

MOTHER KNOWS BEST:

Neoliberal Governmentality and Motherhood

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Abstract

The study of neoliberalism in political science is commonly restricted to its economic policies such as market liberalization, fiscal austerity, and public asset privatization. However, what cannot be downplayed is the conditioning of the self and culture through neoliberal policies. Paying attention to the intersection of motherhood and neoliberalism is integral because it influences the production and condition of the next generation. By pulling back the curtain on core neoliberal tenets in Canadian childcare policy, the paper reveals the reconstitution of a woman's capacity to be a 'good' and productive citizen is strictly measured through her complicity to the dominant ideology of motherhood. This paper analyzes the structure of the Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) to highlight how government family benefit policies function as forms of legal regulation that disciplines mothers who deviate from the dominant expectations of motherhood.

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Introduction

Motherhood is embroidered in the reproduction of society as a site where social and political tensions are expressed, constituted, and contested. The surveillance of mothering is not new to neoliberalism but is newly distinguishable in its bolstering of worthiness in an individual's participation in motherhood. Using a feminist post-structural approach, to what extent has the neoliberal illusion of individual freedom and choice reconstituted and reinstated women's capacity to be a 'good' citizen through her motherhood? Further, how does the structure of family benefit legislation like childcare policy in Canada function as a form of legal regulation, thereby disciplining mothers who deviate from dominant expectations of motherhood? In this paper, I argue that neoliberalism's deeply nested roots have shaped and perpetuated a unique and dominant ideology of motherhood weaponized as a disciplinary power to subordinate women through their reproduction. Furthermore, this ideology creates a moralized dichotomy of the 'good' versus 'bad' mother where women are assigned the responsibility of ensuring the economic and social success of the family unit.

I will demonstrate this argument by first outlining a definition of neoliberalism, followed by the benefits of a

feminist post-structural perspective and how its understanding of governmentality is necessary to illuminate the multi-faceted and complex nature of neoliberalism. Then, I will break down the configuration of the dominant ideology of motherhood and its deviations under neoliberal governmentality. Finally, I will ground myself in the Canadian context by establishing how the Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) reflects an overarching theme of Canadian family legislation privileging the nuclear family model, as well as constituted neoliberal rationalities of hyper-individualism and responsibility. Additionally, there must be an acknowledgement of a limitation of the language of this paper, as I will be using the term ‘women’ to describe individuals who have internalized the values and cultural roles associated with femininity. However, there must also be meaningful consideration towards the expectations of motherhood that are imposed onto all femme-presenting people, individuals assigned female at birth, and so on, who I cannot give justice to on this topic in the scope of this short paper.

The Concept of Neoliberalism

The term neoliberalism emerged from its critics—the political economists—who originally conceptualized it as a theory of political-economic practices that sought to maximize entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework.¹ This reconfiguration was characterized by the rise of a neoliberal policy checklist consisting of “public asset privatization, fiscal austerity [and] market liberalization.”² Neoliberalism is associated with specific

¹ David Harvey, “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610, no. 1 (2007): 22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716206296780>.

² Heather Whiteside, *Canadian Political Economy* (University of Toronto Press, 2020), 7.

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political projects and reigns such as Thatcherism and Reaganomics that heavily pursued and incorporated the aforementioned policies. Promoters of a neoliberal world order promised that markets are simply better equipped to organize economic activity because of their association with competition, economic efficiency and choice.³ It is imperative to understand how these types of policies underline neoliberalism in pursuit of analyzing and disrupting it. However, just as political economists asserted the interconnectedness of political and economic life, we cannot discount how these policies work in conjunction with neoliberal governmentality.

Feminist Post-Structuralism: Understanding Neoliberalism Intricacy

This paper will utilize a feminist post-structuralist approach because its malleability reconfigures the strict policy and capitalist understanding of neoliberalism, which opens previously shrouded avenues of understanding neoliberal governmentality and subjectivity. A feminist post-structural framework best reveals and clarifies how gender determines and influences political relationships, structures of power and the continued social and economic reproduction of neoliberal philosophy.⁴ While neoliberalism proclaims that small governments and individual liberty are the best means to ward off big governments and communism, neoliberalism does not manifest in reduced governance of the citizens and the self.⁵ In reality, neoliberalism is not actually meant to

³ Wendy Larner, "Neo-liberalism: Policy, Ideology, Governmentality," *Studies in Political Economy* 63, no. 1 (2000): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19187033.2000.11675231>.

