

SOURCE: [HTTP://WWW.STAFF.NCL.AC.UK/J.VEIT-WILSON/](http://www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/j.veit-wilson/)
JOHN VEIT-WILSON'S BOOK REVIEWS.

NB: this is the original text of the article below. If you want to quote the page numbers on which passages appeared in print, you will have to find the book or journal in which it was published. John Veit-Wilson asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Publication data: *International Journal of Social Welfare*, vol 15 no 4, October 2006, pp 363-365.

CHAK KWAN CHAN AND GRAHAM BOWPITT [2005],
HUMAN DIGNITY AND WELFARE SYSTEMS. THE POLICY PRESS, BRISTOL.

“Human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected.” So reads Article 1 of the *Charter of Fundamental Rights* of the European Union. The Charter doesn't define or qualify the statement because its aim is rhetorical; dignity is not justiciable. Human dignity is an abstract and contested concept, but the authors of this straightforward report on a research project, motivated by genuine moral concern, consider that it demands the practical recognition of a belief in everybody's equal unconditional value as human, and on positive mutuality, which when implemented must not only respect but promote each person's self-respect and autonomy. “The study of dignity can help evaluate whether the current direction of social policy can truly promote human well-being”, they write (p 4), pointing out that several countries have problematically shifted the cover offered by their social security systems from categorical individual need to conditional economic functionality.

In order to test how far welfare systems do respect dignity, they studied the provisions for unemployed people claiming benefits under four differing ideological systems – Hong Kong as capitalist individualism; the United Kingdom under Blair's 'New Labour' conditional 'workfare' individualism; Sweden as social-democratic collectivism; and China as socialist (read 'communist') collectivism, though moving towards market capitalism. The treatment of people in poverty is a good touchstone of a commitment to respect for human dignity, and unemployment is used as a proxy since most of those who suffer it risk poverty in modern marketised societies, even if some people in work are also in poverty and some unemployed people are very rich. Unemployment is not the real problem; poverty is. The authors also wanted to see what light the findings shed on conventional academic classifications of 'welfare states', since the uncritical blanket use of this term misleadingly implies benevolence even to their practices which actively disrespect the human dignity of poor people (Veit-Wilson, 2000). The issues the book addresses are thus important for policy-makers and administrators, for social workers and other frontline staff, and for the academic community.

The first part of the book (three chapters) discusses the background and rationale for the study, the second part devotes a chapter to each of the four countries, while the two chapters in the final part compare human dignity in the four countries and offer a different approach to 'welfare state' classification. The argument is dense, and the treatment of the philosophical, psychological and sociological aspects of the concept raise many further questions even while showing why the authors adopted their approach. There are two problems. One is the degree to which discussion of the concept of human dignity draws on age-old philosophical ideas. But does it matter what the philosophers told us then, if ordinary people's ideas differ now? And what if the political rhetoric about welfare is just that, rousing demagoguery but irrelevant to policy implementation? The tension between these normative and empirical aspects is mentioned but not, in my view, resolved, and that leads to the second problem.

How should the abstract concept be embodied in a credible and viable instrument so that it can be used as a research and analytical tool? The checklist solution the authors adopted to test whether certain administrative forms respect human dignity covers a number of areas. Respect for physical and psychological well-being is measured in terms of minimum subsistence (not participatory) benefit levels, health care, 'psychological support' for mental health, and the training of

welfare workers. Support for carers, for social participation and for learning and skill development, as well as the quality of the government's presentation of the image of welfare recipients, are all treated as indicators of respect for human dignity. Self-determination or autonomy are measured by the degree to which benefit recipients can participate in policy making and how far benefits promote autonomy, while the equal value of people is assessed by how governments treat age, gender, race and class, the 'special needs of disadvantaged groups', and government attitudes towards 'the value of different social groups'.

Argument about what criteria to use is inevitable, and those chosen by the authors are no less normatively arbitrary than others similarly chosen might have been. It is hard to know what they mean in practice when all we are offered in each country and case is the authors' evaluation of these imprecise and contentious criteria in lengthy descriptions of the contemporary administrative programmes for unemployed people. We may well be left with an overall impression, loose in some aspects but heightened in others, of the degree to which these government policies were framed and implemented with any awareness of what respect for dignity might demand, but the research planning would have been strengthened by attention to Richard Sennett's highly relevant work, in particular his book on *Respect* (Sennett, 2003). Sennett illustrates how concepts such as dignity and respect can be understood properly only through observation and experience of interactions, mutually recognised and negotiated. Rigid normative definitions of the concepts by that very fact miss their essence in collective experience. The project would thus have been more persuasive if it had been based on a method which evaluated the criteria on how far they validly reflected the current negotiated experience of human dignity, either by surveying whether unemployed people in the four countries themselves felt their dignity was enhanced or damaged by these policies, or by basing the policy evaluation on what empirical surveys showed were the criteria used by people in general and not just the researchers.

The authors present their conclusions in two chapters and many detailed tables, from which we can see how far below acceptable levels of respect for dignity most of the provisions for unemployed people fall. China and Hong Kong only pass on their provision of training courses; everything else fails or is at best equivocal. Even the UK gets good marks only for free medical care and for training courses and job placements; all else is failed or qualified. In all three countries, cash benefits are too low to avoid poverty even by the limited standards the study uses. Sweden passes on most criteria, though with reservations on some points. As for the academic game of classifying 'welfare states', the authors modify Gøsta Esping-Andersen's decommodification criterion (Esping-Andersen, 1990) to propose a classification based mainly on the degree of respect for human dignity, though classifications of any kind can really be judged only in terms of whether they work analytically. Nevertheless, by any meaningful definition of welfare only Sweden could be called a 'welfare state'. In short, treating poor unemployed people merely as one of the factors of production, a burden to society when not working and only tolerable when they are, is fundamentally to disrespect the inherent dignity of the human person. If 'workfare' means withholding resources from unemployed people who need them for social participation, it is by definition an outright denial of human dignity. Only Sweden (of these four countries), whose social policies are still based, however weakly, on the idea that 'it's *our* state, for us, and not a power over and against us', expresses through its provisions for those whom the labour market finds currently expendable that they are still members of society whose dignity is to be respected.

The practical policy implications of this research are that reliance on 'the free operation of market forces' to respect human dignity and improve welfare is fatuity, a myth to rationalise certain concentrations of economic and social power against others. Like previous comparative research it concludes that, as the economist Didier Fouarge found, "the market does a much poorer job than the welfare state in preventing poverty ... it is not the market that prevents long-term poverty. It is through government intervention that poverty is successfully tackled" (Fouarge 2004, p 156). That requires government policies designed to respect human dignity and all this demands in practice. Politicians and others who prefer to maintain their comforts in a stratified society will not like this book. Social workers who care about the human dignity of the clients their agencies serve will find much in it to think about.

REFERENCES.

- Esping-Andersen, G. (1990). *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Fouarge, D. (2004). *Poverty and Subsidiarity in Europe: Minimum Protection from an Economic Perspective*. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.
- Sennett, R. (2003). *Respect: The Formation of Character in a World of Inequality*. Allen Lane, London.
- Veit-Wilson, J. (2000). "States of Welfare: A Conceptual Challenge". *Social Policy and Administration*, vol 34, no 1, March 2000, pp 1-25.
-