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my reticence to buy into such arguments has more to do with my own limited views about the value of psychological explanations within social policy settings. Indeed, on a personal level, one positive spin off from reviewing this book is the fact that it has challenged me to think again about what the discipline of psychology might offer as I attempt to understand the ongoing processes of inclusion and exclusion that are an inherent part of citizenship.

Part 3 of the book offers a worked through case study of reframed social citizenship via a detailed discussion of UK welfare reform. Chapter 7, which contains a detailed critical discussion of New Labour’s welfare project, provides the backdrop for Chapters 8 and 9 where the reforms of the British National Health Service (NHS), and citizens’ experiences of them, are described as ‘an exemplar of the impact of the new policy agenda in the welfare state’ (p. 158). I particularly enjoyed the second of these two chapters as it presents original qualitative data from a study into public perceptions about the values that should underpin the NHS and also the authors’ views about the positive aspects (a broad commitment to a publically financed universal service) and the more negative managerialist aspects (target driven agendas, a preoccupation with extending choice) of the healthcare reforms enacted by the New Labour administrations.

Overall, I find it hard to disagree with Taylor-Gooby’s main conclusion that ‘the individual rational actor welfare state’ which now predominates is ‘weakened in the resilience and scope of reciprocity, the reach of social inclusion and the vitality of public trust (p. 186). This is an excellent book that should be read by all those who are interested in how the drive to deliver more individualised and efficient public welfare undermines the vertical redistribution and collective commitment that more substantive notions of social citizenship require.

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A book which purports to offer a new understanding of poverty by showing the errors of all previous approaches must first get them absolutely right. This book fails to do so. Starting from conceptual misunderstanding and misrepresentation of both Charles Booth’s and Seebohm Rowntree’s poverty research methods and measures, it confidently gives an incomplete and inaccurate account of the origins and state of poverty studies and measurement. My criticism of the inadequate scholarship in the first two parts of the book, ‘How to measure poverty and why it matters’ and ‘Towards a new measure of poverty’ has not been coloured in any way by my views on the ideology manifest in the third, ‘Poverty measurement and government policy’. This final part sets out a commonplace neo-liberal agenda following economists such as Friedman and Laffer and aimed explicitly against the approaches taken by the Child Poverty Action Group and others which are repeatedly criticised, chiefly by misunderstanding or misrepresenting the arguments. This is all familiar political polemic and I shall not comment on it. What matters is the unreliability of what goes before.

The author is a doctoral student in public policy with a first degree in economics. The foreword, written by a lecturer in public policy who is thanked for suggestions ‘at various stages of writing this monograph’, claims that this is ‘a superb study’ which proposes to bridge the gap between absolute and relative measures by ‘a new measure of poverty which takes into account both absolute and relative factors: the Consensual Budget Standard Approach (CBSA)’ (p. 12). The author’s unawareness (if that is what it is) of more than a century of work in this field
has led him to discover this version of Minimum Income Standards, apparently all by himself (pp. 156–9) since he implies priority by adding that ‘there have already been experiments with CBSAs: the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s (2010) “Minimum Income Standards”’, referring only to an update and not to the original full methodological report on this massive research project (Bradshaw et al., 2008), which is nowhere mentioned. But perhaps the problem is not ignorance of scholarly foundations but merely a failure to understand what they mean. His cited references are naturally limited in a short book, but readers may be surprised at other omissions and amazed by the consistent misspelling of some key authors’ names throughout the book.

What is particularly frustrating for readers, and paradoxical in view of the author’s ostensible project, is that he repeatedly emphasises three issues on which most serious poverty scholars might agree with him: (1) that as societies change over time and vary between places, so the identification of what is necessary to live a decent and inclusive life in those societies will change and vary; (2) that the question of what are the necessities for socially inclusive life is better answered by the population as a whole than by the a priori assumptions and prescriptions of officials or researchers alone; (3) that statistics of household incomes below a percentile of the median, used as the official measurement of ‘poverty’, in themselves say nothing about the resources needed in time and place to give the freedom of market choice for social inclusion — ‘there is no reason why the cost of social inclusion should be a fixed fraction of median income’ (p. 101). Here, some of his methodological criticisms of the poverty lobby for loosely discussing income inequality as poverty do have validity. But he seems regrettably unaware that the concepts of absolute and relative are themselves problematic in discussions of poverty; indeed, the book conveys little understanding of poverty theory or epistemology as it is generally understood. In this book the term ‘Absolute Poverty’ is ‘characterised by poverty lines that represent a fixed level of purchasing power, or command over material resources’ (p. 43), the fixity being set by prescription; ‘Relative Poverty’ is equally normative since it is nothing more than what is measured by that ‘fixed fraction’ of median income (p. 41). He has some idea of what relative deprivation might be, but having asserted that his book sets out to refute the relative concept (p. 32) and that ‘minimising inequality cannot be an element of a free society’ (p. 118), and by avoiding any consideration of structural aspects, he is left with no coherent explanatory system for his analysis.

Of course, the author has a right to express his opinions just as birthers and flat-earthers have, but, as Daniel Patrick Moynihan is said to have added, not his own facts. Perhaps criticism of his deficient scholarship is futile; after all, he is not writing for the critical and informed readers of this journal. So to put it at its most positive and ignoring all the faults, one can say that the book puts forward an argument perhaps new to its intended audience of IEA supporters, that absolute poverty measures are useless and wrong, that the government’s customary low income measures do not measure the changing social understandings of poverty in themselves, and that in a free society governments should not measure poverty in terms of arbitrary income relationships but on the basis of budgets drawn up consensually by the people themselves, so that poverty is measured in terms of the income needed to cover the minimum cost of socially defined marketed necessities for decent life in the here and now. And if the author manages to persuade the neoliberals of that, who am I to complain?

Reference

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