



June 1989

Book Review - Social Security after Fifty: Successes and Failures by Edward D. Berkowitz

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Recommended Citation

Wolk, James L. (1989) "Book Review - Social Security after Fifty: Successes and Failures by Edward D. Berkowitz," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol16/iss2/13>

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Book Review

SOCIAL SECURITY AFTER FIFTY: SUCCESSES AND FAILURES
Edward D. Berkowitz (Ed.). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press,
1987. pp. 168.

In many ways, this compact little book is a celebration. It is a celebration of the cornerstone of the American social welfare system, the Social Security Act of 1935. It is a celebration of the flexibility of an American political economic system that adjusts, somewhat reluctantly, to the vagaries of a capitalist system. Mainly, it is a celebration of the personality and work of three people instrumental in the development, implementation, and maintenance of an American institution; Wilbur Cohen, Robert Myers, and Robert Ball.

Berkowitz's introduction provides intimate insights into these three dynamic characters in American humanitarianism. More interestingly, he illustrates how diverse they were in philosophy and demeanor. Yet, he notes that it was precisely those differences that were vital to the structuring of an income maintenance system that has endured for fifty years. It has endured despite constant political attempts to alter its intent. It has endured despite frequent administrative efforts to undermine its scope.

Virtually every other article in this collection alludes to these points from a specialized scholarly perspective. Neff offers an historical overview of the first fifty years, focusing on the early years of social security. Aaron and Thompson orient the reader to an economist's thoughts on this American effort into collective responsibility. Their opening statement is clever in this regard. "Changes in the attitudes of American economists toward the U.S. social security program resemble the reported attitudes of English upper-class parents toward their maturing offspring. When the social security system was in its infancy, economists regarded it with great interest and affection. They ignored the institution during its childhood. As social security reached maturity, economists reacted with a mixture of embarrassment and

shock." This reviewer found the chapter by Derthick helpful in understanding the political-economic decisions to federalize all the categorical aid programs, but AFDC, under SSI. Achenbaum's contribution is a comprehensive and provocative piece on strategies for expanding the current social security system and creatively integrating it with other existing social welfare programs. In brief, if a person is interested in the social security system, this book contains something for everybody. That is both its strength and its weakness. The reader should be selective. Read only those chapters relevant to one's specific concerns, or some of the detail will become tedious.

Regardless of the admonition just presented, everyone should join in the celebration by reading Cohen's article and Myers' reply. It is a rare treat. Here are two "high priests" of social security comparing notes. Wilbur Cohen's optimism is infectious. Myers' actuarial pragmatism provides balance. Together, they give all of us potential cynics renewed hope.

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Volume XVI, Number 2

June, 1989

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