



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 10  
Issue 3 *September*

Article 15

---

September 1983

## Book Reviews

Asoke Basu  
*Stanford University*

Kristine Nelson  
*University of Iowa*

Dan La Botz

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



Part of the Social Work Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Basu, Asoke; Nelson, Kristine; and La Botz, Dan (1983) "Book Reviews," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 3 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol10/iss3/15>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

## LETTER FROM AN AUTHOR

Mr. Terrell has raised a number of criticisms in his review of our book, Poverty in America (with Ralph Segalman, not Seligman, as he erroneously writes six times) that require comment. He believes the book is "mean-spirited, sloppy, and pedantic...[and] is carelessly constructed, repetitive, and dated." Moreover, "the authors ignore facts and analyses that do not conform to their thesis" and "complexity and multiple explanations are not the authors' strong points." I seriously disagree with these characterizations and maintain that a more careful reading of the book does not support these accusations. For brevity's sake, I will not undertake a point-by-point rebuttal, but confront the testier elements of his argument.

First, Mr. Terrell simply misses the point of our argument when he writes we "argue by accretion." The first ten pages of the book state, criticize, and synthesize alternative and competing perspectives of poverty. On page 7, for example, we note the inadequacies of the culture of poverty and situational perspectives.

Second, in the first chapter we never stated that our typology of marginal, transitional, and residual poor would capture the "human diversity" of a poverty community as an ethnographic study would. Our typology is an abstraction constructed from a multitude of ethnographic studies of the poor. Since our study does not purport to be ethnographic, Mr. Terrell has erected a very weak strawman to knock down.

Third, Mr. Terrell overlooks the role the typology plays in our argument. We argue that the poor are not a homogeneous mass, that there are many causes of poverty (cultural and structural), that helping the poor move into the mainstream of American society requires that poverty programs be tailored to meet the specific needs of the poverty population the programs are intended to help, and that such programs are related to the country's overall economic needs.

Fourth, we do not rely "principally on the culture-of-poverty literature of the 1960s." We reserve the culture-of-poverty explanation (with structural modifications) for the residual poor who are at risk of becoming America's transgenerational poor; but we are not monists. In Chapter One, we clearly state (p. 14): "The American black, the American Indian, and other minority groups, however, have often been held back by conditions and forces that have prevented meaningful access to many of the facilities readily offered the immigrants. These include effective education, consistent and fair wages, opportunities for upward economic mobility, and housing relatively free from restrictions."

Fifth, we do not argue against public intervention. In the postscript (p. 369), we argue "a multistep pattern of assistance and services needs to be formulated for welfare, housing, education, and employment. Services and constraints should be commensurate with the readiness of that segment of the population to utilize both to their own and society's advantage." Given our four complex and interrelated problems, it is difficult to see how Mr. Terrell concludes that "complexity and multiple explanations are not the authors' strong points." Parenthetically, the cost-effectiveness of continuing the Great Society programs as they are presently constituted is open to criticism; however, space precludes me from challenging Mr. Terrell on this point.

Sixth, the use of the term "Negro" occurs in Chapter Two, which compares the assimilation experiences of early immigrants, refugee immigrants, and the "American Negro slave." Elsewhere in that historical chapter the term "Negro" and "black" are often used interchangeably, but "black" is the modal usage. The main objection we have to Mr. Terrell's comment is that we do not believe the use of the term "Negro" to be racist, nor is it an attempt to turn back the historical clock.

Finally, we believe Poverty in America provides the student of welfare with an historical overview of poverty in America, relevant contemporary data, and an analysis of all the major proposals for welfare reform. Since welfare reform has not been enacted under Presidents Carter and Reagan, the book is hardly "dated." Lastly, Mr. Terrell failed to cite one major study published prior to 1979 which we ignored. Mr. Terrell should either substantiate his claim with evidence or withdraw this reckless charge.

This comment does not answer all the criticisms raised by Mr. Terrell. I have, however, refuted his more explicitly formulated criticisms and submit that a more careful and thoughtful reading of Poverty in America provides no evidence to support his characterization of our work. Let the reader judge.

Asoke Basu  
Visiting Scholar  
Hoover Institution  
Stanford

THE LIMITS OF REFORM: WOMEN, CAPITAL AND WELFARE, by JENNIFER G. SCHIRMER.  
Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1982. 200 pp. \$14.50 paper.

