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JOHN VEIT-WILSON'S BOOK REVIEWS.

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PAUL SPICKER [2007], *THE IDEA OF POVERTY*, THE POLICY PRESS, BRISTOL.

Books discussing *The Idea of Poverty* will continue to be needed as long as the subject is as contentious and misunderstood as it remains. The underlying problem is that the word itself is a mere abstraction which is used, even abused, to refer to a very large number of different and often highly disparate phenomena. Imagine if we debated 'illness' equally vaguely without indicating which precise illness and from what perspective – a sufferer, a researcher, a healer, a preventer, an observer. But unlike germs and viruses, poverty is a purely social construct even if it has horribly material consequences. Just as illnesses sustain drug sales, so some poverties serve other people's interests. Popular confusion and political mystifications about which poverty it is and what could be done about it therefore persist and demand clarification.

Paul Spicker's stated aim is to 'light a candle rather than curse the darkness', to try to make sense of the conflicting material and to challenge myths and stereotypes by outlining how the many ideas of poverties are understood, how they are experienced, why they occur and what the responses should be. He does this in sixteen chapters arranged in seven thematic parts which start with 'understanding poverty' (the definitions, the variability between countries, and the statistics), then covering the four aspects of material need, economic position, social relationships, and poverty as a moral concept, before concluding with parts on explanations for and responses to poverty.

While books on poverty often open, as Spicker's does, by claiming that it can't be defined since there is no one perception of what the topic is about, its epistemology must not be evaded if the variety is to be understood. Rather than use this kind of language or analysis, he instead sets out his eleven previously published clusters of meanings of the term (twelve in the latest version, 2007). In adopting an accessible and conversational style, often polemically about what he calls 'zombie' arguments which revive however often they are buried (such as rational choice fundamentalism or blaming the victim), he has avoided the deeper analytical approach which some of these arguments demand, perhaps because he was trying to cover a great deal of ground in relating the world of ideas and methods to the realities of human experience. He draws in and explains aspects of the subject from a wide range of sources from the micro-sociological to the macro-economic, from underclass polemics to development economics. The book reads so easily that it is tempting to assume that his candle illuminates all the darkest spots equally and sufficiently, but regrettably it doesn't.

Spicker is no novice and is very well read, but readers familiar with the literatures on the different facets of this subject will be puzzled by his choices of what to cite and what to omit in explaining how poverty is understood. It may be that his own interests lie elsewhere, but any introduction to the subject risks being seen as idiosyncratic if it fails to use the contributions made by writers such as Len Doyal and Ian Gough (1991) on needs, Fran Bennett with Moraene Roberts (2004) on participatory research, or Ruth Levitas (1998) on social exclusion. Indeed, the chapter on the concept of need seems to have been written without any awareness of the literature which offers a far more rigorously structured analysis of the concept and its social uses and manifestations, which Steven Dubnoff (1985) and others characterised as need for what, for how long, for whom, and according to whom. Given the centrality of the concept to any discussion of poverty, it is simply not good enough for Spicker to summarise the contested uses of the term by saying that 'needs are

problems' which require responses. The term is used in many more ways than this, not only as unmet needs but also unproblematically, and they need, nay, demand, to be discussed properly.

Spicker rightly points out in the chapter on economic resources that "For many people, poverty boils down, more or less, to not having enough money" (p 46), so it will be even more surprising to readers of a journal so often concerned with financial aspects of poverty, that the two-page section which follows, headed "How much is enough?", refers only to two measures which paradoxically can't answer that question: Mollie Orshansky's (1965) normative budgets which were used to rationalise the politically-chosen US 'poverty line' and, amazingly, the EU standard used for measuring poverty as income inequality (the HBAI measure). There seems to be no reference to the many more recent empirical studies in the UK and elsewhere which have been carried out to discover what people understand by the question and how much income is needed not to be poor in whatever national or local context is relevant. This omission is a major weakness in an introduction to the subject, however brief, and may mislead the unwary reader into assuming that the question cannot be answered. Of course I may have missed something, but it is not easy to check the literature cited other than by going haphazardly through all the 326 non-alphabetical endnotes, since there is no list of references and the index omits names.

Spicker's aim of a broad and inclusive introduction to an important and complex subject is worthwhile, but it does not substitute for existing books on poverty such as Ruth Lister's (2004) and can at best only offer its breadth as a lighter complement to their solidity and depth.

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