberal values even within a capitalist system,” such as a return to the pre-1980s vision for a “just Canadian society” (p. 54). However, given that the modest welfare policies adopted by Canadian policy makers never aspired toward the interventionist, redistributive, equity-minded state that Abu-Laban and Gabriel describe, it is necessary to look elsewhere for guidance as to how to respond effectively to the needs of marginalized Canadians.

As Goldberg (2009) notes, under neoliberalism “the state is restricted to support the privatization of race and the protection of racially driven exclusions in the private sphere where they are set off-limits to state intervention” (p. 337). Yet despite the intricate relationship between neoliberalism and racial exclusions, it is important to avoid an analytical inflation of neoliberalism that fails to recognize how racial exclusions were erected and maintained prior to the ascendancy of neoliberalism. In his account of the racialization of poverty, Galabuzi (2008) is critical of what he describes as the neoliberal valorization of the market as the primary organizing principle of society: “The neo-liberal restructuring of Canada’s economy and labour market towards flexible labour markets has increasingly stratified labour markets along racial lines” (p. 87). Yet, as the account given above of the Canadian welfare state shows, the treatment of the market as the primary organizing force within Canadian society was not an innovation of neoliberalism. Both Galabuzi (2008) and Abu-Laban and Gabriel (2008) seek to differentiate between the “Golden Age” of the welfare state and the rationales that took hold with the dawn of neoliberalism. However, by offering descriptions of how neoliberalism produced racial exclusions through the emergence of new values, these accounts obfuscate the continuities of racial disadvantage between welfare state capitalism and neoliberal capitalism.

Similarly, the solution to ubiquitous racialized employment exclusions cannot be found in the new European models as advocated by Jackson (2006). In his 2006 article, “Regulating Precarious Labour Markets: What Can We Learn From New European Models?” Jackson argues that improving the job quality for those members at the “bottom” of the Canadian labor market will not inevitably cause high levels of unemployment. The intent of the article appears to be to convince those in positions of power that making incremental improvements to the wages, working conditions, and income security of Canadian low-level earners will not threaten those aspects of the economy that are perceived as socially beneficial. This echoes the position of those who call for the reintroduction of welfare state measures, as it represents a compromise between labor and capital for the purpose of achieving improved employment conditions. Jackson (2006) acknowledges that “there are limits to the progressiveness of the social democratic model, which falls short of transformative change,” but nonetheless maintains that “millions of precariously employed Canadian workers would be better off if Canada moved in this direction” (p. 298). Jackson does not devote sufficient attention to considering what segment of the precariously employed Canadian workforce is likely to benefit from his proposed social democratic reforms, despite the acknowledgment that increased job security can exacerbate an “insider/outsider” dichotomy among workers. Jackson (2006) argues that an increase in collective bargaining could assist in raising “the relative pay of workers who would otherwise be lower paid [including] women [and] minorities” (p. 282). However, Jackson does not examine how the hierarchy of power is constructed or why women and minorities experience lower pay. By settling on a perspective that purports to offer marginal improvements for everyone, Jackson ignores the likelihood that those relegated to the margins of society will continue to suffer under a supposedly improved regime.

New Strategies

The task of finding solutions to the inadequacies of the Canadian welfare state must be addressed within a global context where neoliberal imperatives are driving countries to participate in a “race to the bottom” (Carr & Chen, 2004, p. 137). To make local labor practices more hospitable to capital, labor standards are lowered and social redistribution measures are compromised. As Carr and Chen (2004) indicate,

In their efforts to attract foreign direct investment (FDI), governments will often exempt EPZs [export processing zones] from taxation and regulations that would otherwise obtain within their countries, thereby encouraging employment relationships that are not covered by labour legislation or social protection. (p. 131)

By the privileging of capital above labor, workers are made to bear the burden of more hazardous conditions accompanied by lesser compensation. This burden is intensified for those already marginalized within workplace hierarchies, namely, racialized workers. In the interest of resisting capital-driven imperatives for labor market insecurity and flexibility, Carr and Chen (2004) recommend that “the key policy objectives should be to extend labour standards and social protection measures to cover all workers, in both formal and informal employment” (p. 153). These policy
objectives should be constructed with a view to countering the biases toward capital over labor, toward formal over informal work arrangements, and toward male over female workers. Chen and Carr’s recommendations seek, in broad terms, to redirect state labor policies toward the protection of the most vulnerable members of the international labor force. Their recommendations would be significantly strengthened by the inclusion of enforcement mechanisms and critical data collection, as advocated below.