⁴ Whiteside, *Canadian Political Economy*, 4-5.

⁵ Larner, "Neo-liberalism," 12.

advance all-encompassing liberatory freedom but solely an entrepreneurial one.⁶ Derived from Foucauldian thought, ‘governmentality’ draws attention to the pervasive way of thinking and acting in attempts to “know and govern the wealth, health and happiness of people.”⁷ Neoliberal rationalities must be understood in its ‘encouragement’ — through both material and ideological regulation — of people to see themselves as hyper-individualized and active subjects responsible for enhancing and maintaining their own well-being.⁸ Using this lens of neoliberal governance, post-structuralism illuminates that citizens are constrained to a regulated freedom that makes people not simply subjects of power but actors that play a part in its operations.⁹ Through this feminist post-structuralist lens of governmentality, we can see that the neoliberal pedestals of individual liberty and personal autonomy are not the antithesis of power but a key cog in its imposition.

The foundational aspirations of liberty laid the way for a dichotomic system that positions failings solely onto the individual and their socio-political and economic choices instead of the intentionally unevenly developed system. Therefore, a post-structural approach that conceptualizes neoliberal governmentality in conjunction with a grounding and material feminist lens is crucial in understanding the contemporary disciplinary reconfiguration of the dominant ideology of motherhood. By theorizing neoliberalism not as a grand well-thought-out

⁶ Emma McKenna, “The Freedom to Choose: Neoliberalism, Feminism, and Childcare,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 37, no. 1 (2015): 42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2015.988529>.

⁷ Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller, “Political Power Beyond the State: Problematics of Government,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 2 (1992): 175, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/591464>.

⁸ Larner, “Neo-liberalism,” 13.

⁹ Rose and Miller, “Political Power Beyond the State,” 174.

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scheme, but as a complex, multi-vocal and contradictory phenomenon producing unexpected and unintended outcomes, we can illuminate otherwise shrouded areas of connotations and contemporary struggles.¹⁰

Motherhood and Neoliberal Governmentality

The ‘nuclear family’ is one of the most widespread cultural ideals in Western society, structured as a mother and father living together and sharing responsibility for their children and each other. This heteronormative cultural model is characterized by a strict gendered distribution of responsibility, with an emphasis on normative moral standards and the inculcation of values and attitudes conducive to economic success and personal responsibility.¹¹ These aspects of the heteronormative family model are increasingly exacerbated in its contemporary consolidation with neoliberal capitalist expansions. The rise of neoliberal ideology upped the stakes in the nuclear family by accelerating the circulation of people, commodities and assimilative programming, with every aspect of social and personal life becoming commodified and capitalized.¹² Therefore, the illusion of choice that characterizes neoliberal governmentality finds a perfect fit with the heteronormative nuclear family model. Employing classical facades of liberal inclusivity and equality, as well as constraining agency for movements calling for real alternatives, create seemingly impenetrable barriers to the neoliberal ideology. The neoliberal agenda has stated a “privatization or ‘home-ification’ of care... relocating reproductive responsibility from the state” onto

¹⁰ Larner, “Neo-liberalism,” 16, 21.

¹¹ Anne Robinou, *Queer Communal Kinship Now!* (Punctum Books, 2023), 35, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.2353823>.

¹² Ibid., 40-41.

individual families to reduce government spending.¹³ Despite the relative novelty of a nuclear family these days, the concept continues to constitute both the ideals which families are held to and a permeating system that governs familial relations.¹⁴

The dominant ideology of motherhood encapsulates “the constellation of ideas and images in Western capitalist societies that constitute the dominant ideals of motherhood against which women's lives are judged.”¹⁵ One of the central tenets of the ideology is that motherhood should be the desired and ultimate end goal for all ‘normal’ women. Motherhood is framed as the natural condition of biological gender difference and the expression of maternal instincts instead of an imposed institution.¹⁶ This assumption automatically classifies women who do not have children—by their own choice or not— as inherently abnormal or deviant to the supposed ‘natural’ order. Compulsory motherhood is so naturalized and integrated into our way of thinking that women are unable to be viewed as mature, balanced and fulfilled adults until they are mothers.¹⁷ Motherhood exists in a unique intersection with the dominant ideologies of womanhood and family, thus establishing the expectations and ideals that rule and constrain the lives of women.

