

March 2000

Recasting Egalitarianism: New Rules for Communities, States and Markets. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

(2000) "Recasting Egalitarianism: New Rules for Communities, States and Markets. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 27: Iss. 1, Article 15.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.2638>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol27/iss1/15>

This Book Note is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



Book Notes

Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Recasting Egalitarianism: New Rules for Communities, States and Markets*. New York: Verso, 1999. \$13.00 papercover.

The ideal of equality is central to the agenda of those on the left of the political spectrum. Liberals, social democrats and Marxists have all argued that social well-being and human contentment can only be achieved if inequalities in society are significantly reduced. In the past, various policy instruments have been adopted to promote greater equality. Employment generation, job security, wage bargaining, progressive taxation and the provision of publicly funded social services have all helped to reduce disparities in income and wealth. However, in recent times, the quest for greater equality has been stalled by the claim that these and other egalitarian measures stifle economic growth. Their arguments have been persuasive. Today, political leaders and electorates believe that the need for economic development is greater than the drive for equality. As a result of changes to the tax system, the weakening of labor unions and retrenchments in the social services, the degree of inequality in American society has increased substantially during the last two decades.

In this important book, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis propose a new strategy for promoting equality. This strategy is based on the recognition that income redistribution policies are unlikely to secure political support. Instead, they argue that a strategy based on asset redistribution has a good chance of success. Four components of an asset redistribution strategy are outlined. They include the creation of worker-owned firms, the promotion of home ownership, the provision of educational vouchers and the adoption of policies that give children access to parental property.

In addition to outlining their proposals, Bowles and Gintis invited 16 social scientists and philosophers to comment on their ideas. Unfortunately for egalitarians, these commentaries suggest that however ingenious Bowles and Gintis's proposals may be, they suffer from numerous difficulties and are unlikely to result

in a significant reversal in current thinking about economic development and equality. Nevertheless, Bowles and Gintis may have initiated a debate that could have far reaching repercussions. Their clear explication of how a grossly unequal society harms the well-being of ordinary people may be persuasive in fostering an egalitarian agenda that is electorally palatable.

Myra Marx Ferree, Judith Lorber and Beth B. Hess (Eds.), *Revisioning Gender*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999. \$72.00 hardcover, \$34.95 papercover.

Feminist scholarship in sociology has expanded rapidly over the last twenty or so years. This expansion has moved steadily along a trajectory of shifting gender analysis from the margins of sociological interest to its very center. Today feminist scholars insist that gender be viewed as a central element in all sociological research. Since gender is a central element of social life, the gender lens must be applied to all sociological questions.

As the editors of this book point out, sociology has not yet reached the stage where gender is central to its concerns. While gender inquiry is today given much more prominence than before, it is still viewed as a specialized field within the discipline. To attain centrality, they urge feminists scholars to continue to stress the importance of gender in all sociological and indeed, social science research. Irrespective of whether social science investigation is concerned with issues closely associated with gender, such as the family or employment, or with less obviously relevant issues such as economic development, social policy or law, gender must be fully integrated into the research agenda.

To promote this goal, this book offers a broad overview of the current state of feminist scholarship. Based on a summer conference funded by the American Sociological Association, it provides an commendably comprehensive account of the field. Its sixteen chapters cover a wide range of topics. These are grouped into five major categories dealing with the conceptualization of gender; gender and social policy; science and gender; gender and sexuality; bodies, gender and sport; gender and culture and so on. The list is impressive.

Equally impressive is the way most of the authors summarize their topics in a readable and engaging way, and successfully