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# Krys Maki, *Ineligible: Single Mothers Under Welfare Surveillance* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing 2021)

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**Krys Maki, *Ineligible: Single Mothers Under Welfare Surveillance* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing 2021)**

“THERE’S SOMETHING very wrong with the way that we’re viewing things” (single mother welfare recipient). (172) Critical feminist scholars have long written about the feminization of poverty and the role that governments and social assistance programs have played in regulating poor single mothers and casting them as lazy, untrustworthy, deficient people who are burdens on society, all the while failing to acknowledge and address the underlying issues that produce women’s poverty in the first place. Maki’s book, *Ineligible: Single Mothers Under Welfare Surveillance*, provides a valuable addition to this research by showing us just how enhanced and all-pervasive this punishment and dehumanization have become with the neoliberal restructuring of social assistance and its introduction of a sophisticated computerized surveillance apparatus. The book, which is composed of an introduction and six chapters and is based on her doctoral dissertation research, maps out this surveillance apparatus and explores its impacts on both welfare recipients and front-line caseworkers. Maki’s interests go beyond policy, however, to the question of power and politics and what we need to do to effect real change. Her analysis is grounded in theories of surveillance and feminist political economy, including moral regulation and intersectionality, and her research is based on an analysis of social assistance policy and legislation, 33 open-ended interviews she conducted with single mother welfare recipients, caseworkers, and activists, Ontario Works senior management and policy analysts, and her own reflections as a long-time activist.

The first chapter reviews the history of welfare and how surveillance was

“stitched into the fabric” of Canada’s social safety net and reflected the classist, gendered, and racist preoccupations of settler colonialism. The review brings us up to the current neoliberal era, with its agenda of cost reduction, efficiency, and modernization, privatizing and outsourcing welfare services, investments in electronic surveillance infrastructure, combined with anti-welfare and anti-fraud discourse, and the embrace of gender neutrality and workfare. Of course, single mothers were highly targeted and affected by these shifts, especially racialized mothers.

The second chapter provides a detailed description of the surveillance mechanisms operating within Ontario Works and how they (supposedly) serve to catch and/or prevent fraud. Maki shows how every layer and process within the welfare system is designed for the purpose of keeping caseloads low. She finds that the sophisticated algorithmic surveillance apparatus identifies “risky” recipients (i.e., those unlikely to be compliant) on the basis of the existing patterns of exclusion and inequality. The common realities of poverty (such as housing instability, being a new immigrant or refugee, having escaped domestic violence, etc.) become “red flags” that mark recipients as suspect and/or subject to intensive regulation. Caseworkers and other authorities also work to scrutinize recipients’ behaviour, and this, too, often reflects classist, sexist, and racist assumptions. Workfare and required “participation agreements” and welfare hotlines provide additional grounds for such scrutiny and judgment.

Chapter 3 turns to the micro level, and centres on the voices of single mother interviewees, many of whom had left abusive partners, and how they have been affected by the surveillance infrastructure and culture. It provides rich insight into the lived realities of single mothers and the way their lives are

overwhelmingly dominated and restricted by the program, with even greater power imbalances felt by racialized single mothers. Maki demonstrates the way the system reinforces the idea that poverty is an “individual failing” (72); strips single mothers of their sense of autonomy; prevents them from moving forward on their own terms; and ignores their important contributions as mothers, caregivers, and volunteers (103). Mothers are made to feel mistrusted, patronized, and dehumanized, and they are continually fearful of losing their means of survival.

In Chapter 4, Maki broadens the focus on welfare surveillance. She shows how social assistance surveillance is part of a larger “surveillance mashup” (106) that involves two other social service agencies that track and monitor single mothers on welfare. They are the Family Responsibility Office, responsible for forcing (primarily) single mothers into making efforts to “track down” child support payments to offset social assistance benefits as a condition for welfare eligibility, and the Children’s Aid Society (CAS), which is responsible for child welfare, to which single mothers on welfare have an increased risk of being reported. Maki finds that the demands of these bodies also serve to demoralize, patronize, and demean single mothers. They again feel judged, are made to feel guilty and untrustworthy, and are routinely put in fear of losing their benefits and/or children. This is especially so for women who were survivors of intimate partner violence and Black and Indigenous mothers (as seen in the overrepresentation of these populations in child welfare).

