

Book Reviews

Massoud Karshenas and Valentine M. Moghadam (eds) (2005), *Social Policy in the Middle East: Economic, Political and Gender Dynamics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 263 pp., £55 hbk.
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Social Policy in the Middle East is a pioneering work, extending the comparative study of welfare states to the Middle East and North Africa (the MENA countries). It is one of a series of excellent books from the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development on 'social policy in a development context' (under the editorship of Thandika Mkandawire and Huck-ju Kwon).

The MENA region has been *terra incognita* in social policy. These are Islamic countries: is there an Islamic social policy? They are predominantly non-democratic countries: what is the function of social policy under authoritarian rule?

The book is organised into eight chapters, a general overview, case studies of Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Turkey and Iran, and a final chapter on gender and social policy. The authors are from universities in Tunis, Ankara, Fez, Algiers, the Hague, Leiden, New York and Illinois.

The first chapter argues that national social policies grow out of specific circumstances in each country and that the political economy of social development is best studied in a country-specific framework. No new welfare state model emerges here or is suggested. If in some other developing countries, for example in East Asia, social policies have been shaped as a system of support for economic development, in 'the MENA region social/welfare policies in the post-colonial era had more to do with creating a social base of support for the emerging nation states or regimes' (p. 4).

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the MENA region displayed 'impressive' advances in social development as measured by for example mortality and literacy, albeit from a very low base. Public spending on health and education has been comparatively high. However, much of that spending has been distributed in a clientelistic manner, biased towards urban populations and as benefits to public sector workers. The countries have continued to 'lag behind' in industrial advancement and in the development of functioning labour markets. From about 1980 and onwards, fertility declined strongly but a social infrastructure was lacking that could have enabled these countries to benefit from the 'demographic gift' of, for a period, more rapid growth in the labour force than in the population.

Tunisia is the star pupil in this class, governed by a strong state with strong social policy and maintaining a level of public social spending generating a 'highly significant' redistribution of income. In 2001, social transfers per household were higher than the guaranteed minimum wage. However, beneath that veneer is a country organised as a party-state with a regime struggling on the one hand to maintain legitimacy and on the other hand to control popular unrest and the danger of Islamic opposition. 'The power that the party still enjoys derives from its handling of social policy – that is from clientelism' (p. 33). The period of structural adjustment and neo-liberal economic policy from the mid-1980s did not result in a general retrenchment in social policy. Social transfers have more than doubled in real value. Public

education and health care has continued to expand, as has social security coverage, social assistance and family support. Tunisia has emerged as 'the most liberal country in the Arab world in terms of gender relations' (p. 244). This is a welfare state that works in the sense 'that there has been a noticeable reduction in poverty and discrimination against women' (p. 73). But the reverse side of the coin is a repressive and controlling welfare state, 'not based on recognition and exercise of social rights but on "social favours" monopolised by the party-state. Tunisia is an exemplary case of a system where social policy is at the same time the vehicle of social improvement and the instrument of political despotism' (pp. 73–4).

In Algeria, 'the deterioration of socio-economic conditions in the last 15 years resulted from inadequate policies, external shocks and a violent Islamist rebellion. A serious failure in the social policy area contributed to destabilisation and political violence' (p. 80). At independence, Algeria started from scratch with an experience of exceptionally exploitative and violent French colonialism. The socialist period from 1965 to 1980 was one of both economic and social progress, which however was not sustainable, partly because development was dependent on gas and oil rent. Around 1980, the country was plunged into economic and then political crisis from which it has not recovered. The subsequent story is one of violence, government failure, social misery and deteriorating standards of living. Public services ceased to function. 'The social policy that was in place in the socialist era slowly eroded and has not been replaced' (p. 92).

Morocco, unlike Tunisia and Algeria, adopted a capitalist system on independence (1956). Nation building was at first grounded in authoritarian rule, but also under the influence of relatively strong and independent trade unions. Subsequent development has been ambiguous: economic liberalisation, structural adjustment, privatisation and hesitant democratisation. What seems to have emerged is a system of governance on the basis of ambitious goals, including social priorities and weak delivery. Economic development has been unsteady and with recurrent recessions, preventing social policy take-off. Poverty and unemployment (notably among graduates) remains rampant. Only about 20 per cent of the population is covered by social security, mainly urban and government workers.

In Egypt, 'the paternalistic, unsystematic and undemocratic features of social policy were instrumental in the poor quality and maldistribution of social development among citizens' (p. 146). Bold social ambitions in the 'socialist' period, in particular in education and health care, collapsed with economic set-backs, neo-liberalism and structural adjustment, leading towards the end of the century 'to a drastic decline in the quality of education, health care and housing' (p. 140). Yet social policy as such did not collapse but was rather redirected to subsidies which by 2002/3 accounted for over 40 per cent of total public expenditure. Another name for subsidies in the Egyptian case is 'giveaways', strategically dispensed at strategic times in order to reward public workers and 'undermine the Islamists' influence' (p. 142).

Turkey's history is very different from that of the North African countries, but its social story no less sad. With the establishment of the republic in 1923, efforts were made to underpin 'national unity' with redistributive measures in favour of the peasantry and the working class. Social legislation followed and has persisted which on paper looks European, but at the entry into the twenty-first century the combined effects of economic failure and democratic failure is that social security is 'in crisis' and that even inadequate public spending on education and health cannot be sustained.

In Iran, the 1979 revolution caused little or no discontinuity in social policy. The decade up to the revolution was one of economic growth and of expanding coverage in social security, health care and education, albeit with vast inequalities, e.g. urban–rural and by gender. After the revolution social efforts have fluctuated strongly depending on economic capacity but still maintained a long-term trend of further extension of coverage, stimulated by social rights

clauses in the Islamic Constitution. Social assistance and social services have been outsourced to a network of quasi-public and religious NGOs which ‘has become an important instrument of social control’ (p. 217).

Gender divisions in social life in the MENA countries have by and large been perpetuated rather than compensated for by social policies. This is the result of mainly three factors: first, the general social backwardness of the region, not least (progress notwithstanding) in persistent high levels of illiteracy, in particular among women; second, by low levels of female labour force participation in systems in which access to social rights, such as they are, is mainly through (public) employment; and, third, by Muslim family law which has been (except in Tunisia) beyond the reach of politics and effectively works to undermine political measures towards gender equity.

There are general lessons to be drawn from this collection of studies. Social policy here comes through as non-ideological. The level and usage of social spending is explained by the combination of economic capacity and government capacity. No ‘Islamic social doctrine’ emerges to have given direction to social policies in these countries. The influence of Islam is indirect: first, through family law – which ‘contradicts any sentiment of universality and the notion that social policy seeks to ensure social equity’ (p. 224) and, second, through regime fear of Islamist opposition.

