

INTERVIEW

Lori Chambers talks with Ann Porter

Ann Porter, York University, conducts research in the area of globalization, welfare state restructuring, feminism and political economy. Her latest book, *Gendered States: Women, Unemployment Insurance, and the Political Economy of the Welfare State in Canada, 1945-1997*, has been awarded the 2004 Kenny Prize in labour/left studies and the 2005 CWSA/ACEF Annual Book Prize [see review in this issue].

Lori Chambers, Lakehead University, is the author of *Married Women and Property Law in Victorian Ontario*, and of the forthcoming manuscript, *Misconceptions: Unwed Mothers and the Children of Unmarried Parents Act in Ontario, 1921-1969*.

Chambers

First, I wish to commend you on your meticulous research. *Gendered States* is thought provoking and informative. It is also accessible and fun to read. What inspired you to write about unemployment insurance? Are there salient experiences that made these policy debates particularly compelling for you as an individual?

Porter

I want first to say how honoured I feel to be the recipient of the 2005 Canadian Women's Studies Association Book Award and to thank you for your comments and questions. I have had a long interest in the question of women and their experiences with work, labour markets and with unemployment. Having an income, or a source that provides some form of income security, is critical if women are to be able to lead their lives in the way they may wish and to flourish. The unemployment insurance (UI) program initially became a particular issue of concern for me in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I had undertaken research on garment workers in Canada and women in this industry were really some of the first and some of the most severely affected by the move to trade liberalization. They were experiencing large scale lay-offs and there seemed to be little in the way of retraining, income security or new opportunities. This was a critical time not only in terms of the move to free trade, but also because the social programs that had been established in the post-war period had been called into question. The Macdonald Royal Commission had released its report calling for, among other things, a rethinking of social programs and the Conservative government had begun to lay the groundwork for major social program restructuring. Unemployment insurance was a central program of the Canadian welfare state, providing, in the late 1980s, income security benefits to more than 80% of those who were unemployed. This program figured prominently in the restructuring plans. I had a number of questions, then, about what these changes would mean for women. Did women experience unemployment in a particular way

and what would this restructuring mean for them? The research questions that I posed were very much in the context of a women's movement and broader movements for social change that were actively engaged in the debates that unfolded at this time concerning social policy directions. In this sense, linkages between research in academe and political and social changes taking place "on the ground," while sometimes hard to sustain, nevertheless have always been important in informing the research that I have undertaken.

Related to this, while I felt that unemployment insurance was important to investigate as a program, I was equally concerned to look at the larger questions of broader transformation and change. The UI program provided a lens through which to address these questions. How can women achieve greater autonomy, equality and empowerment in their lives? Why was there a restructuring in a neo-liberal direction? What does it mean for women? What alternatives are possible and how do we get there? In order to begin to address these questions, I felt it was important to examine how gendered notions about women's roles and activities had been incorporated in the post-war welfare state and how this has shifted with the transition to neo-liberalism. It seemed to me that the transformations that occurred from the mid-1950s onward, particularly as women left the home for the paid labour force, were not just peripheral but formed a key aspect of the political economy of the second half of the twentieth century, that these gender changes were linked in fundamental ways to the larger restructuring that was taking place and that this was critical to investigate further. I was interested in tracing how various forces and factors - including structural tensions and contradictions, changes in ideology, juridical norms and decisions, political actors including women's groups, as well as contestations at the level of the everyday - can interact over a fairly long historical period to result in complex and cumulative patterns of development and change.

Chambers

What were the most challenging and difficult aspects of researching and writing about unemployment insurance/employment insurance?

Porter

One of the difficult aspects of writing about this

program - or for that matter any state program - is that there are a myriad of technical details.

Entitlement to benefit depends on a complex maze of qualifying requirements, benefit rates and length of time on benefits. These program provisions can be complicated and are constantly shifting and I was looking at these changes over a fifty year period. The details are critically important to understand, however. Minor variations can make the difference between being able to obtain benefits or not. In addition, what may appear as a technical aspect of a piece of legislation can often, in fact, act to include some and exclude others. These details, and the way they are administered, help reinforce and create the complexly interlocking structures and relations of class, gender and race, and structure labour markets, as well as a variety of other institutions, in hierarchical ways. An examination of this level of detail is critical, then, to understanding the structuring of a gender and race order. At the same time, this level is also critical in that spaces can also open up here for contestation and change. A challenge, then, was to present the detailed program provisions, but also to capture the larger picture of what was going on. There was a constant tension between trying to present the micro and the macro in that sense. I think that continues to be a challenge in any feminist writing: How do you provide both a macro view of what is going on - of the larger scale forces causing larger shifts to take place - and at the same time provide a sense of the detail at the level of the everyday that makes up women's lives.

Related to this, a second challenging aspect of the study was how to avoid presenting a series of static snapshots of program changes over time, but rather a sense of how these changes formed part of a larger society on the move. I wanted to present a picture of contradictions, tensions, movement, change. I think that having a goal of this kind of gender, race and class struggle perspective is critical if we are to have some sense of why we ended up with the solutions we did and what alternatives might be possible. Of course, one necessarily presents a fragmentary view of the scale of changes taking place and can only hope to contribute to a larger project in that sense.