KRISTINE NELSON

The University of Iowa

The Limits of Reform is an important book, especially for those who harbor illusions about the liberal state's ability and willingness to bestow full equality on women. In her book, Jennifer Schirmer exposes the sexist truth behind the liberal rhetoric of the Danish welfare state. She argues that the "structure of the labor market, the bureaucratic control of the corporate state, and the traditional view of gender" (p. 43) combine to maintain women's inequality. Specifically, the state depoliticizes and limits social conflict through social reform while protecting the interests of capital and intruding on everyday life and the family in a process Schirmer calls "incorporatism" (pp. 33-34).

Schirmer starts with a useful historical overview of the Danish welfare state and economy. The early development of capitalism, the influx of women into the labor force in the 1960s and 1970s, and the retrenchment in social spending in the 1970s and 1980s closely parallel developments in the United States. Schirmer's devastating critique of the Social Democratic party's response to these developments demonstrates that, however advanced the Danish efforts to mitigate the inequality of capitalism through social welfare and educational reforms, they rest on the false assumption that equal opportunity can create real equality. "The economic inequities of the capitalist system and the very social reforms that were enacted to improve the position of women impede them both as a gender and as members of class groups from attaining real equality" (p. 168). Specifically these social reforms attract women into a low paying, unstable secondary labor market while maintaining their position as flexible, marginal workers by reinforcing their traditional responsibilities for home and family. Women's participation in the labor market, Schirmer asserts, should not be seen as a "willingness" to combine work and family, but as a response to economic and political forces which draw them into low paying service jobs such as day care, home help for the elderly, and nurses aides (p. 62).

Although, formally, equal pay for equal work has been the law in Denmark since 1976, Schirmer shows that through job reclassification, impediments to training and, most importantly, manipulation of women's family roles and loyalties, women remain at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy. She also exposes the inherent dishonesty of meritocracy when applied to persons unable to attain the basic conditions for competitiveness. Even liberal, well-educated professional women are shown to be handicapped by their heavy burden of family responsibilities and by employers' preference for hiring and promoting male workers.

The much-admired services of the welfare state such as government-supported day care and extended paid maternity leave are also shown in practice to limit women's choices by their inflexibility and inadequacy and by employers' flagrant discrimination against women who are pregnant, mothers, or even of child-bearing

age. Catch-22 situations in which unemployed women cannot keep their children in day care, yet cannot take a new job without day care (p. 135) show the ineptness of the system. "Man in the house" rules which require the sexual isolation of women receiving public assistance (p. 145) show its patriarchal bias.

This book was written to alert women to the danger of seeing the Danish welfare state as "a model for improving women's position" (p. 171) and to the error in relying on any state which is itself enmeshed in patriarchal and capitalist imperatives. To the extent that the evidence Schirmer presents is persuasive, the book succeeds in this mission. The many statistics and quotations, however, sometimes are tedious and make no clear point. A judicious editing of the manuscript would have produced a book which was easier to read, free of annoying stylistic inconsistencies, and which better integrated theory with fact and fact with conclusion.

**MARKISM AND DOMINATION: A NEO-HEGELIAN, FEMINIST, PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY OF SEXUAL, POLITICAL, AND TECHNOLOGICAL LIBERATION, by ISAAC D. BALBUS.** Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982. 471 pp. \$40.00 cloth. \$9.95 paper.

DAN LA BOTZ

Chicago

Isaac Balbus examines the "crisis in Western Marxism" and attempts to point the way out of it both theoretically and practically in his new book Marxism and Domination. Criticizing both Marxist and neo-Marxist theories of the state, patriarchy, and technology, he finds them flawed and inadequate, and argues instead for a liberation theory "beyond Marxism" based on participatory democracy, ecology, and feminism, especially on Dorothy Dinnerstein's analysis of "mother-monopolized child rearing" as the root cause of the problems of Western civilization.

Balbus rejects both the Marxist model, with its emphasis on production, the political power of the state, and the role of the proletariat as the emancipator of humanity, and the eclectic neo-Marxist models which grafted contemporary feminist and ecological theories on to Marxism, as "instrumental modes of symbolization" which, like capitalism, perpetuate a "death-denying, mother defying unconscious psychic structure" (p. 334) which embodies a "bio-social and cultural imperialism" (p. 278). Balbus argues for an analysis based on his extensions of the psychological theories of Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow, Hegel's philosophy of the Absolute Idea, Anthony Wilden's dialectic of general systems theory, and the writings of Norman O. Brown on death, all permeated with anarchist theory.

In a final chapter that draws the political conclusions of this analysis, he argues that even a revolutionary socialist labor movement is not necessarily liberating and may well be reactionary, and calls for a feminist-ecological-participatory-democratic movement. Unfortunately, while Balbus would like to resolve the crisis of Western Marxism, his book strikes one as only another expression of it, a former Marxist scholar reverting to an anti-humanist,

reactionary Romanticism with quasi-religious overtones. His political program raises the dangerous possibility of dividing the labor movement from the feminist movement, and of separating both from those who fight for democratic socialism--in fact, he becomes the advocate of a petty-bourgeois politics of 19th century anarchism.

