



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 28
Issue 2 *June*

Article 19

June 2001

Unemployment and Government: Genealogies of the Social.

William Walters

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



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

(2001) "*Unemployment and Government: Genealogies of the Social.* William Walters," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 2 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol28/iss2/19>

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.



its implications for the notion of citizenship. In modern democracies, citizenship has become institutionalized as a means of ensuring individual rights and of balancing them with community obligations. However, the notion of citizenship is firmly rooted in the political and cultural context of the nation state. Citizenship rights and duties are defined and realized within a bounded national political and social system that is often based in a shared ethnic and cultural identity.

As many more people travel across national boundaries and take up residence in nations states that are not their own, the very essence of the concept of citizenship is being challenged. For this reason, the authors call for new ideas that redefine the notion of citizenship. Many more people now live in societies which deny them citizenship rights. Many others live in more than one society and often move between them and again, many do not have political, social and other citizenship rights in these societies. If democracy is to have meaning in a world that is increasingly shaped by globalization, a new conception of citizenship that accommodates changing demographic and cultural realities will be needed.

The book considers these issues in a readable and informative way and makes a number of interesting suggestions for a reconceptualized concept of citizenship. The authors are particularly committed to the idea that citizenship status needs to be decoupled from ethnic or cultural status. They also consider the prospects of global citizenship. The book has implications for social welfare, and particularly for the way the notion of social citizenship based on a theory of social rights is being undermined within the global capitalist system.

William Walters, *Unemployment and Government: Genealogies of the Social*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. \$64.96 hardcover.

Accounts of the history of social policies and programs are often descriptive providing chronological narratives of their evolution. Indeed, it was not until the 1970s, that the first systematic attempts to use theory to analyze the development of social policy were made. The tendency to apply theory is more widespread today, and social policy scholarship now frequently employs established conceptual approaches to frame the material and

interpret historical events in the light of the analytical insights of theory.

This book augments this tradition by drawing on Michel Foucault's theoretical work on the subject of 'governmentality' to analyze the way the issue of unemployment has been defined and managed by Western governments over the last hundred years. Walters shows how unemployment has been defined in different ways by the state during this period. Indeed, he contends that the concept of unemployment did not exist until the end of the 19th century when industrialization created pressures for governments to respond to what was increasingly perceived as a problem that not only affected individual workers but undermined family life, the moral order and cherished social institutions. Attempts to deal with unemployment were, therefore, not necessarily motivated by altruism but by many other complex considerations which give expression to the role of government in regulating the welfare of its citizens. In pursuing this task, the problem of unemployment has frequently been redefined. Early definitions that viewed unemployment as a function of disorganized labor markets, or of deficient moral character have given way to new conceptions that emphasize social risk or, increasingly today, of a lack of skills. While these diverse conceptions produce different policy responses, all seek to regulate the problem through state intervention.

However, in offering this analysis, Walters rejects simplistic deterministic accounts which emphasize the role of structural forces in interpreting events. The author rejects these explanations and offers a more complex analysis which draws on the use of a genealogical methodology. This methodology, he contends, provides more powerful insights. Walters has written a sophisticated account not only of the history of unemployment but of the way social problems are defined and handled through practices of governmentality. His book should be widely consulted.

Steven E. Schier (Ed.), *The Postmodern Presidency: Bill Clinton's Legacy in U.S. Politics*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000. \$45.00 hardcover, \$19.95 papercover.

Many books and articles designed to assess the impact and legacy of the Clinton presidency are likely to be published during