Chambers

You provide compelling evidence that in a myriad of

ways women challenged the gendered ideals embedded in unemployment insurance policy. Did you consider interviewing either women who tested UI regulations through the courts or those who struggled politically for reform?

Porter

The whole question of methodology and how we give women voice within feminist writing is really important. I think there are a number of different ways of doing so. For the earlier historical periods some of the archival material I used provided some insight into how women voiced their own concerns. There were women, for example, who wrote directly to their MPs and there were a number of concerns that MPs brought to the House of Commons and so, indirectly, women's concerns were voiced that way. The decisions of the UI Umpire - the adjudicator making decisions at the second level of UI appeal - was another rich source for women's testimonials, providing a detailed encapsulation of women's lives as they challenged the administrative decisions that were made and struggled to find the means to survive. These cases were important not only because they provided a glimpse into individual women's lives, but also because they were precedent-setting, providing guidelines for subsequent decisions. In addition, I felt it was important to examine the stated documents of organizations - women's organizations such as the National Council of Women, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, and the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women - because these are a reflection of collective decision-making and of women's collective political voice. If I had longer or were doing it again I would probably supplement this research with more direct interviews, but one also has to be conscious of how, in interviewing, any one individual's memory and reflections can form a critical part of the story, but also only tell a part of it.

Chambers

Throughout *Gendered States* you explore the hesitant and halting incorporation of maternity benefits into the Unemployment Insurance/Employment Insurance scheme. To what degree did advocates of UI maternity reform, and women themselves, identify child care concerns as a structural barrier to participation in the workforce?

Porter

Initially the question of childcare did not enter into maternity leave discussions at all. While maternity provisions were introduced in 1971, in the context of a growing mobilization around women's issues, the legislation itself was framed with views from earlier in the century about maternal health, about women's capacity to work during pregnancy, as well as reflecting the view that certainly in advanced stages of pregnancy women should withdraw from sight into the private sphere. These concerns were reflected in the initial maternity provisions, which allowed for 15 weeks of benefits, but which stipulated that eight of the weeks had to be taken before the expected date of "confinement," one the "week of confinement" and only six afterwards. Since the legislation was housed within the UI program, where actuarial concerns about how much the program was drawn on had always been an issue, there were also concerns about women "abusing" the program, for example, by entering the labour force once pregnant, in order to be able to collect benefits. A number of other provisions were aimed at preventing such "abuses." While women did gain the right to greater choice or flexibility in terms of when they could take their leave, the debate around maternity benefits was still not framed in terms of childcare per se or in terms of structural barriers to women's labour force participation. Rather, the key issues had to do with women's entitlement to be in the labour force (maternity leave and benefits essentially allowed women to take some time away from work while remaining part of the labour force), their right to equal treatment to men within programs such as UI even if pregnant, and about women's right to choose when to take leave. Certainly there was a debate about childcare also going on in this period, but the specific struggles around maternity leave and benefits tended not to be framed in those terms.

It was only towards the end of the 1970s and early 1980s that increasing attention was paid to the issue of structural barriers. I think at this point there was a greater recognition both that there were limits to what could be gained through the "equal treatment" approach and that substantive inequalities resulting, for example, from women's concentration in particular jobs, such as in part-time work, as well as those arising from their role in childbearing and rearing, needed to be addressed. In conjunction with

this the view was increasingly articulated that child bearing and rearing are not just individual or familial responsibilities, but are also a collective or social responsibility. Certainly the debate changed somewhat in the 1980s as the report of the Cooke Task Force on childcare, the Abella Commission report and others asserted the importance of maternity and childcare provisions for women and that greater equality for women also meant accommodating differences, including with respect to child bearing and rearing responsibilities. More recent changes with respect to maternity/parental provisions have been framed more in terms of children - indeed, can be seen as part of the overall shift in state policy from focusing on women's equality to focusing on children, child poverty and "investing in children." For example, it was in the context of the National Children's Agenda that in December 2000 parental benefits were extended to provide for up to a year of benefits.

Chambers

Your book provides clear evidence of the ways in which "gender has been implicated in the formation and restructuring of welfare state regimes" (231). You trace the origins of UI and the male breadwinner model, the gradual inclusion of women into UI as secondary workers, and women's formal equality under recent UI/EI schemes in a global context of structural inequality. To what degree do you see older ideas about gender and work as continuing to frame structural inequality?

Porter

I think there have been enormous shifts in ideas about gender and work, as well as in the ways that these notions have been incorporated into welfare state regimes. In the years after the war, and through the period when the welfare state was expanding, welfare state programs were very much informed by the notion that there should be a male breadwinner and that women belonged primarily in the home. What we have now is more of an "employability" model of welfare state, where it is assumed that both men and women, even if there are young children, are or should be working in the labour force. What there is in the latter approach is a lack of recognition that women also have traditionally assumed greater responsibility for childcare and for caring labour in general, and that there have

to be measures in place to address this if some of the barriers to women's employment are going to be addressed, or, for that matter, if "employability" is even to be feasible. So what we have is greater formal equality, changes in the ideology concerning women's ability to engage in paid work, but still an assumption that women are responsible for unpaid caring labour. The result has been the persistence and in some cases the deepening of structural inequalities.