Furthermore, if social policies are for purposes beyond the social, in these studies they overwhelmingly serve the purpose of raw social control. Social policies are obviously always an instrument of rule and in authoritarian regimes they are perform an instrument of authoritarian rule.

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Myungsook Woo (2004), *The Politics of Social Welfare in South Korea: Growth and Citizenship*, Maryland: University Press of America, 177 pp., £21.99 pbk.
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The book is one of a number to emerge during the past two or three years on social welfare in South Korea. At a time of social development within Korea and with a limited but growing emphasis on the social rather than the economic there is considerable interest in the nature of this movement and the post Korean War history in this area. This is effectively a case study focusing on a distinctive late comer to the social policy scene and draws on existing theories of state and welfare to explore the politics of social welfare, in particular ‘balance-of-class power’ and state-centred theories. The book will be of interest to students of international social policy, globalisation and of South Korea, as well as political scientists, drawing as it does on a detailed and distinctive study of the political nature of social welfare.

The study focuses on three elements of this period: the government co-ordinated market economy, the nature of the democratic movement and the impact of the international economy, and argues that welfare reform has been, and remains, limited by Korea’s place in the global economy and the emphasis on company-based welfare services.

These three elements form the analytical framework of the study and the book is constructed around these with a chronological structure interwoven. Each of the three elements is introduced within its most significant time segment and related to the government of the day. Thus something of the post-war history of South Korea is presented enabling readers who are unfamiliar with the detail to set the study within the South Korean political and economic context. An appendix listing chronologically the various welfare programmes is also helpful.

Within each chapter different areas of social welfare are explored, education, employment, health insurance and pensions.

The writer argues from her findings that South Korea demonstrates that economic development and welfare policy development are related as suggested by the 'logic-of-industrialisation' argument albeit as a 'late developer'. What is particularly interesting in this study is the way the writer works with political aspects of social welfare reform and the predominance of the market economy, in particular the large industrial companies. Much social welfare during the latter half of the twentieth century was delivered through company schemes with the support of the unions and promoted by the state thus weakening the case for universal welfare services. The unions, although strong, did not have the political power to seek welfare reform outside of their business enterprises and still tend to be company specific.

The financial crisis of 1997–8 gave a focus to social as well as economic issues and increased the state role. The writer suggests that, contrary to the convergence theory of welfare states, in South Korea the crisis resulted in the increased state autonomy necessary to co-ordinate economic actors and this facilitated the introduction of compensatory social policies and empowered the unions. However, the demands of the large companies and a divided labour force still restrict the possibilities of reform.

This as a fascinating study of class power, developing democracy, dramatic economic development and crisis, which finds that social welfare becomes of concern in troubled economic times rather than in the good times. The complex relationship between the international and the domestic, the state, the economic market, large companies and the unions and state autonomy and democracy is well demonstrated through the use of examples. The book concludes with a consideration of current and future issues in social welfare, which highlight the diversity of social policy around the world, and a consideration of the value of comparative social policy, which demonstrates that for social welfare and South Korea there are as yet no clear and final conclusions.

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Phineas Baxandall (2004), *Constructing Unemployment: The Politics of Joblessness in East and West*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 270 pp., £49.95 hbk.

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This book represents a major contribution to the economic and political analysis of unemployment in current times. It clearly challenges the way we used to think about the phenomenon – as a category with universal, immutable characteristics (that allows us to make labour market comparisons) – arguing that the meaning of unemployment is socially and politically constructed. In order to sustain his idea, Baxandall shows how the meaning of unemployment has changed over the years in Western European countries and in Eastern Europe former communist countries.

The author concentrates on the case of Hungary, exploring the causes and consequences of how communist and post-communist governments understand and respond to unemployment. In doing so, Baxandall reverses some prevalent misconceptions that, for instance, assume that unemployment would not exist under soviet-type regimes, explaining that it did exist but its' meaning and political salience changed over time, depending on the prevailing model of employment and on the strategies designated to preserve it. A central premise of the book is that changes in the political meaning of unemployment are largely dependent of

changes in the political meaning of employment and that social policies affect the distinction between employment, unemployment and other forms of non-employment (e.g. retirement and disability). In the case of Hungary we could see that, in the context of post-communist transition, changes in the meaning of employment (entrepreneurial employment became the prototype) led to the disappearance of unemployment's political importance, since the boundaries between the two status became less prominent. Within this analysis framework, Baxandall calls our attention to the existence of some exceptional cases, such as the region of Ózd within Hungary and certain Eastern countries (e.g. Poland and the former German Democratic Republic), reinforcing the argument that in places where employment still resembled the old communist prototype (long-term, full-time and in state industry), unemployment remained more politically salient.

This leads us to one of the aims of the book which is to understand how and the reasons why the political importance of unemployment can vary so widely between countries and/or regions, therefore emphasising the interest of Baxandall's research for the purposes of international comparative analysis. In this matter we can, nevertheless, underline some weaknesses. For instance, the author extensively examines the Hungarian case, describing in great detail its political, economic and social history and using extensive empirical data (Chapters 2 to 6), while the analysis of some other cases – Britain, Soviet Union, United States and Municipalities near Ghent – lacks more recent and developed data (Chapter 7). This creates a disequilibrium in terms of analysis of how unemployment is reinvented both in Eastern and Western countries. Furthermore, we think it would have been important to understand the reasons and the particular interest for concentrating on these four cases, as well as to establish a connection with the focus on the European Union case described afterwards (Chapter 8). Again, as an explanation for the European Union's diversity in terms of the political importance of unemployment, Baxandall validates his theoretical hypothesis. This is that unemployment is more politically virulent when governmental commitments towards the unemployed are greater and higher employment standards are encouraged. He does so by stressing the role played by the government as the primary actor in the construction of the political meaning of unemployment. Nonetheless, as he himself recognises, we should also pay attention to the role played by other actors – such as trade unions and employers associations, communities of experts, etc. – on the processes of policy making and construction of the boundaries between what is perceived as work, employment and unemployment. Moreover, the generalisation of other forms of work (e.g. sub-contracting, consultancies, multiple job-holding, youth internships) calls our attention to the importance of considering different resources, apart from social security benefits, that can influence the way unemployment is experienced and the kind of work that is expected and therefore its political relevance in a given society. That is, if the unemployed are able to find other sources of livelihood (e.g. self-employment, work in the informal sector) through other channels (e.g. social networks) apart from the traditional official state mechanisms (in the countries where they exist), then we should also look to the role played by other social structures (e.g. family systems and specific markets configurations). This type of reasoning is emphasised, for instance, by authors like Gallie and Paugam (2000) in their research on the differences in the experience of unemployment in European countries, which in fact is an excellent complement to Baxandall's book.