Chapter 5 turns to the impact that the neoliberal intensification of surveillance has had on front-line caseworkers and is based on interviews she conducted with workers in three Ontario cities. Maki finds that recipients’ relationships with caseworkers are crucial in influencing the

kind of experience they have on welfare, and much depends upon workers’ individual attitudes and orientations, which, according to Maki, can vary from “ethics of care” to “authoritarian overseer.” Maki also finds that neoliberal restructuring and automation have greatly intensified caseworkers’ focus on surveillance and monitoring, quotas and timelines, and the monitoring of their own work, and this has limited their autonomy and ability to develop respectful and caring relationships with recipients. In Maki’s terms, the welfare surveillance apparatus has created a “pressure cooker” on both recipients and front-line workers, which has created “an us/them mentality [that] turns these groups on each other rather than confronting the neoliberal state...” (181)

Maki ends the book by coming back to politics, anti-poverty activism, and what needs to be done. While welfare seeks to isolate and silence single mothers, her research shows that single mothers often find ways to resist its punitive practices, and similarly, caseworkers can often engage in everyday and often inconspicuous acts of resistance to protect recipients. She points to ways that positive change has and can be made when welfare recipients, caseworkers, unions, anti-poverty coalitions, violence against women shelters, and other allies work together on their shared concerns. (Although she also recognizes the forces working against such possibilities). In the end, however, the author comes back to a recognition that is made throughout the book, that reforms are not enough as the changes achieved are generally temporary: “we also need to push for radical social transformation that centres equity, justice, and freedom for all.” (189) The way to do this is to work alongside low-income communities and centre the expertise and solutions that come from the

real poverty experts – those with lived experience of welfare.

This book is impressive in many ways. Maki's research is both scholarly and activist, it is sensitive and nuanced in its weaving together of the macro and micro, and it embraces complexity and contradiction. While social policy scholars and anti-poverty advocates have long been aware of the inadequacies of social assistance and its demeaning treatment of single mothers, this book provides an in-depth view of how neoliberal social policy discourse and mechanisms, and particularly welfare's sophisticated surveillance apparatus, have "automated class, gender, and racial inequality," (166) working in more thorough and hidden ways to render invisible the humanity of recipients. As Maki argues, there is nothing neutral or apolitical about welfare. It both relies on and serves to perpetuate and secure inequality; in its treatment of single mothers, we see women's oppression intersecting with racism and the destabilizing poor and marginalized communities and individuals, and in so doing, maintaining, or even increasing the power and wealth of the upper echelons of society. In obscuring the humanity of recipients, particularly single mothers, our social gaze is taken away from the injustices taking place, and this deters us from having human compassion and caring. Maki's book presents a powerful counter to this. At the broadest level, this book is about social justice, and it raises the important question of what kind of society we want: one that erases the humanity of some sectors of society for the sake of more "deserving" others, or one that recognizes and values care and our interdependence as human beings?

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**Audrey Laurin Lamothe, Frédéric Legault, Simon Tremblay-Pepin,**  
*Construire l'économie postcapitaliste*  
(Montréal : Lux, 2023)

IL EST DEVENU un lieu commun aujourd'hui de critiquer les dérives du capitalisme, mais trop peu de livres osent s'aventurer dans la recherche d'alternatives à ce système. C'est là le grand mérite de l'ouvrage d'Audrey Laurin Lamothe, Frédéric Legault et Simon Tremblay-Pepin de « se pencher sérieusement sur cette question trop longtemps négligée par la critique : à quoi pourrait bien ressembler une économie postcapitaliste? » (8).

Les auteur-e-s proposent un livre à la fois clair, synthétique, accessible et stimulant présentant différents « modèles » socio-économiques remettant en question la propriété privée des moyens de production et l'économie de marché. La vaste majorité de ces modèles réhabilitent l'idée de planification économique, longtemps répudiée en raison des errances des régimes soviétiques du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle.

On découvre alors qu'il est possible d'imaginer une planification « démocratique » de l'économie, évitant les excès de centralisation, favorisant l'autogestion des milieux de travail, tout en coordonnant les décisions économiques à différentes échelles. Comment concrétiser ces objectifs? Nous ne pouvons résumer ici le fonctionnement détaillé de chaque système, mais voici un aperçu des modèles élaborés par des théoricien-ne-s peu connu-e-s dans le monde francophone.

Au chapitre 1, le modèle de la « coordination négociée » de Pat Devine et Fikret Adaman repose sur la « propriété sociale » des entreprises (distincte de la propriété privée ou étatique), de même que sur différentes instances de coordination : comités sectoriels,