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Book Reviews

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Poverty in America by RALPH SELIGMAN and ASOKE BASU. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981. 446 pp. $35.00 cloth.

PAUL TERRELL
University of California, Berkeley

Poverty in America is a mean-tempered, sloppy, and pedantic book that seeks to describe the array of social welfare programs in the United States and to argue their ineffectiveness. In their analysis, Seligman and Basu present the Welfare State in its most unappealing light—a fragmented, expensive, dependency creating institution with social and economic costs that exceed its benefits.

The authors argue that the Welfare State has engendered a persistent underclass lured by welfare benefits into lives of dependency, hopelessness, and alienation. Relying principally on the culture of poverty literature of the 1960s, Seligman and Basu paint a picture of poverty as pathology—an enlarging class of people lacking in self-respect and work habits, suspicious of the dominant culture, and living for the moment alone. Jimmy Breslin's evidence is typical: "The daughters of the poor regard pregnancy as the way to welfare and welfare as the way to lives of their own. There is not any other dream."

Public welfare does not stand alone in Seligman and Basu's denunciation. Trying to help the poor, the authors argue, programs like unemployment insurance and housing assistance have ignored the realities of the marketplace and "done great harm to the intended beneficiaries" (p. 342). Ignoring the principles of less eligibility, and mythologizing the capabilities of the poor, the programs of the 1960s have worsened the problems of poverty stigma, and instability.

Seligman and Basu take the usual potshots at the Great Society, and studiously ignore the substantial reduction in poverty of the 1960s and 1970s, the vast increase in medical and educational opportunities, and the important advances in social protection offered by the expansion of social regulation and civil rights. In arguing the welfare/dependency equation, in addition, the authors ignore facts and analyses that do not conform to their thesis. The problem of poverty is a continuum of problems, but complexity and multiple explanations are not the authors' strong points. Most contemporary ethnographic work on poverty communities, for example, relates a human diversity that simply cannot be captured by Seligman and Basu's laboriously constructed stereotypes. The recent series of articles by Ken Auletta in the New Yorker, for example, describes an underclass of real people, with substantial differences and complexities. AFDC mothers, for example, far from being acutely alienated from the world of work and the culture of the marketplace, are often striving desperately against dependency. AFDC mothers, indeed, constitute one of the welfare populations most likely to benefit from job skills programs.

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While the social legislation of the sixties and seventies certainly resulted in unintended and incomplete results, the plain fact is that the living conditions and opportunities of American poor were improved as never before in history. Public intervention is surely not the panacea for all social problems, but public intervention just as clearly is an indispensable instrument to advance equality and community in our society.

This volume is carelessly constructed, repetitive, and dated, despite its 1981 copyright. Anachronisms creep in (HEW becomes HHS and back again). The large mass of cited material is generally from the 1960s and early 1970s. Organizations are misnamed (Student Nonviolent Committee for Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). Writing about "Negroes" may be pace-setting, but I doubt it. And for Californians, Seligman and Basu seem oblivious of the massive recent immigration of Asians and Mexicanos "sin papeles," arguing that immigration has long been "at a plateau or decline."

Finally, the authors argue by accretion. A single telling example is never offered when 25 will do. Poverty in America reads like a series of literature reviews spliced together from 1960 dissertations. The bibliography is over 500 items, and they are all heard from, frequently at great length. The authors' method is clear in their very first paragraph.

Hoult defines poverty as (1) "a scarcity of the means of subsistence" and (2) "a level of living that is below a particular minimum standard." The Theodorsons define it as "a standard of living that lasts long enough to undermine the health, morale, and self-respect of an individual or group of individuals."

Before the paragraph is through, Robert Theobald and Harold Watts are cited; before we reach the first subsection, sixteen more parties are heard from. At the completion of almost any section of this book, a careful reader is left swimming in a potpourri of arguments, typologies, and jargon.

This is not the book for readers who want the facts and figures on poverty, an understanding of the program components of the Welfare State, or an introduction to some of the dimensions of controversy concerning its values and operations. While provocative and forceful on a number of issues (such as arguing the insurance rather than the income transfer nature of social security), Poverty in America is generally undistinguished by brevity, cogency, or humor.

ROBERT E. WOOD
Rutgers University, Camden

This is the sort of book one would like to recommend more highly than one can. The authors' hearts are in the right place. They are in favor of a better life for the poor and the dispossessed, of grassroots democracy, of non-violent social change, of unified development planning. It is hard to find anything in the book that one could disagree with.