In conclusion, Baxandall's work can provide a core framework of analysis to underline and explain the differences in the meaning of unemployment across different times and places, but it should be complemented by other variables/indicators besides the (central) role played by the state (e.g. other political and social agents) if we want to (more widely) understand how the political meaning and the salience of unemployment are constructed and the effects they have on the social policies designated to deal with this (new) social problem.

Reference

Gallie, D. and Paugam, S. (eds) (2000), *Welfare Regimes and the Experience of Unemployment in Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CARLA VALADAS

Naila Kabeer (ed.) (2005), *Inclusive Citizenship: Meanings and Expressions*, London: Zed Books, 274 pp., £17.95 pbk.
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This lively and thought-provoking collection of multi-disciplinary papers on citizenship, brought together by Naila Kabeer at the Institute of Development Studies, is a text that serves as an important and timely reminder that, even though we appear to be living in an RAE age where edited collections tend to be either sidelined or looked down upon, such enterprises can in fact be intellectually rewarding and make for truly fascinating reading. This is a book that achieves many goals regarding the empirical and theoretical – as well as methodological – challenges that studying and writing about citizenship can throw up.

The 14 substantive chapters presented here, as well as a full and detailed introduction by Kabeer herself, provide for an insightful and empirically rich overview of current debates and arguments on citizenship in different parts of the world. In the introduction, Kabeer powerfully argues that ‘the history of citizenship in both North and South has been a history of struggle over how it is to be defined and who it is to include. However . . . a great deal of the theoretical debate about citizenship today is taking place in an “empirical void”, where the views and perspectives of “ordinary” citizens are largely absent’ (p. 1). Fortunately, the chapters in this book counteract some of the more arid debates and discussions in this area and allow the articulate and passionate voices of ‘ordinary’ citizens to be heard loud and clear.

The organisation of the book is logical and coherent with chapters being split into sections covering rights, identity, struggle and policy. This structure and ordering is, I would suggest, an attempt to persuade us that only by examining the situation of particular communities – in particular countries, at particular times – can we then begin to unpack and explain (‘from below’) what *universal* citizenship can look like and mean to those who are marginalised and excluded and how groups, neighbourhoods, families and individuals can seek to organise themselves and claim the rights that citizenship can, sometimes, substantively offer. Whether concentrating on lived experience in Nigeria, Brazil, Bangladesh, South Africa, Britain or the United States the pictures and stories that emerge throughout the individual chapters are that context, culture and ‘historical moment’ are important to appreciate in such debates, but that nonetheless some constants, such as fighting for self-determination, challenging economic and political oppression and securing social justice are features common to all nations and communities. It is, after all, just a question of different approaches and methods for different situations and contexts: place and culture do still matter in ‘global times’ and in the wider context of debates on particular/universal human rights (‘the abstract and concrete sides of the same coin’ it is noted, p. 9).

It is worth highlighting, in this context, that as well as offering something to substantive debates on citizenship the book has many points of interest to readers who are interested in different approaches to social research. There are a range of diverse methodologies employed by the various authors in their respective studies: Pant’s study with nomads in Rajasthan draws on an action research approach; Lister *et al.* use a series of focus groups with young people to hear how they understand citizenship; Cortez Ruiz uses in-depth interviews as a way of

letting indigenous women tell their stories in Chiapas, Mexico and, perhaps most novel of all, Abah and Okwori's study uses community/popular theatre as a means of discussing citizenship within Nigeria (which, as they argue, is 'a nation in search of citizens', pp. 82–3).

The most important contribution this book, as a collective endeavour, brings to wider theoretical debates on citizenship is the argument that in examining the concept we need to remember people and place and the day-to-day struggles that occur in the name of citizenship. This is a theme that is woven into all the chapters and it is a rather unenviable task to highlight specific chapters over others in this review. However, the one that particularly spoke to me (apart from Pant's study of nomads in Rajasthan, no surprise given my own research interests) was Dagnino's chapter covering the way in which concepts of citizenship in Brazil are deeply contested: to my mind this chapter responds beautifully to the continued neo-liberal assault on democratic and socially just versions of citizenship in the Brazilian context and, as a reminder of the struggles that have been fought, and still need to be fought, over citizenship rights, this chapter makes for very potent reading.

In summary, this is a body of work that has much to say on its chosen topic at the theoretical, methodological and empirical levels. The text shows that the nature of citizenship is dynamic, global and multi-dimensional and different social movements across the world, within particular historical and geographical contexts, are constructing new possibilities and hope for citizens and communities who are marginalised and oppressed. Naila Kabeer, as editor, is to be congratulated for bringing together such an excellent pool of talent.

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Jordi Estivill (2003), *Concepts and Strategies for Combating Social Exclusion: An Overview*, Portugal: International Labour Office, 131 pp., £8.95 pbk.
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Discussions on social exclusion have grown substantially over the past two decades in both academic and policy circles. The use of the term has been catching on not only in European countries but also very quickly in many other parts of the world. One could speculate that this popularity sums up the need for a 'concept' that is inclusive of many forms of social injustices, visible or invisible, which in most instances lack proactive measures to remedy these situations. To assist the students of social exclusion in their venture to better understand and apply this context-bound concept, the author of this book comprehensively examines it in detail and suggests strategies to address and tackle it from multiple angles in a highly globalised world. Because of the very fact that so many people in so many ways are using it, social exclusion inevitably has to be met with the difficulty of establishing its conceptual boundary, as the sceptics would point to its opacity (p. 51). This book, organised into three main sections, is a grand effort to take on this challenge and to build collaborative strategies with multiple actors, particularly emphasising the importance of local actions paving the way for future development in combating social exclusion.