¹³ Ibid., 41.

¹⁴ Ibid., 39.

¹⁵ Marlee Kline, “Complicating the Ideology of Motherhood: Child Welfare Law and First Nation Women,” *Queen’s Law Journal* 18, no 2 (1993): 310.

¹⁶ Margot Challborn, “Autonomous Mothers and Social Policy: How the CCTB, UCCB, and Alberta Child Care Subsidies Govern Women’s Autonomy in Motherhood” (Master’s Thesis, University of Alberta, 2016), 42, https://era.library.ualberta.ca/items/93ea2228-1b15-4395-87e7-ef013acc16f9/view/c0015cca-e7b9-449f-ad5e-65b042e1fce1/Challborn_Margot_201601_MA.pdf.

¹⁷ Kline, “Complicating the Ideology of Motherhood,” 310.

Neoliberal logic reconfigures all aspects of being and worthiness according to values of self-sufficiency and individual responsibility.¹⁸ Neoliberalism distinguishes between the ‘good’ and ‘failing’ citizens in terms of their production and success in the market. Therefore, motherhood intersects with neoliberalism because it is inextricably involved in the constitution and production of such ‘good’ citizens.¹⁹ The governing and surveilling of mothering is not limited to pregnancy and birth; this ideology also spans across definitions of ‘good’ mothering. The binary of the ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ mother parallels the ‘good’ versus ‘failing’ citizen in that an individual’s categorization is based on their conformity to dominant ideology and hegemony. Therefore, a woman’s potential to adhere to tenants of ‘good’ citizenship is additionally calculated through her potential to be a ‘good’ mother.

The dominant ideology of motherhood not only creates an ideal for mothers to adhere to but also acts as an authoritative power to discipline women.²⁰ Mothers who deviate or subvert from these expectations are constructed as ‘bad’ mothers who must be kept in line through social and legal regulation. Single mothers are particularly denigrated for not abiding by this nuclear model of dependence. They are used as a scapegoat “responsible for nothing less than unruly and ill-educated children, rising crime, and a crisis in masculine identity.”²¹ Neoliberal rationalities of individual choice easily slot themselves into

¹⁸ Paula Hamilton, *Black Mothers and Attachment Parenting: A Black Feminist Analysis of Intensive Mothering in Britain and Canada* (Bristol University Press, 2021), 27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv19cw9sf>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁰ Kline, “Complicating the Ideology of Motherhood,” 311-312.

²¹ Gil Jagger and Caroline Wright, *Changing Family Values: Difference, Diversity and the Decline of Male Order* (Routledge, 1999), 122; Challborn, “Autonomous Mothers and Social Policy,” 41-42.

this context because whereas ‘good’ mothering is framed as natural and universal, any deviation from norms is considered unnatural and is the consequence of individual incompetence and irresponsibility. Insofar as children are framed as our collective futures, constructions and weaponization of ‘bad’ mothering are used to justify and legitimate a mother’s social and legal regulation.²² Therefore, while the expectation of motherhood is imposed on all women, the allowance and ease of mothering can also be conceptualized as a privilege rather than a right. This is a privilege that is withheld ideologically and in more material ways from individuals considered ‘unfit’. The root of ‘bad’ mothering and the dominant ideology of motherhood, in general, is their existence within intersecting social relations of oppression such as race, class, sexuality and able-bodiedness.²³ Thus, the dominant ideology of motherhood creates a means to produce viable neoliberal citizens as well as naturalize, legitimate and intensify the realities of systemic oppression.

The Nuclear Family System and Canada Child Tax Benefit

In such scenarios where governments might do a song and dance for equity initiatives despite their seeming contradictions to neoliberal tenets, it is only so far as the initiatives can contribute to economic growth, bolster class hierarchies or backhandedly reaffirm disciplinary power.²⁴ The state only cares about women and mothers to the extent that they are “contained within the structures of masculine capture – the couple, the family, the household, the retired

²² Kline, “Complicating the Ideology of Motherhood,” 311-312.