This, however, is the problem with the book. Its bland well-intentioned generalities seem unconnected with the realities of underdevelopment: systematic repression, class exploitation, pervasive corruption, foreign intervention, dependency in all its forms, government indifference to social needs and hostility to independent forms of mass organization, etc. For someone grappling with how to deal with these fundamental problems, the book offers very little guidance.

The book consists of ten essays, mostly although not exclusively by present or former faculty at the School of Social Development at the University of Minnesota-Duluth. The essays overlap a good deal, but the editors describe them as presenting in turn "the conceptual framework of social development" (Chs. 1-4), the "methodology of development," (Chs. 5-8), and an analysis of education and social development (Chs. 9-10).

In his introductory essay, co-editor Jones defines social development as "the process of planned institutional change to bring about a better correspondence between human needs, on the one hand, and social policies and programs on the other" (p. 3). Such a notion is obviously open to widely varying interpretations, which presumably is what enables Daniel Sanders, in his essay on "International Cooperation for Development," to inform us that: "It is evident that the low income countries of the world have opted for social development" (p. 51). This is indeed good news, but one wonders what it means when one looks at some of the 38 countries designated as low income by the World Bank: e.g., Afghanistan, Haiti, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Chad, Zaire, Pakistan, and Uganda, among others. The precise meaning and analytic status of the concept of social development are never clearly delineated.

David Gil's "Social Policies and Social Development: A Humanistic-Egalitarian Perspective," stands out from the other essays in its treatment of social development. Gil begins by incisively locating social policy within the power relations of a society, and then goes on to propose a frankly radical conception of social development. For Gil, social development is only meaningful if it is a strategy of radical transformation in the direction of complete equality, including the collective ownership and democratic control of society's wealth. Noting that there are other, supposedly more pragmatic concepts of social development, Gil debunks them, concluding that: "The result of such pragmatic development policies is at best an illusion of social development...." (p. 79)
Gil's article is eloquent, but it underlines the ambiguity of the rest of the book. Given the apparent assumption of his fellow authors that social development is happening in most of the Third World, their concepts would seem to be those Gil is attacking as an illusion. They certainly might take Gil to task for failing to explain how his concept of social development can be applied in the particular circumstances of Third World societies, but the debate is not joined. Instead we are offered a steady diet of assertions that add up, in this reviewer's eyes, to a severe case of pollyanna. We are told optimistically that all countries without exception are developing, that national planning leads to decentralization, that industrialization is based on consensus, that social development is a "partnership operation," that the "styles" of social development can even include "top down, bureaucratic approaches." The neutrality of the state apparatus is assumed; what is needed is the definition of the proper social development strategy. It is hard to imagine that real-life planners and organizers will find much here to aid their work.

The authors seem most interested in developing typologies. Most of the chapters provide some sort of classification scheme for sorting out different types of resources, goals, institutional contexts, etc. While some of these are interesting, their usefulness is limited by the near-total absence of empirical propositions connecting these categories to real life situations. These discussions are without exception exceedingly general.

In sum, as a discussion of general goals and orientations for planners in the Third World (although the essays emphasize underdeveloped societies, the authors assert that the concept of social development applies to developed societies as well), this book puts a welcome emphasis on the need for institutional change to meet human needs. As an analysis of planning within the concrete conditions of underdevelopment, however, it is severely limited. Almost no reference is made to the vast sociological literature on the subjects of class structure, dependency, power relations, etc. in underdeveloped societies. Calling for an integrated approach to development, the book unfortunately fails to integrate its concern with planning with what we know about the oppressive realities of underdevelopment.


JIM BAUMOHL
University of California, Berkeley

As David Gil observes in the foreword to this slim volume, the authors have attempted a "picture-book-in-words" about the residents and conditions in single room occupancy hotels (SRO's) in New York City. In 34 sketches, residents of SRO's speak plainly about themselves, their environment, and the welfare institutions that have a dramatic effect on their lives. These sketches are organized into seven chapters which are intended as a sort of typology of SRO residents: employees of welfare hotels, the aged, former mental patients, drinkers, ex-offenders, addicts,
and urban nomads. Each chapter is briefly introduced by the authors, and the text of each sketch is drawn from transcripts of interviews with SRO residents conducted in 1976 and 1977.