Despite the increasingly global dimension of labor markets, Arnold stresses the significance of the nation-state as a facilitator of global capital, as well as a site of resistance. In *America’s New Working Class: Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in a Biopolitical Age*, Arnold (2008) contests the disappearing state thesis and instead highlights that the “nation-state is often cooperating with corporations at the expense of workers” (p. 237).

Accordingly, Arnold (2008) avers that “institutional solutions are necessary” for the stability and capacity of the social safety net (p. 236). While Arnold advocates protest and resistance on the part of marginalized workers, her analysis recognizes both the institutional limitations placed on protest and the racialized marginalization of workers that serves to silence the most exploited members of the American workforce: “[T]hose who are most affected by economic changes and who face the most instability therefrom are viewed as criminal, unassimilated, or ungrateful” (p. 202). Given that “differentials in power and economic inequality are mutually reinforcing” (Arnold, 2008, p. 140), racialized workers who are consigned to the lowest rungs of the workforce face similar exclusions in the exercise of political power. Accordingly, recognition of systemic racism must inform institutional policy change. Arnold calls for institutional changes that provide for openness to civil disobedience and collective bargaining. However, given the systemic nature of racism, the power-based hierarchies that permeate state institutions are replicated in civil activism and union organizations that do not actively attend to these inequities.

While the Canadian welfare state never sought to dismantle the embedded racial exclusions of Canada’s workforce, the vulnerability of racialized Canadians has been exacerbated under neoliberalism. By virtue of being excluded from the normative model of White male employment (Vosko, 2006), racialized workers act as shock absorbers for the neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state (Vickers, 2008). Galabuzi (2008) reports that in the period after the decline of the Keynesian welfare state, racialized group members are twice as likely as other Canadians to live in poverty. Accordingly, by occupying the least desirable and most exploited positions within Canadian society, racialized workers absorb the cost of neoliberal restructuring and shield more privileged workers from the disadvantages of an eroding welfare state and a rise in precarious employment. In their study of the racialized, and gendered, dimensions of the Canadian workforce, Lewchuk, Clark, and de Wolff (2011) report clear evidence that racialized workers experienced more *insecurity*, expended more *effort* and were more likely to report discrimination at work. These results are consistent with research that indicates that race is an important factor shaping labour market experiences and that White workers continue to occupy a privileged position. (p. 120, emphasis in original)

Disrupting this marginalization and the racial inadequacies of the Canadian welfare state requires the following: racially aggregated data collection throughout the Canadian workforce, the representation of marginalized voices within collective bargaining, and the implementation and enforcement of institutional changes that reflect the realities of the Canadian workforce, including the reality of the erosion of the standard employment norm.

**Racially Aggregated Data Collection**

The collection of racially aggregated data is essential both to capture and to address the racial stratification of the Canadian workforce. Without annual audits of the racial makeup of the labor force, policy makers and state institutions are able to deny the salience of race to poverty, precarious employment, and privilege. While Canada enacted federal employment equity legislation in 1985 (legislation that is analogous to U.S. affirmative action legislation), the scope of this legislation has been largely limited to federally regulated industries and contractors to the federal government. A recent Diversity Institute (2012) study conducted within the Greater Toronto Area found that “as Employment Equity legislation requires measuring and reporting, it is a strong confirmation that ‘what gets measured, gets done’” (p. 23). What is needed is a regular and comprehensive system of data collection that applies to all workplaces (in particular those with nonstandard work arrangements) and captures the racial characteristics of the workforce, as well as the overrepresentation of racialized workers within precarious employment positions. This recommendation is particularly significant given the Canadian federal government’s recent replacement of the mandatory long form census with the voluntary National Household Survey. Academics from various fields have stressed the risk involved in changing the national census from mandatory to voluntary, as “there is strong evidence that survey non-response is non-random” (Green & Milligan, 2010). By undermining the quality and reliability of race-based census data, the government can effectively obscure the evidence of differential experiences based on race, including significant income disparity. Broad and accurate data are needed to capture the enduring presence of the systemic exclusions facing racialized workers and to measure success in combating these exclusions.

