September 1998


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

Part of the [Social Work Commons](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol25/iss3/17)

**Recommended Citation**


Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol25/iss3/17

This Book Note is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
the care and rehabilitation of the violent are themselves not averse
the condoning or even participating in such violence.

Peter Leonard, *Postmodern Welfare: Reconstructing an Emancipatory
papercover.

In certain circles, postmodernism has nearly attained cult
status. The term is now widely bandied about at conferences and
in discussions about the human condition. However, it remains
poorly defined and relatively few social workers who use it know
what it means. Equally few understand its implications for social
policy and social welfare. While postmodernism is lauded for
being anti-positivist and for promoting identity politics, its rele-
vance for the future of social welfare is poorly understood.

Peter Leonard bravely attempts to explain what postmod-
ernism means for social policy and social work. Wading through
jargon and rhetoric, he manages to reduce postmodernism to
its basic elements and to interpret its meaning in ways that are
comprehensible. Of course, many other commentaries on post-
modernism have been published, and while some of these pro-
vide even more comprehensible explanations, Leonard’s book is
useful for its discussion on the implications of postmodernism for
human well-being. Coming as he does from a Marxist persuasion,
Leonard’s account of the normative implications of postmod-
ernism is not an entirely happy one. He clearly recognizes the in-
ability of postmodernism to offer a viable alternative to the social
democratic project which he and many other Marxists defended
against the radical right’s onslaught. But, like many others, he
recognizes that social democracy is increasingly ineffective and
unappealing to electorates, and that alternative paradigms are
needed. While he suggests that postmodernism can provide a
normative basis for reconstruction, his argument is not wholly
convincing. Nevertheless, his attempt to harness the potential
of popular social movements to engage in effective activism is
an interesting one. It is one of the few coherent explications not
only of how postmodernism can provide a normative basis for
social welfare but of how activism can be kept alive in a world
which is increasing indifferent to human suffering, social causes
and collective action. It remains to be seen whether his ideas and
prognostications will be translated into a viable emancipatory project.


Although utopians have long dreamed of creating a world where all citizens are equal, this dream has not been realized. Instead, inequalities of various kinds continue to characterize contemporary societies. It is partly for this reason that the debate is no longer concerned with the possibility of attaining equality, but with the arguments that justify inequality in terms of acceptable social justice criteria.

An argument of this kind invokes the notion of equality of opportunity. Proponents of this view believe that inequalities between human beings are fair if everyone has equal opportunity to succeed. Usually this means open access to education and equal opportunity to utilize the knowledge and skills offered by schools, universities and other educational institutions. If everyone has equal opportunity to achieve, unequal outcomes may be justified.

This book examines the equality of opportunity argument with reference to a massive amount of statistical data for countries as varied as Britain, Japan, Russia, the United States and several East European nations. Although these studies show that educational opportunities have increased significantly in recent decades, they reveal that those who come from higher class families continue to have better life chances than those who come from lower class families. In addition, it found that people born into upper class families continue to do well even if they do not utilize educational opportunities. The authors conclude that class continues to be a fundamentally important determinant of success, and that enhanced educational opportunity is not an adequate justification for inequality.

This important book is not only academically interesting but important for social policy making. It suggests that the provision of educational opportunities is not a quick solution to the problem of inequality. Class barriers and other structural impediments continue to play an important role and must be addressed if equality and its negative consequences are to be overcome.