Balbus's critique of Marxist philosophy, theories of patriarchy, and technology is well informed and interesting and must be taken seriously--even though this reviewer finds explanatory and even compelling theories which Balbus finds inadequate and ultimately misleading. His critique of the Marxist theory of the state is, on the contrary, incomplete and ahistorical, based almost solely on one famous line from the Communist Manifesto. One wonders why he ignores the historical writings of Marx and Engels, particularly those on Bonaparte and Bismarck (or why he didn't make use of Hal Draper's already classic work Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution: Part I State and Bureaucracy). It is unfortunate, too, that he chose to mix Marx with (nominally) Marxist fashionable writers like Louis Althusser or Nicos Poulantzas, while ignoring the more important writings on the state of Marxists such as Lenin, Trotsky, or Gramsci.

Without going into his critiques of the neo-Marxists, suffice it to say that he finds them either eclectic or subject to the same critical charges he makes against Marx. Against both Marxist and neo-Marxist views of the primacy of production and the centrality of the state he argues, in short, that the premises are either too narrow or are tautological. Balbus finds inherently reactionary characteristics in modern industrial technology as such, which Marxism cannot explain. And he uses familiar contemporary feminist arguments to criticize Marx's inadequate explanation of patriarchy.

The heart of Balbus's critique is his view that Marxism and neo-Marxism are, like capitalism which they criticize, "instrumental modes of symbolization." He argues that a theory and practice based on industry, politics, and working class struggle come to use nature, to use women, and to use political power as means to an end. Ultimately, people are using people and nature as means not ends, and thus would undo the very ends that even the best of them seek to achieve.

Such critiques have been made in the past, usually by Kantian Marxists like the Austrian Max Adler. Balbus's critique, however, derives from Hegel's criticism of the Enlightenment in the Phenomenology of Mind. Balbus will derive a "post-instrumental mode of symbolization" from Hegel's Absolute Idea (i.e., God), and from a recognition that there are intentions and intelligences other than human ones. Notwithstanding his denials, the quasi-religious implications are unavoidable. So while Hegel can conceive the "purposefulness or 'freedom' of [a] stone," likewise Balbus can refer to "the homeostatic capacities of natural ecosystems which can be described as a form of 'intelligence'...." (pp. 285 and 365).

He argues that "Totalitarian or technocratic politics is the corollary of a totalitarian stance toward nature..." (p. 283), which derives from child-rearing by women: "The domination of nature is the domination of the mother: the symbolization of nature as an absolute, dangerous other which must be tamed lest it destroy us is rooted in the unconscious, childhood symbolization of the mother as an other who must be punished for having betrayed our love" (p. 336). Consequently the answer: "Shared parenting thus establishes the

necessary psychological bases for...the post-Instrumental mode of symbolization" (p. 339).

The answer is feminism, partly because, "Contemporary women...have an unconscious emotional structure that is, in certain respects, far closer to that of both primitive women and men than is the structure of contemporary men" (p. 341). In other places Balbus calls this structure emotional and relational. All of this is part of a valorization of the primitive and irrational which goes hand in hand with the quasi-religious view of nature and which must be repugnant to any humanistic outlook, and certainly to a Marxist socialist view.

His feminism is riddled with problems. How reconcile the fight for contraception and abortion with nature? How reconcile lesbian rights to raise children with a view that "mother-monopolized childrearing" is the origin of all our problems? How explain Golda Meier, Indira Gandhi, Eva Peron, and Margaret Thatcher if "...support for (almost always male) political despotism continues that repudiation of the mother that began with the embrace of the despotism of the father" (p. 323)?

Most important, however, are the political conclusions--the social movements against labor. "Women's restaurants [run by participatory democracy] typically offer vegetarian fare that has been 'naturally' prepared, i.e. cooked without additives, refined sugar etc." (p. 368). It is the old Proudhonian mutualist cooperative in new feminist garb. A political movement built on such a basis will be crushed by the weight of capital unless allied with the labor movement. However, Balbus argues that, "The proletariat, as Marxists and neo-Marxists define it, cannot be understood as the or even a revolutionary agent within contemporary societies..." (p. 353), so the movements should eschew alliances with it. Balbus would condemn the most progressive movements to defeat by taking away their most powerful explanatory theory--Marxism--and their potentially best ally--labor.