While better data collection will not, in itself, break down racialized power structures, it is a necessary step toward challenging Canadian color-blindness and what Thompson (2013) has termed “racial aphasia”: “Aphasia . . . indicates a
calculated forgetting, an obstruction of discourse, language and speech” (p. 135). Racially aggregated data are crucial for combating dominant Canadian discourses that subsume issues of race under discussions of culture and attempt to confine racial conflict to the United States. These discourses fail to acknowledge the history of racial marginalization within Canada and attempt to recast racial exclusions within the workforce as arising out of cultural barriers or applying only to new immigrants. Strategies that involve collecting racially aggregated data serve to recognize that “the reality of racial aphasia links our racial pasts to the still racist present, perhaps connected by collective silences as much as by the persistence of oppression, domination and inequality” (Thompson, 2013, p. 135). The Ontario Human Rights Commission has stressed the importance of collecting organizational human rights–related data to identify and verify theories and perceptions, measure progress or lack thereof, prompt consultations, and reduce exposure to possible legal action (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2009). Beyond these identified rationales, comprehensive racially aggregated data may also serve as a basis for social and political mobilization on the basis of racial, rather than cultural, categories.

**Better Representation of Marginalized Voices Within Collective Bargaining**

As explicated above, union membership provides a degree of protection from contingency and precariousness that is not available to nonunionized workers. However, historically, workers of color have enjoyed less union protection than White male workers. In his report to the Canadian Labour Congress, Jackson (2002) finds that in Canada, “In 1999, the proportion of workers of colour covered by a collective agreement was at 22.1%, well below the 32.0% rate for all other workers” (p. 16). While Jackson (2002) is inclined to regard the underrepresentation of workers of color as “the result of hiring patterns” (p. 17), Das Gupta is keen to highlight the racial exclusions and hierarchies embedded within union structures. Das Gupta (2006) maintains that “despite the move towards greater inclusion, the continued marginalization of many workers of colour within unions remains a pressing issue” (p. 326). She describes many unions as “happy to ‘include’ but ignore” (Das Gupta, 2006, p. 327) racialized workers within their midst and offers anecdotal accounts of a lack of support for antiracist initiatives that seek to disrupt color-blind rhetoric. As a result, workers of color face barriers within unions and are unable to advocate for their own interests within the workplace.

The racial exclusions that are faced by workers within their employment are thus exacerbated by their marginalization within the union and their disproportionate absence from positions on the union executive. “The representation of workers of colour in leadership positions within the labour movement has been one of the primary concerns of unionists of colour” (Das Gupta, 2007, p. 198). To ensure that marginalized voices are empowered to contribute within collective bargaining structures, positions on the executive should be reserved for racialized members, and antiracism committees should be permanently established within unions’ structures to provide for ongoing responsiveness to issues that disproportionately impact workers of color. These mechanisms will help ensure that the well-being of marginalized workers is not sacrificed in the interest of negotiating successes for the more powerful and established contingent in the union.

In highlighting labor’s “diversity” achievements, Raysia (2007) names race as one of the areas in which Canadian unions have shown only slow and limited movement toward inclusiveness. Das Gupta (2007) points out that while policy development and education in antiracism have had “a good degree of success” (p. 196), the sustained presence of racialized voices in senior positions in unions has been more limited. In lieu of “soft strategies” such as education and policy commitments, explicit and measurable strategies that reserve space for racialized members on the executive are required. Finally, drawing on Das Gupta’s (2006) recommendations in favor of community unionization, unions should engage in coalitions with community groups, such as “self-help organizations, ethnic networks, support groups in neighbourhoods, or worker centres” (p. 329) in the interest of forming alliances with unorganized workers of color in precarious employment to advocate jointly for improved conditions. By combining designated racialized leadership positions with standing antiracist committees, these strategies also seek to avoid reproducing circumstances of tokenism and isolation by combining representative and substantive strategies that promote a network of antiracism activism within union structures.

