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JOHN VEIT-WILSON'S BOOK REVIEWS.

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HOWARD GLENNERSTER, JOHN HILLS, DAVID PIACHAUD AND JO WEBB [2004], *ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF POVERTY AND POLICY*, JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION, YORK.

LUCINDA PLATT [2005], *DISCOVERING CHILD POVERTY. THE CREATION OF A POLICY AGENDA FROM 1800 TO THE PRESENT*, THE POLICY PRESS, BRISTOL.

The very process of problematising any one or another of the many kinds of poverty implies a policy agenda to combat the problem. But as both of these books document, there is a vast difference between posing a problem with its solutions and the realities of negotiating the political process when politicians believe non-poor majority electoral interests oppose anti-poverty policies as narrowly zero-sum. While abolition of one kind of poverty is the UK's current political rhetoric, the political reality about others remains ambiguous, and social policy analysts of poverty agendas must remain sceptical. How well do these books counteract the politicians' tendency to confuse the answers to what can be done about which poverty according to whom; how well do they give us the information to evaluate what was going on?

The commendable aim of both of these books is to offer a history of the relationship between the contemporary understanding of the 'facts' about one or more kinds of poverty, such as they were, and the policies which some publics promoted and which governments rejected, amended or adopted as political responses to what they perceived as the problems of poverty – problems to the non-poor population as much as to the poor. Lucinda Platt studies the two centuries during which industrialisation and urbanisation have dominated the pattern of UK society and its politics, while Howard Glennerster and his LSE colleagues celebrate the centenary of Joseph Rowntree's foundation of his trusts to further the study of the causes of poverty and not only its relief.

The styles of the books are very different. Platt addresses a conceptually sophisticated readership and is more concerned to tease out and explain the development of the complex relationships between perceptions and policies in constructing and framing the idea of childhood and child poverty, ideas which draw on the archetypes of innocence and corruption. It is a wide-ranging qualitative study from a sociology of welfare perspective. By contrast, the LSE team present a simpler, social administration, account of quantitative social survey findings about what was taken to be (mainly income) poverty in the whole population. While their valuable account sets out the statistics and outlines some political responses and policies, their general treatment of policy contexts and conflicts is less intensive than Platt's. But the book is written with their exemplary clarity (even with large type) for easy reading by the general public.

The unifying themes of Platt's account, discussed at chapter length, are the complexity of the relations between disparate social perceptions and policies; the fact that considering child poverty means addressing the welfare of the family, and women in particular; and that child poverty means current suffering has life-long consequences. Major historical changes were the shift in the perception of women and children as workers to their being dependent on male breadwinners, and the locus of the concomitant conflict between the state and parents in the mass-education system. By contrast, the political ambivalence between relieving distress and controlling threats and inefficiency has persisted throughout. Platt's analysis of the interplay of various perceptions of poverty and the proposed or actual policy responses is both detailed and nuanced, and much can be learned from it. There are,

however, a few typos (for instance the dates of Rowntree's second survey and of the introduction of educational maintenance allowances), and a confusion between Tony Lynes and Richard Titmuss.

The thread running through the LSE team's book is Seebohm Rowntree's lifetime work, but it is not a theme. Indeed, the authors disclaim any intention of engagement with the problematics of the meaning or measurement of poverty, referring readers instead to Ruth Lister's recent treatment of those topics (2004). The book has three principal sections, on poverty, policies and futures. In the first, Glennerster contextualises Rowntree's approach in late nineteenth century concerns and perceptions. These included the problems of urban squalor and social inefficiency, and of measuring, counting and explaining, but he also draws attention to the qualitative reports by women's groups on the experience of poverty and the distribution of household resources. In two chapters, David Piachaud and Jo Webb then describe changes in poverty and its causes, but the ideas of poverty they present are only those embodied in the minimum income measures used for social surveys during the century. Indeed, in explaining this narrow perspective they remark that no attempt has been made since Rowntree to measure 'secondary' poverty, by which one assumes they mean deprived levels of living. While they may be right that this reflects 'the primacy given in twentieth century social science to the quantitative over the qualitative' (p 47), it is puzzling that they believe that the use in surveys of empirically-derived objective standards of deprived levels of living 'involved a highly subjective judgement on the part of the researcher'. Not only has this notion been unsubstantiated since Mack and Lansley's (1985) study if not since Townsend's (1979), but it is even more true of the normative measures they treat as unexceptionable. Their discussion of the 'causes' of income poverty refers of course to the risk factors and the need for adequate incomes when they occur. Since the largest group in poverty continues to be people in work, it would seem that 'work' could with equal justice be described as a 'cause' of poverty as 'unemployment' always is (especially since not working, when combined with an adequate income, is valued even higher than working), but that would fail to make the traditional social distinction between the deserving ('hard-working families') and the undeserving.

In the policies section, Glennerster describes official poverty policy to 1970, drawing out its often questionable assumptions, for instance that the Beveridge universal flat rate benefits were costed on the basis of what the lowest earners could contribute. What does not form part of Glennerster's account is that we now know that those low earners of their poverty could not afford to contribute anything without further detriment, and so in a broader reality the Beveridge scheme was limited, as the minimum wage is today, by political regard for employers. John Hills contributes two of his customarily lucid accounts of income policy and its achievements, one 'from New Right to New Labour' as the complementary chapter in the policy section, and one on challenges and dilemmas as the futures section. He describes and explains the movements of the social economy very clearly and does not evade the influence of real politics on policy options, but this virtue risks ascribing the status of 'policy' to what was mere political rhetoric, and it cannot convey the incoherence of political action.

The persistent incoherence of most government activity around poverty is, indeed, one of the conclusions both books suggest, though Platt details it openly and the LSE authors are too polite to say so. Platt sees a cyclical tendency from the nineteenth century inability to distinguish the integrity of factual enquiry from the tendentious presentation of findings, through the development of independent scientific social research in the twentieth, and back again in recent decades to the incorporation of researchers, whether through funding or discretion. Evidence is what the researchers find – but why were they looking for that? Governments recognise 'evidence' only if it is consistent with their epistemologies and ideologies, and consonant with policy. The LSE team illustrates Platt's point that what *can* be measured becomes 'estimates of poverty' to the exclusion of others. But the other experiences of poverty, what is expressed but is not counted, are 'heard and noted' but make no impact on what actually happens at street level. How else can one explain the persistence of political disrespect for deprived people, the 'othering' (Lister) which no government opposes?

Thus no Whig account can be given of the march from perception and analysis of causes (underlying, proximate and immediate) to the policy, the legislation and its final implementation. Our scholarly inclination is to seek rational linear models of explanation, but other models are hard to articulate to lay audiences and we are perhaps more appreciative of the findings of research than are policy makers. As Platt says, the history of ideas about poverty does not march in step with the policies for a variety of perceived social evils, and the policies themselves often hark back to earlier

paradigms. These books complement each other, and both deserve to be read by those who would engage with the disparity between the Blairite rhetoric of poverty abolition and the complex reality of government policies which maintain and even entrench a wide range of social inequalities. Platt's conclusion sets hopes on pressure groups and independent researchers. The LSE team concludes with alternative scenarios and quotes Seebohm Rowntree's own conclusion about so much poverty and suffering in so rich a country: '... when once we realise it we see that social questions of profound importance await solution' (1901 p 304). But the political will isn't really there, is it?

#### REFERENCES.

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