Chambers

Gendered States engages important questions about the limitations of formal equality. As you assert, "just as women have entered the labour market, the rights and entitlements that once went with labour force participation have been ended." (236) Does it concern you that formal equality - in a context of structural inequality - may make policy makers less sympathetic to women's concerns and contribute to hostility towards women who challenge the current state, market, family nexus?

Porter

If we look over the post-war period, one of the major struggles that women engaged in - and indeed, this was really a key defining aspect of the second wave of the women's movement - was to achieve formal equality. That is, for an end to overt discrimination, for the right to enter the world of work and compete there on the same terms and conditions as men, for the right to be treated on the same basis as men within programs such as UI. For example, looking at the UI program, this entailed a struggle in the 1950s to end an overtly discriminatory provision that required married women to work an additional amount of time in order to "prove" their attachment to the labour force before being able to qualify for benefits. There was also the struggle of women who were pregnant and unemployed but who were "ready, willing and able to work" to have access to UI benefits and so on. Neo-liberalism was able to accommodate formal equalities on this level. Indeed, these changes I believe were consistent with and probably in fact necessary for an economy that had developed and been restructured in ways that increasingly depended on women's work in the labour force. In this context juridical norms that were based on the assumption that women were dependents in the home were no longer appropriate.

On the other hand, these formal equalities are clearly limited in terms of their ability both to address the condition of women's lives and the persistent inequalities that they experience. This formal equality is limited in two senses. First, it is limited because of the overall dismantling of the welfare state, which has affected men as well as women. That is what the quotation refers to. Just as women entered the labour market and gained the right to participate on equal terms as men, the rights and entitlements that went with labour force participation - and here I am referring to welfare state entitlements - the social rights of citizenship - have been eliminated. Women, particularly as they began to participate in the labour force in greater numbers, gained the right to access UI benefits, but those benefits barely exist any longer. We no longer have the right to income security if we become unemployed "through no fault of our own." That citizenship right has been eliminated for both men and women and certainly that change affects women's life conditions. Secondly, formal equalities are limited in terms of their ability to address women's equality goals. So that not only has there been an overall erosion of entitlements, but also women's position relative to men within programs such as UI has slipped. In this respect, for example, women's over-representation in certain sectors and in part-time work and women's continued disproportionate share of caring responsibilities have limited their ability to enjoy "equality of results." Certainly I think there has been a backlash towards women, that neo-liberal times are difficult ones for women and for equality-seeking groups in general, but I believe that is due to a combination of factors, and not simply having gained greater formal equality.

Chambers

In a related question, how do we best raise awareness about structural inequalities? And what policy changes, in your opinion, are most likely to successfully dismantle such inequalities? What new approaches should we - feminists in particular - take to "organizing and to questioning the welfare state model"(241)?

Porter

Following from the previous comments I would say that women have made important equality gains but we do

not really have equality of results. Women's lives are still difficult, women still have greater chances of living in poverty, still have overall income inequalities, women still experience violence in their lives and still have fewer opportunities. And this, of course, varies enormously for different women depending on race, ethnicity, period of immigration, disability and other factors. Formal equality is still, of course, critically important. It is just that on its own it does not address some of the underlying root causes for the persistence of inequality. In order to address these issues I think we have to take seriously the whole question of who is responsible for social reproduction - the caring of people in particular. We have to address the structure of the economy and the prevalence of contingent, part-time work. We have to address the question of a market-driven agenda that leaves little room for a welfare state or the means to address social needs or positive programs to rectify inequalities. And we have to address the issue of economic globalization. These are all, of course, big issues and ones that the women's movement cannot address on its own. I believe it will require a much broader movement for social change, of which the women's movement will be a part.

Chambers

In retrospect, are there aspects of this project that you would approach differently if you were starting it now?

Porter

If I was starting the project now I would look to a greater extent at how different groups of women - for example, women of colour or immigrant women - may experience unemployment and access to state programs and attempt to provide a greater sense of how the post-war period involved not just the construction of a gender order but a racial order as well. This, however, would have necessitated a different project and a different methodology. It is not simply a case of being able to add on these other dimensions.

Chambers

Have you now moved on to a new research project? What is it and how is it connected to work on UI/EI?

Porter

The project that I am currently working on examines

the interconnections between globalization and domestic welfare state restructuring. If we look at the period since 1995 there has been a far-reaching restructuring not just of rights-based income security programs such as UI, but also of the means-based social assistance programs at the provincial level. So we really have a very large erosion of all types of state-based income security. I am concerned with the question of the extent to which there has been "globalization from above" in the sense of pressures at an international or global level for particular types of welfare state restructuring, and secondly, how that plays out at a local level, how we also have "globalization from below" in this area as access to income security may vary according to gender, race, ethnicity and period of immigration. I am interested in the question of, given these welfare state changes at so many levels, what kind of survival strategies have households adopted? How are social needs met? What is the role of the state in this regard?