The first two chapters, to some degrees, achieve the purpose of deciphering the meaning of social exclusion and how it is manifested. In the first chapter, the author provides the genealogy of exclusion within the context of Western historical development and how it came to be accepted widely by many international organisations and local initiatives. As it is still a growing concept, the diversity and multiplicity of its meanings has only added to the 'ambiguities' (p. 34). However, the author brilliantly navigates through his review of neighbouring conceptual frameworks – i.e., marginalisation, isolation, poverty, deviation, expulsion and stigmatisation – and

combines them under a common theme of social exclusion. Taking into account its social, economic and political dimensions, the author defines social exclusion as 'an accumulation of confluent processes with successive ruptures arising from the heart of the economy, politics and society, which gradually distances and places persons, groups, communities and territories in a position of inferiority in relation to centres of power, resources and prevailing values' (p. 19). This comprehensive definition highlights the structural roots and multi-dimensionality of the concept through which multiple actors could converge in an effort to minimise its effects on people. It is also suggested that social exclusion could supplement poverty in an age of welfare state retrenchment, for there is less stigma attached to 'inclusion' as a would-be solution rather than the redistribution of wealth.

The second chapter examines the process by which social exclusion is manifested and the difficulty of validating its measurement. The author suggests understanding social exclusion as a developmental process identified in terms of its structural origins and taking place in multiple stages of exclusion. Exclusion can occur at individual, group, social, and spatial levels and this complexity calls for qualitative studies to provide a more complete picture of the social fabric (p. 40). The measurement section of this chapter may be the weakest link of the book. The author successfully defines the concept in Chapter 1, although in a broad sense, but remains somewhat reserved in this chapter about going beyond introducing various social indicators that have been in use by some studies. Although the main purpose of the book, as he puts it, is to present a good overview of the concept, he succumbs to the vagueness of social exclusion partly because of the all-encompassing nature of the concept. He highlights the inadequacies of the pre-existing measures rather than illustrating how they have led to the designing of current strategies. In short, he provides no specific suggestions or directions as to how one ought to detect social exclusion. His simple statement that 'there is no single way to describe, measure, assess and explain exclusion', coupled with his loose conclusion to combine all methods (p. 59), suggests very little but that the strategies provided in the following chapter are non-evidence-based ideas that rest on assumptions rather than methodological rigor.

Despite this limitation, as the author acknowledges, the third chapter relies on the key identified characteristics of exclusion as mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2 and provides a solid outline of various actors and the roles they could play along the lines of some specific typologies and principles for strategies to combat social exclusion. Located in various coordinates of time and space, voluntary and collective motives push multiple actors, particularly led by the civil society or the third sector, to promote citizenship and democracy. Along with these social enterprises, the author mentions trade unions, employers, financial institutions, the economy and the public sector as main actors in the partnership for engaging in a long-term effort to combat social exclusion at multiple levels. Also, strategies to recognise the existence of social exclusion, to identify the strategic objectives and to balance the objectives and resources are listed as possibilities. Again, the author maintains that a pluralistic approach is desired, reflecting the pluri-dimensional and structural nature of exclusion, based on the conviction that strategies have more legitimacy and sustainability if all partners are involved (p. 104).

Not having a clear measure of social exclusion may be an unfavourable condition in terms of designing strategies and assessing the degree of success when the strategies are implemented. Without reference to any valid measures and outcome assessment, the author contends that the strategic principles of integration, partnership, participation and the small-scale local approach have provided the best results (p. 116). Conceivably, as a moving concept that could potentially include many forms of exclusion and actors, it may seem unrealistic to clearly discriminate what is and what is not social exclusion in application. Although this is implied in some parts of the book, the author never clearly states that it would be impossible to measure social exclusion on a grand scale based on the adopted definition in Chapter 1. If done so, he could gain more

support for his proposal on the bottom-up initiatives from local communities to combat social exclusion. Furthermore, one could relate these principles back to complement the discussion on the measurement issue. Logically speaking, these principles could in fact be the very criteria that can guide local development of measures to adequately capture the reality as it relates to exclusion in the communities.

Overall, richly filled with concrete examples, this book is overall a good comprehensive overview of the concept of social exclusion. It is a must read by all those who are not yet familiar with the issue and/or who are frustrated with how poverty and inequality have become obsolete terms under the dominant influence of neo-liberal market forces. Perhaps, as the author describes social exclusion as a process, it may be an 'actionable' concept in the sense that it can identify various forms of exclusion, measure it locally given the specific context, and provide specific strategies that can best be applied in the local context. The author's proposition for a global responsibility to create a transnational network of sharing best practices and pressuring governments by international organisations are well warranted.

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Ann Oakley (2005), *The Ann Oakley Reader*, Bristol: The Policy Press, 306 pp., £19.99 pbk.
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In her foreword to this book, Germaine Greer describes Ann Oakley's writing as 'the coming to consciousness for many women in the seventies'. And, indeed, Oakley's landmark work on *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) had been republished five times by 1980. However, it was her work on motherhood (*Becoming a Mother* (1979), later reprinted as *From Here to Maternity* (1981) and *Women Confined: Towards a Sociology of Childbirth* (1980)) and housework (*The Sociology of Housework* (1974; revised 1985) and *Subject Women* (1981)) that earned her ideas both academic and popular acclaim. The *Ann Oakley Reader* acts as a compendium of the above works, while additionally including several recently published papers on qualitative and quantitative methodology, paradigm warfare and science and gender.

The book is formally divided into four sections: sex and gender, housework, motherhood and social science. The social constructionist argument in Part 1 attests that gender and gender roles are learned through the socialisation process. Oakley's original contention that the situs of men and women within society was not fixed or naturally inferred, but rather was the social construction of sex, began a fundamental modern intellectual debate on the socially constructed characteristics of men and women. The discussion of sex and gender has moved on and Oakley's view of gender has since been criticised (Gatens, 1991), but it nonetheless has undeniable continuing value, both in terms of documenting her own academic progression, but also in terms of elucidating existing arguments on sex and gender roles. Part 2 details Oakley's seminal research on housework. Although parts of her research do appear, by her own admission, somewhat outdated, and a plethora of research now exists on housework and the roles of women and men within the home (for example, Baxter and Western, 1998; Sullivan, 2000), Oakley was the first to investigate housework as a legitimate form of 'work', and, in this respect, her research is rudimentary in this area. The topic of motherhood (Part 3) has stimulated vigorous debate within feminist writings, to the extent that the discussion and understanding of 'motherhood' has evolved to become an essentially divisive issue among feminists. It has provoked a discord between those who desire women to be equal, as in the same as men, and those who desire women to be equal to men but with respect for the inherent 'differences' between the sexes. Oakley's early work on motherhood challenged entrenched

views of the idealised mother of the 1950s, and, alternatively, documented the motherhood experience of loss (status, identity, etc.), the demands of childcare and the poor social status afforded to mothers. Oakley's sensitive and highly original writing on motherhood provided a springboard for a great deal of significant further research in this area and remains central to modern understanding of our construction of motherhood, but it is also an important illustration of a fundamental theoretical dispute within feminism itself. Finally, Part 4 is particularly interesting (and markedly different from the other sections) in respect of the pertinent questions it raises about the position of women within modern sociology (the 'invisible woman'). Oakley's basic tenet is that sociology is fundamentally sexist and overtly concerned with the interests and activities of men. The examples she gives – deviance, social stratification, power, the family and marriage and industry and work – are instructive, relevant and thought provoking. Oakley contests the traditional 'masculine model of sociology' (p. 217), which appears, she argues, in much of scientific method. By this token, she advocates 'the use of feminist research principles to rehabilitate scientific method' (p. 243) and so to introduce an improved and more rigorous framework by which research methods and practice are evaluated.

