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Social Security in Global Perspective. John Dixon.
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Book Reviews

John Dixon, *Social Security in Global Perspective*. Westport, Ct: Praeger Publishers, 1999. \$69.50 hardcover, \$27.95 papercover.

Perhaps the principle worldwide challenge facing social policy makers today is the preservation of social security. The great social achievement of the last century—the creation of welfare states and welfare protections—has provided an important measure of material security for millions of ordinary people in scores of countries. *Social security*—not the inconsistent protections provided by families or churches or charities or employers—has become society's principle assurance of the well-being of citizens. Can this legacy be carried forward?

While the social security challenge reflects differing circumstances throughout the globe, nearly everywhere one chief element is demographic. People are living longer; they are working fewer years; the ratio between workers and dependents is diminishing. Until the industrial revolution, the elderly rarely made up more than 3 percent of the population. Today, in the developed world, the figure is 14 percent. By 2030 it will be 25 percent. An aging population, combined in many countries with low birth rates, is subjecting social security to fearsome strain. In the capitalist countries, certainly, the budget trajectory is heading deep into the red. As costs rise faster than revenues, the number of options are limited—benefits can be trimmed, or program income raised, or else some measure of the two.

The fiscal imbalance facing social security is put in world historic context in John Dixon's *Social Security in Global Perspective*, a systematic comparison of social security systems in 172 countries. Dixon provides several helpful organizing concepts for making sense of the patterns underlying the creation and maturation of national social security arrangements. A particularly enlightening chapter on the evolution of social security, for example, conceptualizes seven discrete programmatic "traditions"—European Poor Law, Master-Servant, Occupational Provident Funds, Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist, State Welfare Paternalism, Insurance, and Marketization—representing the major

historical and intellectual perspectives guiding social security's development.

Dixon, in the central 200 pages of his book, provides a global overview of the major components of social security practice—program coverage, benefit levels, eligibility and financing arrangements. Separate chapters address the major protection “contingencies”—unemployment, ill-health, disability, old age, and unemployment. Programs for child and family allowances are also covered. Reading these chapters can be a rather daunting experience as Dixon catalogs an almost encyclopedic description of social security variations. Interested in survivor's eligibility in the Seychelles? Child benefits in Kyrgyzstan? It's all here.

Building on these foundations, Dixon devises a methodology for comparing the 162 social security systems worldwide. Assessing each system in terms of 860 separate “design standards” identified by the International Labor Organization, Dixon orders social security systems in four tiers from best to worst, with Australia, Sweden, France, Denmark, and New Zealand topping the list and Vanuatu, Montserrat, Tuvalu, Surinam, and Azerbaijan at the bottom. Dixon's construction offers its measure of anomalies—Russia (6th) and Armenia (19th) rank in the top group while The Netherlands (34th) is in tier 2 and the U.S. (63rd) in tier 3, immediately behind Ecuador—reflecting a ranking system significantly built on formal, “statutory” elements in social security legislation rather than actual program results. The U.S.'s dismal ranking, in addition, reflects its vast system of private employer-sponsored retirement coverage, coverage promoted by very substantial tax subsidies—“fiscal welfare” arrangements not calculated in Dixon's accounting.

Dixon concludes his book with an assessment of social security today and its near-term prospects. While acknowledging the enormous cost burden involved in maintaining benefits, he downplays the “crisis” rhetoric that has been such a major conservative theme over the past decade. Arguing that the social security debate has been “intellectually and epistemologically hijacked by a virulent stream of neoliberalism” (260)—the advocates of markets and privatization—Dixon sympathetically defends current arrangements on social justice grounds, arguing that modest

reforms are sufficient to protect social security's viability without undermining its egalitarian principles.

The final chapter also provides a provocative and erudite analysis of the major challenges facing social security today—not only in the countries of the rich world, but in the developing world and the ex-Soviet nations. In the poor world, Dixon pointedly notes that social security remains largely irrelevant to the basic material needs of most ordinary people. Focussed on the urban middle class and public employees, social security generally bypasses the rural poor, especially women, as well as urban dwellers in the informal sectors of the economy. In the post-Soviet nations, as the reasonably generous cradle-to-the-grave social security systems of the past have decomposed, a variety of new, "mixed," and substantially less protective systems are evolving.

Dixon's book provides an important addition to the social security literature and a helpful contribution to comparative policy studies; his organizing categories offer a useful context for comparing and evaluating programs. While somewhat circumscribed in its analytic dimensions—Dixon largely ignores issues such as race, gender, and economic globalization—*Social Security in Global Perspective* is impressive in scope and scholarship, an outstanding addition to the burgeoning social security literature.

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Ira M. Schwartz and Gideon Fishman, *Kids Raised by the Government*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999. \$49.95 hardcover.

Over half a million children live in subsidized out of home care in the United States and their numbers are growing. Children from ethnic minority groups, especially African American children, are overrepresented. The authors of this book assert that child welfare system dooms children to impermanent living arrangements and poverty is the main reason. Hence: Kids are being raised by the government because, under the current system, they live in damaging impermanent relationships paid for by the government.