²³ Ibid., 313.

²⁴ Hamilton, *Black Mothers and Attachment Parenting*, 23-24.

couple.”²⁵ The Canadian context exists as a prime example because as the interests of the state pivoted to adapt to a neoliberal economy, concerns for equality in avenues like childcare collapsed under increasing desires for economic stimulation and a decrease in federal spending on social support.²⁶ The liberal democratic system that the Canadian state is premised on assumes complete and active participation in the market by all citizens.²⁷ Thus, the additional padding of neoliberal governmentality ties a moralized individual worthiness to citizen participation. Yet these assumptions fail to consider, or simply do not care, that women’s participation in the labour market and citizenship is limited by a “lack of access to good jobs, a lack of access to childcare, and programs which define them as men’s dependents,” justifying and legitimating their social marginalization and regulation in the paid labour market.²⁸ The rise of Mulroney silenced demands for childcare as shouts for women’s equality became inaudible in the new governing order.²⁹ Childcare or lack thereof is a class problem that imposes a serious threat to the quality of life and livability of poor and working-class families; the lack of childcare intensified the socioeconomic dependence and servitude of mothers to the nuclear family.

The Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) was introduced in a 1999 budget speech by Finance Minister Paul Martin and as a federal initiative to assist low- and middle-income families with the expenses of raising

²⁵ Challborn, “Autonomous Mothers and Social Policy,” 16.

²⁶ McKenna, “The Freedom to Choose,” 49.

²⁷ Challborn, “Autonomous Mothers and Social Policy,” 52.

²⁸ McKenna, “The Freedom to Choose,” 49.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

children.³⁰ The federal government claimed the CCTB was consistent with the role of government “in promoting fairness and equity among individuals with different incomes and family circumstances.”³¹ While the CCTB has since been restructured in 2016, its examination offers an important and specific example of the privileging of the nuclear family structure and governance of mothering. The CCTB presented a mystifying image of a progressive policy in that it was not taxable, supplemented family income regardless of where the families lived, if they worked, and the benefit decreased as income increased.³² The policy was made up of two non-taxable components.³³ First, a basic benefit targeted at low and middle-income families. Second, the National Child Benefit (NCB) supplement provides an additional supplement for low-income families specifically and was a nationwide initiative created to reduce child poverty.³⁴ The unveiling of the NCB in 1996 was meant to convey the Prime Minister and Premiers collaborating to “bring down barriers to employment and [improve] the lives of many families.”³⁵ The federal government boasted that the NCB was the best way to remove children from welfare by “ensuring that families will always be better off as a result of working.”³⁶ The government tied children to our collective future, one solely survivable via poverty reduction programs that increase employment and economic opportunity like the

³⁰ The Government of Canada, *A Guide to Effective Business Continuity in Government: Year 2000 Strategy* (Ottawa: Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 1999), 2-3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

³² Challborn, “Autonomous Mothers and Social Policy,” 73-74.

³³ The Government of Canada, *A Guide to Effective Business Continuity in Government*, 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁶ McKenna, “The Freedom to Choose,” 49.

NCB.³⁷ The benefit is based on family or household income rather than individual income, meaning that partnered mothers end up losing support faster and manufacture an increased dependency on the state.³⁸ The CCTB presumes a particular nuclear family and subsequently privileges it while also disenfranchising the mothers in these families. While it may be better to get some supplement rather than none, provisions provided in Canadian child benefits are a mere drop in the bucket compared to the amount that childcare costs annually.