There is no doubt that Oakley's *Reader* is very effective as a synopsis of her work. However, a curious, and certainly highly contentious, aspect of her writing is her very apparent cynicism, throughout the book, towards the treatment of women's health. She contends, in Part 1, that 'most of the medicalisation of women's health cannot be justified in terms of scientific evidence about effectiveness and safety' (p. 47). Furthermore, she argues that there is little evidence that drug treatment is effective in curing depression in women (p. 27), that ultrasound examination and postnatal depression are examples of 'deeply unscientific' medical terms – in respect of both treatment and aetiology – and that the ideology of the latter plays 'a powerful role in tying mothers to a socially useful mode of production' (p. 121). Perhaps most controversially, she states that cervical cancer screening is not an effective method of cancer prevention (p. 47). Her language and syntax are, at times, highly emotive: she writes of episiotomies as 'genital mutilation' (p. 121), of women having 'their babies cut out of their abdomens in an operation euphemistically known as Caesarean section' (p. 119), of technology used in motherhood affected to 'control and commodify women's bodies' (p. 119), and of the 'unbridled medical enthusiasm for new techniques' inherent in the profession (p. 157). In this respect, Oakley's sporadic linguistic predilection for emotive diction and generalisation could potentially detract from the value and persuasiveness of her research.

The difficulty with a feminist perspective on *modern* women's issues (such as women's health, motherhood etc.) is that it has the ability to present a world that appears to us unfamiliar, outdated or irrelevant, even to women. Such a perspective could also be seen, in certain respects, as the manifestation of stereotypes and generalisations – e.g. the apparent implication that all women involved in certain types of pornography are victims (p. vi), and that women care about housework and men don't (p. vii). Oakley addresses the charge that feminism (may) involve bias but I felt that she did not adequately answer such criticisms: a feminist perspective is not considered 'polemical' *simply* because it runs contrary to 'the accepted male-orientated viewpoint' (p. 190).

While Oakley's *Reader* is a highly valuable commentary on her work on women, gender and social science methodology, it nonetheless raises fundamental questions about the position and value of feminism, and the 'feminist perspective', within modern society.

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Colin Francome (2004), *Abortion in the USA and the UK*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 177 pp., £39.95 hbk.

Lisa Smyth (2005), *Abortion and Nation*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 187 pp., £47.50 hbk.
doi:10.1017/S004727940627003X

These books are welcome additions to the literature on how reproductive rights' policies have developed in various jurisdictions. Colin Francome's book examines similarities and differences between the situation in the USA and the UK, while Lisa Smyth presents a sociological analysis of national identity and abortion politics in the Republic of Ireland. Smyth's work is aimed at a more specialist audience, while Francome's could be read by anyone with an interest in the issue and provides easily accessible information for undergraduates and campaigners. Both books are written from a pro-choice point of view, but Smyth's concentrates on anti-abortion tendencies in the Irish state and, she argues, national identity. Francome focuses on broader issues raised in the movement for abortion rights and how these impacted on the policy development process.

Francome includes chapters detailing facts and figures in relation to the experience of legal abortion in the USA and the UK and the campaigns in those countries which brought about legalisation. The introduction has interesting sections dealing with who are the supporters and opponents of choice and with how 'both sides have their own facts'. The latter is an examination of the 'facts' that each side in the abortion debate choose to use, or ignore.

Smyth elucidates an interesting theme in the politics of reproductive rights in the Republic of Ireland. In deciding to take such a narrow focus, she inevitably examines the debate mainly from the viewpoint of those with an interest in promoting a 'national identity'. This tends to exclude not only most of those campaigning on the streets, but also the women most affected by the debate. So she argues that the issue was forced on Irish feminists by the anti-abortion lobby's demand for a constitutional amendment prohibiting abortion. Yet Francome points out that the number of women from the Republic of Ireland having abortions in Britain had risen from 578 in 1971 to 3,600 in 1981 (the year the campaign for a constitutional amendment began). He also argues that in both Britain and the US, one of the important influences for legalisation of abortion was liberalisation of sexual attitudes. Evidence from Ireland suggests a similar liberalisation was occurring there in the 1970s; Irish pro-choice campaigners may not have chosen the ground on which to fight on abortion rights, but suggesting that there was no demand for such rights is to accept that there is something intrinsically different about Irish society – an argument that has been demolished by the experience of the Celtic Tiger.

Francome argues that there is a relationship between the social climate and the development of birth control and abortion rights. He examines the campaigns for legalisation of abortion that developed in both the USA and Britain and differences between those campaigns and their outcomes. In Britain, the law was liberalised after fierce political campaigning and, while women did not win the right to choose, abortion became relatively freely available on the NHS. By contrast, legalisation in the USA was the result of a court judgement. That judgement gave women the 'right to choose' but no way of vindicating their right since few women are able to access state-funded abortions. Francome insists that it is people who make history and that 'the presence of well-organised groups can produce important changes'. In Britain, those

well-organised groups were mainly comprised of Fabian socialists and middle-class reformers. In the USA, they were made up of radicalised students, civil rights activists and anti-Vietnam war campaigners. Their radicalism was based on the impact laws such as segregation and the draft had on people's lives and their approach to abortion was similar. Demands for reform of the law on abortion relied on 'hard cases', while they noted that most women seeking abortions would still be unable to get one legally unless there was a repeal of laws that criminalise abortion – a woman's right to choose.

Francome includes two fascinating chapters on 'when abortion was illegal'. These chart changing views on the growth of Victorian morality in the USA and UK, the growth of the medical profession and with it changing views on the acceptability and legal status of abortion. He examines which women sought illegal abortions, why and the conditions under which they obtained them.