**Adoption of Social Policies/Legislation Reflecting the Realities of the Workforce**

Drawing on Arnold’s (2008) insight regarding the significance of institutional change, addressing the racialized exclusions of the Canadian welfare state must involve institutional changes in state policy. Given the erosion of the standard employment arrangement, social welfare policies must be constructed in accordance with the realities of an increasingly precarious workforce, including embedded race-based exclusions. For as Vosko (2010) points out, given the crumbling male breadwinner/female caregiver gender contract, the enlargement of the temporary migrant worker programs, and the ever-increasingly globalized nature of capital, “there is . . . no returning to the SER [standard employment relationship]” (p. 209). This observation has implications for industrial relations studies in that it accords with Kaufman’s (2008) call for a “broad employment relations paradigm” rather than the modern paradigm, which is almost exclusively centered on unions and labor–management relationships (p. 335). Vosko’s consideration of the
impact of citizenship and the gendered contract further stresses the need for a critical approach to industrial relations that recognizes that the “employment relations conflict is part of a broader societal clash between competing groups” (Budd & Bhave, 2008, p. 104). Crucially, unlike the pluralist account, which treats these competing groups as having roughly equal opportunities to mobilize and voice their concerns, an approach that is attentive to gendered and racialized systems of oppressions addresses the ways in which historical marginalization and workplace exclusions are exacerbated by a rise in precarious employment.

A particularly salient example of the failure of the current welfare policies to meet the needs of a precarious workforce is the federal Employment Insurance (EI) program. The gendered and racialized exclusions of the EI program were further exacerbated in 2013 by the introduction of new rules that break down job seekers into three groups: long-term workers who have long paid into EI but rarely make a claim, occasional claimants, and frequent claimants who are regular users of the system (Government of Canada, 2013). The three groups face different criteria for qualification under the insurance program rules, wherein frequent claimants are subject to more stringent considerations, thereby further solidifying the insider/outsider dichotomy of the workforce and the associated wage protection. The new rules have been characterized as a “crackdown to target repeat benefit claimants” (Feket, 2012) and adversely impact seasonal and contract workers who rely on EI during regular bouts of unemployment. The EI changes reflect a neoliberal logic that treats unemployment as a choice (such as the refusal to accept available, but less desirable, employment) rather than as a consequence of embedded racial (and gendered) workforce exclusions. Instead of challenging the legitimacy of these differentiated categories, a strategic response to these EI policy changes is attentive to systemic workplace exclusions could utilize these categories to demonstrate and address the disproportionate exclusion of racialized workers from long-term employment. This strategy would provide additional supports for frequent claimants, helping them to cope with frequent unemployment, rather than treating those who fall into this category as warranting punitive measures.

In “The Challenge of Expanding EI Coverage,” Vosko (2012) considers access to coverage and adequacy of coverage across various demographic dimensions such as gender, immigration, and geographic location. While this review does not specifically consider the accessibility of EI for workers of color, Vosko’s recommendations, if followed, would serve to expand and improve coverage for marginalized members of the workforce who do not fall into the eroding norm of the standard employment arrangement. These recommendations include extending eligibility to solo self-employed workers (as many of them lack genuine control over their work) and raising the replacement of income rate to 67% (Vosko, 2012). Furthermore, the social wages associated with work (extended health and dental coverage, a pension plan, life/disability insurance, etc.) should be made equally available to contingent workers, continue for longer periods after employment termination, and be readily portable into new employment arrangements. By using a multidimensional understanding of precarious employment for the purpose of social policy construction, social policies can better reflect and meet the needs of an increasingly nonstandard and diverse workforce.

Conclusion

While the Keynesian welfare policies were not intended to challenge racial hierarchies, by extending social benefits to all Canadians these policies helped to ameliorate many precarious workers’ experience of disadvantage. The ascendancy of neoliberalism, with concepts such as NAIRU, represents a movement away from the goal of a high and stable level of employment and signifies a substantial increase in precariousness. An effective response to the neoliberal trajectory cannot be found in the postwar Keynesian welfare state policies, which were constructed to complement existing market structures and never endeavored to challenge capitalist racialized hierarchies. An acknowledgment of the inadequacies of the Canadian welfare state, in particular with respect to the treatment of racialized workers, is necessary to achieve the advancement of new strategies aimed at addressing precarious employment. These new strategies must identify, track, and challenge the racialized power structures, particularly as they intersect with gender, that exist within Canada’s governments and workplaces, as well as within organized labor.

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