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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 29
Issue 2 June

Article 16

June 2002

Social Inclusion: Possibilities and Tensions. Peter Askonas and Angus Stewart (Eds.).

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Recommended Citation

(2002) "*Social Inclusion: Possibilities and Tensions.* Peter Askonas and Angus Stewart (Eds.).," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 2 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol29/iss2/16>

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Book Notes

Peter Askonas and Angus Stewart (Eds.). *Social Inclusion: Possibilities and Tensions*. New York: Palgrave, 2000. \$ 69.95 hardcover.

Social policy scholars in the United States may be aware that the notion of social exclusion has been popularized in European social welfare circles but few are fully conversant with its meaning and its relation to wider debates on poverty, inequality and welfare. Certainly, there is little evidence that the concept has been widely incorporated in social policy discourse in the United States. American scholars have not, it seems, embraced it with the same enthusiasm as Europeans have. Eventually perhaps, social policy writers in the United States will make more frequent use of the term and apply its insights to social policy analysis.

However, this book should serve as a caution to those who would use the concept without carefully considering its meaning and implications. Originating in social policy circles in France to refer to the fact that some citizens were not protected by the country's many social insurance funds, the concept referred to the role of the State in ensuring that all were included in social security coverage. The term was then adopted by officials in the European Community and in turn by the Blair government in Britain which has promoted its use by funding research into the subject at British Universities and creating government programs designed to address the problem. It is in the context of British social policy that Askonas and Stewart have compiled this collection of papers on the subject. Their book shows that the notion of social exclusion remains an ambiguous and ideologically controversial one.

Unfortunately, the book does not offer a helpful introduction to the concept or the way it has evolved historically. Nor does it summarize the debates attending the notion of social exclusion. While these are deficiencies, it does contain some very interesting and important material which engages the reader in a thoughtful review of the concepts more problematic implications. For example, the chapter by John Gray shows how revisionist social democrats have promoted the concept of social exclusion to foster the workfare agenda. For them, the concept is not about the

exclusionary consequences of poverty or deprivation but rather of a lack of workforce engagement and the inability of the poor to participate effectively in society through engaging in regular employment. Workfare and job training social policies are advocated as the means of combating social exclusion, enhancing participation and promoting social solidarity. Gray suggests that the emphasis on social exclusion offers an alternative to the traditional commitment to egalitarianism in social democratic thought and that its imputation of cohesion does not give an authentic expression to the social democratic ideal of social solidarity. He also questions the idea that social investments can replace social transfers through income benefits and services. A welfare state based on investment principles, he insists, is a mirage.

Other contributors to the volume take a different position arguing for the concept's utility while yet others address some of the complex issues which accompany the debate on social exclusion. Some of the contributions are very abstract and discursive while others are practical and concrete. For example, Ruth Lister offers a set of proposals for promoting social inclusion which are helpful irrespective of whether the notion of social exclusion is considered congenial or not. Peter Robinson examines the problem of unemployment in relation to the notion of social exclusion and finds that the problem has less to do with technological change and globalization than with economic mismanagement. To promote a truly inclusive society in which the social democratic ideal of full employment is realized, a commitment to effective and efficient economic management will be needed.

The book contains many more interesting and informative contributions which address diverse aspects of the concept of social exclusion. While it is not a book for those who require a basic elucidation of the concept, its examination of the many issues which arise out of recent European debates about social exclusion will be of value to American scholars. It raises many issues that will counter the tendency to use the term because it has become fashionable. Instead, it will be of value to anyone concerned about the way traditional notions of poverty, inequality and deprivation are being reconceptualized and employed in social policy circles today.