There is, of course, one part of the UK in which abortion remains illegal – Northern Ireland – and Francome does not neglect to explore the impact of this anomaly on women in the region. He highlights the impact this has on poorer women 'who must endure an unwanted pregnancy, incur great debt, or have an illegal abortion'. There has been little advance since 1997 on abortion rights for women in the UK, including Northern Ireland. Child poverty rates are very high in Northern Ireland and there is a higher proportion of large families than in other parts of the UK. Democratic Unionist Party MLA Jim Wells argued against the extension of the Abortion Act in the course of an Assembly debate on the grounds that, were abortion to be available free on the NHS, a third more women in the region would end unwanted pregnancies. These unwanted pregnancies are mainly those which, at present, the poorest women are forced to continue. Apart from ending discrimination against Northern Irish women, there are clear economic and social reasons why the Abortion Act should be extended to Northern Ireland. The Westminster parliaments since 1997 are the most pro-choice in history. Francome reports the disappointment of veteran abortion rights campaigners at the failure of New Labour to carry out longstanding Labour Party policy and liberalise the UK's abortion laws. His account of the 2002 Abortion Law Reform Association AGM explains why there has been no progress; the AGM was told that 'the position seemed to be "We love Tony Blair, we like being in power and so go away and be nice women"'.

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Alan Maynard (ed.) (2005), *The Public–Private Mix for Health*, Oxford: The Nuffield Trust/Radcliffe Publishing, 318 pp., £35.00 pbk.
doi:10.1017/S0047279406280036

This edited collection brings together a number of chapters, each of which gives an overview of the public–private mix in health services in a selected rich country, principally from a health economics perspective. Additional chapters discuss the role of ideology in debates about the public–private mix and the difficulties of efficient purchasing in healthcare systems, the latter based upon a comparison of the purchaser–provider split in the British NHS with the development of managed care in the USA. Chapters by the editor, Alan Maynard, give an overview of problems and challenges common to all healthcare systems. The book follows a similar format to one published over 20 years ago (McLachlan and Maynard, 1982).

Maynard's chapters identify persistent problems in health systems in a no-nonsense way that often highlights the failure of politicians to develop effective health policies. In particular, he

makes a strong call for evidence-based policy, criticising governments for failing to make their goals clear and for focusing on structural reforms which ‘reorganise’ health systems rather than on incremental reform which is properly evaluated. Two major problems in contemporary health systems are identified: persistent variations in clinical practice and the failure to measure success with appropriate measures of health outcome. These arguments are clearly and robustly made, but the problem lies in their relation to the public–private mix. Whilst Maynard makes some attempt to chart the actual (rather than supposed) outcomes of public and private systems, he sometimes seems to suggest that the public–private mix is irrelevant to the key issues he has identified, a strange argument in a book whose central focus is that mix.

The country-focused chapters are written by authors with expert knowledge of the relevant health system and provide extensive overviews and insightful analyses. However, it is not clear what the criteria were for the selection of the countries (the UK, the US, Canada, France, Scandinavia, Germany, New Zealand and Australia), and countries experiencing interesting and relevant changes such as the Netherlands are not included (despite the Netherlands being included in the earlier book). Furthermore, whilst each chapter focuses on the aspects of the system that the author identifies as being most relevant, this means that different chapters focus on different aspects of the split in the respective countries, so there is less basis for direct comparison than would otherwise be the case. There is no systematic attempt to relate this volume to the previous one or to ascertain and evaluate the degree of overall change over the last 20 years. Indeed, the research priorities identified at the end of the first volume are simply repeated with the statement that they ‘continue to be of importance, but the gathering of evidence to answer them remains elusive’ (p. 304).

Uwe Reinhardt’s excellent chapter on the US system brings out the absurdities of that system, which suffers from an inefficient over-complexity where the cost of the system is substantially higher than any other comparable country but where health outcomes are no better and inequality of access is far greater. Yet, whilst Reinhardt draws attention to the dominance of supply-side interests in the US system, the analysis is focused on the mix of payers with virtually no attention to the mix of providers. This is surely an oversight given to the growing importance of corporate provision (not just in the US but internationally). Maynard also draws our attention to the importance of power in influencing the direction and outcomes of policy, but he is far more concerned with the power of the medical profession than with that of emerging commercial interests.

There are two broad issues that need to be investigated in relation to health markets. The first relates to empirical research on the structuring of markets, including the extent and forms of private involvement in healthcare systems and how this may be changing. The second relates to the implications of this for the meeting of health policy goals. Empirically this book provides an extremely useful overview of private involvement in selected rich countries, although no overall comparison is attempted. However, whilst the individual chapters provide often excellent analyses of the implications of the public–private mix in their respective countries, there is little attempt to draw overall conclusions about the importance of that mix.

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Glen Bramley, Moira Munro and Hal Pawson (2004), *Key Issues in Housing: Policies and Markets in 21st Century Britain*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 245 pp., £55.00 hbk.
doi:10.1017/S004729406290032

Housing, as shelter, as a repository of wealth, and as an instrument of social policy, has been a fundamental determinant of social outcomes at least since the industrial revolution and the rise of modern cities. Over the past quarter of a century, we have seen, particularly in Britain, but also in Europe, Australia and elsewhere, a number of volumes which describe in detail the state of the housing system and analysis of its winners and losers. The regular appearance of new texts reflects the changing landscape of housing policy and its old sparring partner, the housing market. In this book, however, Bramley, Munro and Pawson set out, not simply to update, but to document and explain the process of change itself over a period where state intervention has been in retreat, and during which the discourse of markets apparently has colonised housing policy.

Housing policy, in this book, rightly includes not just housing provision and management, but the tenure system, the finance system which underpins it, and also the instruments of land development and planning. The book dedicates large sections, or entire chapters, to each of these elements, in each case documenting an increasing reliance on the language and idea of markets to determine policy directions and housing outcomes. It will not come as any surprise to JSP readers to hear that the scale of changes over the two decades covered and their implications for our understanding of social dynamics and social stability are profound.

From an international perspective, the British housing system has provided an almost archetypal example of the march of neo-liberal ideas and practices through the post-War Fordist welfare state. Beginning in the Thatcher era with restrictions on public sector borrowing, through the rise of the housing association sector driven by large-scale transfers of dwelling stock, and the Right-to-Buy scheme, the authors analyse the political forces driving change and also set out in clear numerical terms their dramatic impacts on not just the social housing sector, but on the wider housing market, and on British society more generally. These impacts are shown to be both macro-economic and micro-social, affecting the composition of local communities and the intergenerational prosperity of families. I found the discussion of the residualisation of social housing, and the polarising effects of tenure changes, highly relevant to current policy debates in Australia concerning social mix, estate management and the role of the private sector.

