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Book Notes


Textbooks on social policy in Britain tend to follow a standard format. After discussing the nature of social policy as a field of endeavor, they usually launch into a detailed descriptive account of the social services that comprise the British welfare state. These books invariably provide detailed descriptions of social security, health care, housing, education and the personal social services (as they are known in the United Kingdom). While books that document and describe the social services are obviously needed, it is refreshing to find a text that does not use this approach. The most exciting thing about social policy is the complex issues it raises. And this is what Pete Alcock’s book is all about.

Like many other books on social policy in Britain, Alcock also begins with a discussion of the nature of social policy as a field of academic and practical endeavor but this is presented in a lively way which presages the content of the rest of the book. From here on the book courses through issue-focused topic after topic. There is an interesting account of the role of the state in social policy which is contrasted with the other institutionalized approaches for enhancing social well-being such as the market, voluntary activities and the informal sector. A discussion of the role of ideology in social welfare is accompanied by an analysis of how gender, class, race and other divisions are related to social policy. One of the most useful chapters in the book deals with social welfare and economic development although here, more reference to the emerging ‘social development’ approach could have been made. One chapter attempts to link developments in Britain with international trends, but this discussion is confined to an account of events in Europe.

Alcock’s book will not provide the international reader with a detailed description of the British social services but it will offer a lively analysis of the issues and themes in British social policy today. It will also stimulate reflection on how these issues affect other countries. Despite its focus on Britain, this is a book that
should be widely read by anyone interested in issues of social policy.


It is refreshing to read a book by a sociologist that not only reveals the author’s ability to engage in sophisticated empirical work, but shows how this research can be applied to address critical issues of social welfare. By tackling a topic which is widely regarded as the purview of social workers, Harris demonstrates just how effective good sociological research can be in informing social welfare policy making.

The book is concerned with the topical issue of teen welfare mothers—a group of welfare recipients who are widely regarded to be the most likely to abuse public social programs, and the most difficult to rehabilitate. It is based on an analysis of a longitudinal study of about 300 women in Baltimore who first applied for income support in the late 1960s. Using this data set, Harris followed the recipients through to the late 1980s, and collected a substantial amount of useful information on their behavior, life styles, income, work habits and adjustments.

The study is broad ranging and examines many issues of welfare. Its analysis of the work behavior of welfare recipients is not only the most interesting aspect of the study but of most relevance to current concerns about time-limits and employment. The study confounds many myths and confirms scientifically what many social workers already know, namely that the vast majority of welfare recipients are economically active and that they use income support programs as a safety net as they cycle on and off welfare. A small proportion of the research subjects who were better educated and who had children at a comparatively late age only experienced one spell on welfare. The others, who were poorly educated and only able to find low paying jobs, cycled on and off. The study confirms that this group of women will be most seriously affected by the new welfare legislation. Given their low education and skills, lack of availability of remunerative jobs, and numerous barriers to employment and mobility, these