The purpose of the book is to make public the voices of impoverished individuals who are rarely heard; to lend individuality and distinctiveness to the statistics by which our social casualties are monitored. The authors succeed rather well in this. The voices are real and compelling; the poverty and animosity of SRO life is plausibly and concretely presented. While the book is a modest and persuasive documentary as far as it goes, there is a flaw in the work that undermines its intent to provide an accurate portrait of this brand of poverty. The authors fail to focus on the distinctions residents make among themselves and, most importantly, the practical implications of such distinctions. It is clear that many residents are concerned about the large number of "mental cases" in their midst, and about the "junkies" and "winos." It is not at all clear, though, how such distinctions are made or how such categorization limits social integration and contributes to the maintenance of suspicion and disorganization. In short, the book does not fully capture the social logic of the setting, and ultimately remains on the outside, looking in through categories derived, apparently, from the authors' assumptions about what matters of biography and behavior are salient.

But perhaps this is to expect too much from too little. Single Rooms is not the product of a full-blown field study, nor is it intended to be. It is a simple, straightforward presentation of 34 individuals explaining themselves, and doing so with occasional eloquence. If the book is not an illuminating urban ethnography, it is useful nonetheless.


SARA ROSENBERRY
Virginia Polytechnic Institute

As implied in its name, the field of comparative social policy involves both a subject matter and a research method. There is a certain tension between these elements in that the need to respect the complexity and diversity of the subject matter often conflicts with the pressure to develop general conclusions which might be used in generating theory about social policy. This tension is reflected in a division within the field of comparative social policy between rich, though often ethnocentric, descriptions of particular situations and efforts which rely on more structured and often more superficial analysis of aggregate data to develop conclusions about a large number of cases. Traditionally, individuals within the field have fallen into one camp or the other. They choose either to pursue in depth explorations of a limited number of cases, which often suggest important and often complex questions, or they attempt to test specific hypotheses using available data from a larger number of countries.
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Dr. Higgins recognizes this division in her book The States of Welfare and acknowledges a preference for an important question over a next answer. This bias, which is admirable, is reflected in the organization and substance of her book, meant as an introduction to the field of comparative social policy. The bulk of the book, which was "designed primarily for the undergraduate student," is organized around issues which define the focus of the field. These include the role of the state, the role of religion, work and welfare, and public and private systems of welfare. Each of these chapters serves to illustrate the complexity of the field of social policy and should encourage students to ask important, even if difficult to answer questions.

Higgins is less successful in her treatment of the comparative method. She asserts that comparative social policy is not so much a field of study as a method of study (p. 5), but limits her introduction of that method to a well considered discussion of the problems in developing a methodology which allows for valid comparisons among countries. These problems include the lack of comparable definitions, lack of standardized data, and a lack of substantive and methodological expertise on the part of the individuals involved. Higgins recognizes that these methodological problems contribute to the division of the field into detailed descriptive efforts (which tend to produce conclusions about the "uniqueness" of countries' efforts) and attempts at a large scale aggregate explanation (which generally support arguments about convergence). Unfortunately, she offers little encouragement or methodological guidance to students who might want to bridge that division by finding ways to pursue answers to the questions suggested in her substantive chapters.

She refers to the effort to refine and develop the techniques of comparative analysis as "the challenge of the future" (p. 170). In doing so she fails to acknowledge the considerable progress already made in finding means to identify patterns among countries and relationships between concepts, defined in her last chapter as important. Clearly Willekens and Koryli have each illustrated the importance of thoughtful and imaginative methods in developing defensible general conclusions about concepts Higgins has cited as important. Both individuals' efforts represent progress in closing the gap between research which asks important questions and that which produces general conclusions. Because of their methodological imagination and rigor, they have produced conclusions which are neither narrow nor superficial. In doing so, they have provided the basis for theory building. They also provide much needed examples of the kind of research effort students should strive to replicate.

The fact that Higgins does not give more attention to the progress being made in producing research which is both conceptually rich and methodologically defensible is the major weakness in her book. She wisely emphasizes the importance of beginning with important questions and provides a rich introduction to issues which students must consider as they begin their research efforts. If that substantive introduction could be complemented by an equally good discussion and examples of how those issues have been and might be addressed through structured research, then readers would have a very sound introduction to the field of comparative social policy.