practitioners who want to navigate the debate on "Social Europe", but also for (young) academics exploring the literature on this topic: who will find all the main contributions to the debate irrespective of authors' ideological or theoretical approach to the question. The book will also be useful as a textbook for courses on "Social Europe", as the structure along nine questions makes for an engaging approach, and each chapter ends with a useful list of further readings and questions for debates or essays.

Amandine Crespy has decided not to organize her manuscript chronologically. That has been the right decision, as the current structure gives the book much more analytical power. Still, throughout the book it becomes clear that the current state of the European social question is the result of a number of critical junctures, moments or periods during which the relationship between European integration and social protection could have taken a different course. Besides the 'original sin' during the negotiations of the Rome Treaties in the 1950s to allocate market-making and market-correcting policies to different levels of government, these include the neoliberal revolution of the 1970-1980s, the failure to qualitatively strengthen Social Europe during the heydays of European social democracy in the 1990s before the enlargement of the EU to central and eastern Europe, and the response to the global financial and euro crisis. In the final chapter, Crespy reflects upon the current juncture. How will Brexit, covid-19 and the climate transition – and today one may add the war in Ukraine – affect the European social question? While in response to these challenges the EU has certainly taken unprecedented decisions at an unprecedented pace, Crespy argues that the EU is still not fit for purpose to tackle the social challenges of the 21st century. This, she argues, requires that new (social) policy innovations are not just fabricated through technocratic and/or executive politics. Instead, responding to the European social question in an effective, legitimate and sustainable way can only be done by undertaking substantial democratizing steps. But there is little evidence that today, like in the 19th century, elites are convinced that this is necessary to preserve the system, or that new powerful progressive forces are forming that can extort these changes.

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Jonathan Wistow (2022), *Social Policy, Political Economy and the Social Contract*, Bristol: Policy Press, £24.99, pp. 190, pbk.
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The key purpose of this important book is "to identify and challenge the social contract in England" (p. 13). Much has been written about social policy and more about political economy. Wistow attempts to bring these together and explore the nature of the social contract that exists. He sees the way forward as resetting the equilibrium and making the social contract work 'for the many and not the few'.

Wistow raises big and complex issues and shows deep thought and considerable candour about difficult questions, while being straightforward about his own political views. This is not a book for students new to social policy and sometimes the direction of his argument is less than clear and analysis and prescription get muddled. Yet the issues are so important that perseverance is worthwhile. He draws on a wide range of literature: sociology, political science, social policy, economics and history. This might be termed an inter-disciplinary approach, but

he sees it more as a reproach to disciplinary divisions. He is surely right that the compartmentalisation of the social sciences is a sign of their limitations, rather than success. Compartments may be comfortable for academic careers, courses and publishers. But communicating only with those of a like mind is hardly a recipe for comprehending the complexities of individuals, communities, social policy or the wider economy. Thus, Wistow is to be applauded for looking at the impact of social policy within the reality of the political economy. He does this examining the pressures posed by globalisation and devolution, spatial inequalities, inequalities of health and life expectancy, ideas of social mobility and inequalities between generations.

His main critique of social policy is that it has served the needs of the economy and the political system. It has been placatory, mopping up the worst excesses and consequences of a liberal economy, preventing more radical change: "when viewed in relation to more far-ranging debates about theories of distributional justice, the scope of social policy . . . too often 'tinkers round the edges." (p. 17). For example, the health service responds to disease but gives little attention to causes of health inequality such as poverty and inequality, housing, working conditions and environmental pollution.

Wistow argues that a social contract exists and has become tied to the neoliberal political economy. Indeed: "The social contract is not in peril. It is clever and sneaky and hard to pin down . . . from a broadly left-wing perspective it is certainly rotten" (p. 13). Wistow concludes that: "The key problem facing those of us on the left ideologically and politically is that not enough people have sufficiently high expectations about the role of society and the state in producing more equal outcomes" (p. 153).

Wistow certainly seems right that a social contract exists in most advanced economies (whether the USA is an exception is debatable). Despite challenges such as neo-liberalism, a commitment to extensive social provision remains widespread; indeed, in much of the world governmental social provision is expanding steadily. In the UK, over the twenty years prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, public expenditure on health, education, housing and social protection grew from 21 to 24 percent of gross domestic product (HM Treasury, 2022). In response to the pandemic health expenditure rose rapidly and temporary measures to protect jobs vastly increased social spending. Neo-liberals seeking to roll back the state may not have given up, but they have certainly failed thus far. In terms of attitudes towards social spending, there has been a marked stability; there had been little change before the pandemic over the previous 20 years. In Britain, in 2020, 6 percent thought taxes should be reduced and less should be spent on health, education and social benefits; 43 percent thought levels should be unchanged and 50 percent thought taxes and spending should be increased (NatCen, 2021). This is not a sign of a social contract on the verge of collapse.

So, in what way is this social contract sneaky or rotten? It certainly may not be what some, especially those on the Left, might like to see. But it represents a compromise between an untramelled economy and a social economy that affords some degree of protection and opportunity to citizens (but not those further afield) and it has survived for nearly a century. There are certainly serious omissions and failures, as Wistow sets out; many standards have fallen and are far below what they could be. But a government that is concerned with maintaining social cohesion and legitimising the state cannot turn its back on social policies – as the current scramble of the British and other governments to do something – however inadequate – about energy price rises illustrates. Even in the USA it is notable that Obamacare survived the condemnation of Trump. One may agree with Wistow that "it might be time to reconsider and reset the equilibrium [of the social contract]" (p. 153), but that is easier to say than to do. It requires, first, a widespread endorsement of the goal of greater equality and, second, a confidence that it could be effectively achieved at an acceptable cost. Neither yet seem evident.

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Elevating the goal of equality needs evidence but also eloquence and inspiration. Beveridge's liberal social contract of slaying the five giants – want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness – that stood on the road to reconstruction is a little more stirring than Wistow's proposal to "reduce inequalities to 0.24 on the Gini coefficient for household income within ten years".

Confidence that greater equality is feasible needs clear evidence on when and how reductions in inequalities have been achieved, and the gains therefrom. Yet this has rarely emerged from the small army of disparate and disputatious social scientists. So the dull inertia of those dubbed by Galbraith "the contented majority" prevails, and avoidable and costly inequalities persist or worsen.

Yet, while one may question Wistow's prescriptions – which he never claims to be the last word – his intention to focus on the "causes of causes" of inequality is surely right. He offers a wake-up call and a challenge to social policy analysts and practitioners.

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