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Book Notes


Social insurance programs that provide support at times when people’s incomes are terminated, interrupted or reduced as a consequence of disability, illness, unemployment, retirement and other contingencies have been established in many countries around the world. It is generally accepted in social policy circles that social insurance programs were first developed in Germany in the late 19th century by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. Indeed, it is not uncommon for social policy scholars to refer to social insurance as the “Bismarckian” approach to social welfare. The distinguishing feature of these programs is the use of a special payroll tax known as a contribution to fund benefits.

However, as this interesting book reveals, the development of modern day social insurance programs was also inspired by the payment of public pensions to soldiers, sailors and others who had served the state. This was particularly true in the United States where the payment of veterans benefits to survivors of the Civil War gave impetus to the campaigns of social reformers who advocated for the introduction of social insurance. Clark, Craig and Wilson show that the payment of military pensions from colonial times created a climate in which the idea that government should support those in need took root and ultimately flourished. Initially, however, pensions paid to soldiers and sailors in service of the state were designed to compensate those who were injured or disabled as a result of military action, and the idea of providing retirement benefits came later. These pensions were also provided on a haphazard and temporary basis and often involved political struggles between those who claimed assistance and those who were responsible for the public purse. The authors show that these political pressures led eventually to the establishment of permanent, and better managed military pension funds after the Civil War. In turn, these developments facilitated the emergence of pensions for state and local workers and eventually for federal
employees. The decision to introduce Social Security in the 1930s did not, therefore, occur in a vacuum but built on the gradual evolution of public pension programs.

The book provides helpful historical information for anyone wishing to understand the way government income maintenance programs evolved in the United States. It is well written and thoroughly documented. Unfortunately, the authors do not make much mention of the parallel development of social assistance programs, particularly for poor women, and of the way these programs undermined the principles of universality and inclusiveness which the social reformers of the late 19th-century extolled, and which many social policy scholars today still regard as of vital importance in income maintenance. On the other hand, they use the historical record to draw interesting lessons for contemporary debates on Social Security by emphasizing the role of political struggle and policy instability in the history of public pensions. These lessons are particularly relevant at a time that campaigns to privatize social insurance have intensified.


Transnational and transracial adoption has a transformative effect on society, the family, and the individual. The literature on adoption covers what parents may expect regarding the adoption process, their child’s health and development, and identity issues for the child and family. Few works have previously considered what internal transformations may transpire for adoptive mothers in their conceptualizations of maternity, race, and gender. In this book, Nora Moosnick juxtaposes feminist portrayals of motherhood against the statements of twenty-two adoptive mothers of White, Biracial, Black, and Asian children.

Social constructivism provides a theoretical framework for considerations of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. With a sample composed of White middle-class mothers who have adopted children from a variety of racial backgrounds, Moosnick examines the women’s experiences for evidence of changed attitudes towards maternity, racism, and maternal fitness. She questions whether maternal identity is contingent on the adopted child’s race and she