

## Reviews

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Camila Arza and Martin Kohli (eds), *Pension Reform in Europe: Politics, Policies and Outcomes*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, 2008, 240 pp., hbk £65.00, ISBN 13: 978 0415 40722 9.

The stated purpose of this book is to address some of the ‘fundamental questions’ that have arisen as a result of recent pension reforms in Europe: how does institutional change occur and what are its outcomes? It is part of a clear shift in the consideration of these reforms from single-country descriptions towards a more thoroughgoing comparative analysis of change and its effects. Theoretically, the volume targets path dependency theory and regime theory, which its editors argue lie behind a mistaken consensus that emphasises the obstacles to reform. This, they contend, has decreased our capacity to make sense of the empirical reality: the fact that pension reform in some European countries seems more radical than either of these theories would lead one to expect. The editors’ overall aim is thus to show that ‘many of the received ideas’ about pension reform ‘need to be replaced with a richer and better grounded account of how institutions cluster, change and influence outcomes’ (p. 18). So far, so promising; the book’s clear comparative analytical focus is extremely welcome. All the contributors have heeded the editors’ instructions and kept description to the minimum necessary for meaningful analysis. This makes for very interesting and stimulating reading, with each of the contributions containing much that is of value to pension policy analysts. The book’s explicit intellectual agenda also means that there is coherence to the contributions, particularly in the first part on the politics of pension reform.

But to what extent does the book succeed in terms of its overall aims? Inevitably, the answer is partially. Theoretically, while the papers in Part 1 are very good at conceptualising change, this generally takes place at the actor level with the implications for path dependency and regime theory left unspecified or ambiguous. The concentration on the actor level is certainly welcome and some very interesting empirically-based observations are made about processes of bargaining and exchange. The chapters by David Natali and Martin Rhodes and by Katarina Müller are particularly interesting in this respect. What is generally missing in this section, however, is systematic engagement with the most important outstanding issues raised by theory: what actually constitutes a path-breaking reform and can such change take place incrementally (Streeck and Thelen 2005)? The exception in this regard is Einar Overbye’s paper, which clearly focuses on path dependency theory without ever really clearing up the conceptual ‘fuzziness’ of which it complains. For example, the cited grounds for arguing that pension reforms in Sweden and Italy are ‘path-breaking’, but that similar reforms are unlikely in other EU countries (pp. 71, 77), might surprise analysts of the German pension system; while the suggestion that pension change

in Latin America and Eastern Europe proves path dependency wrong is only true if the notion of ‘critical junctures’ is ignored.

Part 2 of the book is generally less coherent than the first, but its emphasis on ‘outcomes’ is very welcome, albeit that none of the chapters actually give any new indications of the outcomes of the post-reform systems. To do this, a policy simulation approach would be required (as by Meyer, Bridgen and Riedmuller 2007), but there is no discussion of this methodology. Instead, the contributions address the question of outcomes on the basis of detailed comparative descriptions of pension rules or by proxy. The former approach is taken by Camila Arza who outlines ‘new distributional principles of pension policy’, ones that individualise benefits and reduce redistribution, and Patricia Frericks and Robert Maier, who skilfully and carefully detail the persistently gendered nature of pension entitlements notwithstanding improvements in this regard in some countries in recent years. The proxy-based approach is taken by Martin Rein and Karen Anderson, who show that the relationship between current pension outcomes and pension system design are far from straightforward, and by Robin Blackburn, who as a means for assessing the consequences of the Bismarckian systems shift to greater private provision, provides a compelling and expertly researched review of the problems with the Anglo-Saxon system. Overall, then, while this volume does not quite live up to its editors’ claims, it is a very welcome addition to the literature and provides students and researchers of pension system change in Europe and beyond with much to debate and discuss.

## References

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Helen Small, *The Long Life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007,  
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*The Long Life* is a major study of old age in western philosophy and literature. It presents eight interconnected essays that aim to sharpen thinking about old age by discussing how longevity affects major questions of moral philosophy. Each chapter probes a particular set of questions, first through the texts of a philosopher, and then through those of a literary figure. Helen Small is not so much interested in the philosophy of old age as in probing the significance of old age for philosophy. Hence she does not address the question most commonly addressed by philosophers of ageing: how should one respond to the changing conditions of life experienced in old age? Instead she asks: What is the relation between a long