The book continues this form of analysis through excellent chapters on: the growing influence of consumerism on planning and urban form; the introduction of 'market' principles in housing management; and a detailed review of the contemporary dilemmas around locality based (and housing focused) interventions to address social disadvantage. Again, the latter section brings together ideas and data pertinent to policy and practice debates well beyond the United Kingdom. Here, Bramley, Munro and Pawson demonstrate the complexity of building economic and policy partnerships which truly involve resident communities, and also question the applicability of 'one size fits all' approaches such as 'urban intensification' strategies in areas where consumers appear to continue to prefer lower density, car dependent, urban forms.

The final chapter focuses on the policy system, and contains some salutary contributions for students of social policy. Building on the assembled evidence of two decades of housing policy, the authors question the veracity of the rhetoric of 'evidence based policy'. While acknowledging that the amount of research commissioned to inform housing policy has increased, they maintain that where political expedience, media sensitivity or strongly held theoretical beliefs conflict with it, research evidence will almost always come off second best.

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Jonathan Bradshaw and Emese Mayhew (2005), *The Well-being of Children in the UK*, 2nd edn, London: Save the Children, 369 pp., £19.95 pbk.
doi:10.1017/S0047279406300037

We collect more data on children than ever before. The average local authority in the UK alone now collects data on well over 200 indicators relating to children, much more than any other European or North American counterpart. In addition, these data are dwarfed by census material, surveys and research. Despite this, we know hardly anything about child well being.

One part of what is known rests on the work by a series of research teams at the University of York led by Jonathan Bradshaw. This book collects together data on 12 domains of child well-being: demography, child poverty, health, lifestyle, mental health, children's time and space, child maltreatment, children in and leaving care, childcare, children and crime, education and housing. The domains reflect the York expertise. The book is intended as a discursive, critical review rather than a comprehensive compendium of the available data.

The conclusion is optimistic. This review of the social and demographic data seems to suggest that the well-being of children in the UK is improving, although there remain a number of domains where trends are worrying. The book is more upbeat than it might have been about the contribution of government policy since 1997 to child well-being, although it was chastening to be reminded of the substantial financial improvements for families with children, the significant increases in expenditure to public sector services and the raft of specific policies put in place for children.

Strength often indicates a weakness and in this book it is the wealth of social policy expertise pushing out potential counter-indicators from child development research (e.g. Collishaw *et al.*, 2004). By putting the social policy analysis alongside the child development contribution a coherent picture begins to emerge. Children live in families that are better off than in the past. Their physical health has improved over the last century, although there are indications in this book that it is beginning to deteriorate (I was reminded reviewing this evidence that the current generation of US children will be shorter than their parents, a possible indication of deteriorating physical health). Children's educational attainment has been going up and there is a lot of debate about whether each generation is successively more intelligent than the last. But behaviour is probably deteriorating, as is broader mental health. In this case, the downward trend operates across the population, occurring both at the middle of the distribution – meaning my children are behaving worse than I behaved at the same age – and also at the end – meaning there is more depression, suicide and criminal behaviour.

Put the leading experts from all relevant disciplines in the same room and there would not be much disagreement about the last paragraph. Asking *why* these trends are occurring would no doubt result in far less coherence. Asking why many policy makers appear to be largely uninterested in these trends should produce a collective gasp of incomprehension. As strong as the York team are, bridging the gap between child development and social policy domains is probably critical to answering these questions. To take one example, we know relatively little about the relationship between changing social conditions and children's well-being. If, for example, there is more mental illness (poor behaviour included) among children and adolescents today, then to what extent have combined environmental factors (changing family conditions, greater educational stress or new interpersonal challenges) contributed to this change? New collaborations will be needed to answer this type of question.

Much can be answered from existing data, as this book amply demonstrates. But new data will be needed as well. The requirement is not for more data but for less, of better quality. One hopes that groups like those in York will get the opportunity to fashion the data collected by

central and local government, as well as to analyse it. The chances of progress do not seem great, however. Save the Children, a national charity, financed this book and the research that underpinned it. The major research investment in this area is coming from another charity, the Nuffield Foundation. Government for its part is left more in the production room of facts and figures, largely disconnected, and, by my reckoning at least, some way from shaping policies to reverse some of the negative trends.

All of these concerns stem from a reading of *The Well-being of Children in the UK*. Anyone with some interest in child development or social policies intended to improve child outcomes will want to have a copy of this book. Hopefully interest in the issues it addresses will increase and as a society we will take a more systematic approach to creating the conditions that will give children a better chance.

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Valerie Polakow, Sandra S. Butler, Luisa Stormer Deprez and Peggy Kahn (eds) (2004), *Shut Out: Low Income Mothers and Higher Education in Post-Welfare America*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 252 pp., £17.75 pbk.
doi:10.1017/S0047279406310033

Shut Out describes the difficulties low-income 'single parents' (the term used in the book to refer to never-partnered, separated, divorced and widowed parents – not the ideal terminology in all countries, but adopted here to keep with the authors usage) in the USA face in seeking to participate in post-secondary education under the new 'Work First' rules of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the main welfare benefit to single parent households in the USA. The book describes TANF as a strong Work First model which places primary emphasis on reducing welfare caseloads and pushing TANF welfare recipients into jobs as quickly as possible, in some states from as early as when the child is 12 weeks old. Welfare officers are incentivised to meet high, and escalating, work participation rates. TANF work requirements are in general poorly supported by childcare provision and operate within a highly flexible labour market in which neither TANF benefits nor the entry-level jobs favoured by welfare officers with job-placement targets move TANF recipients out of poverty. In this context, post-secondary education is argued to be increasingly important in avoiding poverty and enabling career progression, though TANF has made it increasingly difficult for recipients to participate in such education. Federal legislation excludes post-secondary education from its definition of 'work activities'. In general, states may allow 20 per cent of the caseload a 12-month exemption from the work requirement to pursue vocational courses, although even this has been further reduced in recent reforms.

Shut Out aims to tell the stories of single parents on TANF battling to continue their education. The opening chapter briefly outlines the development and nature of TANF and looks at the evidential bases both for and against a Work First model for TANF. It suggests that the political arguments in favour of the Work First model draw only on a portion of the available evidence. After providing critiques of this evidence, the chapter discusses alternative evidence setting out the benefits to supporting education within TANF. The remaining chapters set out

case studies based on qualitative data from interviews with low-income single parents receiving TANF. Chapters by Mathur *et al.* and Deprez *et al.* discuss the ways in which California and Maine have been more progressive in incorporating support for post-secondary education within the federal TANF requirements. Contributions by Kahn *et al.* and Ratner set out the alternative position of two particularly work-orientated cases of Michigan and New York City, and these are arguably the two most critical chapters. Kahn and Polakow suggest that welfare officers in Michigan deliberately misinform and partially inform TANF recipients about the extent of their work obligations, while Ratner suggest continued patriarchal and racial oppression within TANF. Chapters by Miewald and Watts *et al.* focus on the often-neglected role of women's activist groups in empowering women to resist TANF policies and in challenging and reshaping state policy. Heller *et al.* look at how changes in financial aid tend to disadvantage single parents on TANF, whilst Sharp focuses on how institutional factors of education providers can impact on the ability of TANF recipients to continue their education.