Neoliberal theory asserts that “human well-being can be best advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, encumbered markets, and free trade” underlining its political economic practices.³⁹ The role of the state is to create and maintain the institutional framework required for such practices, which have slowly but surely whittled Canada’s social services following the rise of neoliberalism. Therefore, while neoliberals assert that it is a system premised on revitalizing the economy through marketization— which, in reality, has not been particularly successful— neoliberal policies and values have instead succeeded in a project of restoring and revitalizing disciplinarian hierarchies.⁴⁰ The general unhelpfulness of Canadian childcare policies like the CCTB sustains a legal regulation of parenthood, one of the ways that families are constrained, disciplined and deemed unfit.⁴¹ Consequentially, this establishes and grows a culture where

³⁷ Challborn, “Autonomous Mothers and Social Policy,” 21.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

³⁹ Harvey, “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction,” 22.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴¹ McKenna, “The Freedom to Choose,” 42.

the privilege to parent is a right only afforded to the wealthy. Further, the gender-neutral language of the CCTB does much more harm than good. Gender-neutral language, much like a colour-blind policy approach, does not dispel the different realities women have from men but simply functions to mask it.⁴² Legislative approaches that ignore and refuse to acknowledge these different realities serve to govern and stigmatize families that do not conform and live by societal hegemony. Critiques of the CCTB reflect a greater examination of how the “state, market and law shape [and govern] the intimate lives of citizens.”⁴³ Policies like the CCTB act as governmental technologies through which authorities seek to embody and give effect to governmental ambitions, thus making way for its citizenship, regulations and ideas to become tangible.⁴⁴

Neoliberalism was built to make the market more efficient so that capital can flow more easily and free of state intervention. However, a market economy can only function in a market society. Therefore, the market continuously seeks to shape society in its own image.⁴⁵ Through our market and societal interaction, our individual selves are chiselled to reflect market and neoliberal logic. When analyzing the neoliberal influence in policies like the CCTB, we must consider who is benefiting from them and who they are constricting. Despite policies like the CCTB being framed as altruistic on behalf of the state, the part they play in the larger scheme of maintaining disciplinary and dominating power cannot be shrouded. These policies are premised on an individual level and thus reflect permeating neoliberal rationalities “of hyper-individualism,

⁴² Challborn, “Autonomous Mothers and Social Policy,” 52.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁴ Rose and Miller, “Political Power Beyond the State,” 175.

⁴⁵ Challborn, “Autonomous Mothers and Social Policy,” 21.

privatization, and competition.”⁴⁶ Rather than turning a new leaf and fostering collective structures of care and kinship, policies like the CCTB perpetuate the cycle of denigrating and disciplining women for refusing the nuclear family and its model of interdependent motherhood.⁴⁷ Additionally, family policies like the CCTB meant that men were emancipated with social citizenship while women were stifled as dependent citizens, therein “dependent on the individual men, family, or state-funded and delivered social welfare” that came with the condition often involving surveillance, social stigma and lower levels of compensation.⁴⁸ Therefore, I infer that the CCTB represents a puzzle piece in the larger picture of how these policies are not about ensuring economic growth or reducing family poverty, but of the reaffirmation of social values of family, partnership and who is allowed to mother.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Neoliberal governmentality has stripped people down to be genderless, individually responsible, self-policing citizens. Yet mothers exist with a uniquely gendered responsibility for the success and education of the future generation and family unit. This contradiction is unsurprising considering the hypocritical and complex nature of neoliberalism. Whereby neoliberal ideology has aptly accommodated to preexisting struggles and reconfigured them to the disciplinary hierarchy, the

⁴⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 41-42.

⁴⁸ Jill Brodie, “We Are All Equal Now: Contemporary Gender Politics in Canada,” *Feminist Theory* 9, no. 2 (2008): 151, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700108090408>.

⁴⁹ Challborn, “Autonomous Mothers and Social Policy,” 72.

dominant ideology of motherhood acts as a prime example of how neoliberal ideology intertwines with a preexisting form of disciplinary power and creates added dimensions of self-governance.⁵⁰ The structure of family benefit policies like the CCTB sustains legal and social regulations of families by constraining those who do not conform to the ideal configuration. Further, these neoliberal family policies seek to intensify mothers' status as citizens dependent on their partners and the state with the added condition of surveillance and social stigma.⁵¹ The presumption of a nuclear family therefore presumes a dominant ideal of motherhood. These dominant ideologies function to uphold and perpetuate a cycle of surveillance and policing of the production of future neoliberal citizens and future neoliberal society.

⁵⁰ Larner, "Neo-liberalism," 16, 21.

⁵¹ Brodie, "We Are All Equal Now," 151.

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