The overall tone of the contributions is that current TANF policies serve to create and to legitimise a class of permanently poor working single parents. TANF recipients trying to continue their studies alongside satisfying paid work requirements are described as facing an unhelpful and obtrusive welfare bureaucracy, strained family relationships, exhaustion, stress and guilt. On occasions the authors also suggest that marriage has become a central official anti-poverty policy for single parents (read mothers) in the USA. *Shut Out* benefits from evocative personal stories of single parents seeking to overcome the multiple obstacles to education placed in front of them by active resistance from TANF policies and welfare officers. In this way the book succeeds in its primary aim of providing a voice to these stories, and contributions are generally of good quality. Some comparative quantitative information on TANF exit and re-entry rates in different state policy contexts might have been an interesting addition. Particularly for a non-American audience it would have been useful to have a more explicit section detailing the exact nature of federal TANF legislation policies and their evolution over time. This may have helped to avoid repetition of the federal position at various points in the book. Whilst there is also an emphasis on childcare availability, a relatively unexplored area in the book seems to be the consequences for parent and child of the difficult decision between childcare price and quality in a marketised and relatively unregulated childcare market.

Shut Out would be particularly relevant for those with an interest in 'single' parenthood, issues of gender or race, or the place of incentives within welfare bureaucracies. *Shut Out* is also relevant to reforms beyond the US context. Some chapters are particularly successful in highlighting interactions between welfare policies and officers with the local labour market, childcare, college and travel supports. At a time when shifts to an adult worker model and work-welfare reform for single parents are towards the top of many countries' social policy agenda, *Shut Out* does a good job of describing the impact of strict Work First legislation combined with weak financial, childcare and labour market supports for enabling care.

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Gordon Phillips (2004), *The Blind in British Society: Charity, State and Community, c. 1780–1930*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 438 pp., £57.50 hbk.
doi:10.1017/S004727940632003X

The shifting policy landscapes of physical and mental impairment in Britain have prompted several historical monographs (See, for example, Cooter, 1993; Scull, 1993; Thomson, 1998).

Sensory impairment, on the other hand, has been less well served. Therefore, Gordon Phillips' meticulous study of *The Blind in British Society* is a welcome addition to the literature. Based on the careful scrutiny of rich primary sources, the book takes its sub-title seriously to construct a subtle exploration of the relationship between charity, the state and the community from the early days of the Industrial Revolution until the onset of the Great Depression in 1930.

The argument is rehearsed in eight substantial chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the advent and consolidation of institutions between 1780 and 1860, and their mission to educate and train blind people for work. Chapter 3 charts the organisation of 'outdoor' workshops, domestic employment and home teaching as a backlash against institutional confinement during the third quarter of the nineteenth century, whilst Chapter 4 examines financial relief under the Poor Law and the evolution of charitable pensions up to the outbreak of the First World War. Chapter 5 then addresses the advancing role of the state in blind education, explaining the exclusion of disabled children from late Victorian legislation for public schooling, the campaign for special provision that culminated in the Elementary Education (Blind and Deaf Children) Act of 1893 and the impact of continuing to rely on the voluntary sector to supply the majority of school places. The right to work is the focus of Chapter 6, which – after stressing the tension between profitability and the welfare imperative for sheltered workshops – traces the growth of the National League of the Blind and its attempts to establish a comprehensive system of state support, acting increasingly in concert with the charitable bodies that were initially hostile to its endeavours.

Dr Phillips next takes a step backwards to ask if, overall, 'the social condition of the blind' altered over the course of the nineteenth century and whether any changes were 'the outcome of charitable enterprise' (p. 321). Perhaps too speculative on occasions, Chapter 7 assesses the size and the characteristics of the blind population, compares its economic profile with that for 1880 to 1914, and uses individual examples to piece together how blind people encountered work. The final substantive chapter looks at the nationalisation of charity in the first two decades of the twentieth century as it became clear that the 'immense and complex burden of poverty' (p. 367) was irremovable without major state intervention. Consequently, the local orientation of blind charities before 1900 gave way to a national orientation – underpinned by more professional management – which also acknowledged the necessity of collaboration with local and central government. It was this mentality that the Blind Persons Act of 1920 captured.

Gordon Phillips rounds off his book with an Epilogue, viewing the contemporary 'debate on blind welfare from an historical perspective' (p. 2). Charities, he argues, will never regain their previous 'importance as purveyors of welfare', but with greater independence 'they might well aspire to create and disseminate a better understanding of what a modern version of blind welfare entails' (p. 419). This recognition of an ongoing contribution is consistent with the book's positive appraisal of philanthropy. Sceptical of grand narratives – whether in the shape of Enlightenment pedagogy, Whiggish progressivism or Foucaultian discipline – Dr Phillips highlights a pragmatic preoccupation with the idleness of potential labour in the fashioning of British as opposed to French policies. His emphasis is a valuable corrective to the abstract theorising that mars much disability history. In prioritising the practical goal of employment, however, he tends to exaggerate the consensual nature of charitable services and the capacity of blind recipients to negotiate their delivery. Furthermore, with ideas downplayed, the interpretative range is narrowed. Did eugenic thinking, for instance, influence the Edwardian expansion of disabled workhouse inmates? And was the redefinition of blindness to include lower levels of visual impairment merely 'the unexpected outcome of political miscalculation and administrative confusion' (p. 396), or a reconfiguration of the 'normal' and 'abnormal' that was to become central to what David Armstrong (1983) has termed 'surveillance medicine'?

The virtue of an approach that eschews big theory is that it protects the particular from simplistic generalisation. Thus, despite calling his book *The Blind in British Society*, Dr Phillips does not reduce his client group to a monolithic whole. On the contrary, through painstaking scholarship he preserves the identities of blind charities as well as blind people in a goldmine of detail. The insights contained within this diverse material have much to offer not only history but also disability studies. However, their accessibility for this wider readership would have been greatly enhanced by succinct summaries at the end of each chapter, and a concluding overview of the principal themes.

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