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BOOK REVIEW

WILEY

INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL POLICY ANALYSIS: ILLUMINATING WELFARE

By Stephen Sinclair**Bristol: Policy Press, 2016. ISBN: 9781447313922; £19.99 (pbk).**

As this textbook's author notes, "Given its significance and ubiquity, it is perhaps surprising that Social Policy—the discipline that is devoted to studying social problems and welfare policies—is not familiar to many people" (p. 3). Social Policy lecturers often express regret that our subject does not enjoy the popularity we think it deserves, and we are always on the lookout for material that fosters wider interest in the subject. This book promises to "illuminate" welfare; its stated aim is to "... introduce readers to Social Policy analysis and to help them think coherently about social problems and how societies collectively respond to them" (p. 1). Whilst students and teachers will clearly have to look elsewhere if they require the more standard Social Policy introduction (containing a chapter on social security, one on health etc.), Sinclair's book, by providing students new to Social Policy with some key tools of analysis, makes a unique contribution.

The introductory chapter provides the most accessible and non-confusing discussion about "what is Social Policy?" I have seen; the chapter then helpfully divides Social Policy analysis into four dimensions—empirical, distributional, critical and ethical. Each subsequent chapter title poses a question which is then understood and answered via the application of relevant theories and concepts. Chapter Two ("What is a social problem?") centres on a key message of many introductory undergraduate Social Policy courses—that what one regards as a social "problem" reflects one's ideological perspective. Chapter Three ("Who benefits from welfare?") revisits Richard Titmuss' landmark "social division of welfare"; after noting Titmuss' success at drawing attention to middle class men's tax reliefs and company cars, it reports more recent contributions, including feminists' insights about women's unpaid caring work. After Chapter Four ("Who is a member of society?") covers expected territory on social exclusion, Chapter Five ("How does inequality persist?") discusses the distribution of income and wealth, which is dramatically more unequal in Britain now than it was in the period from the advent of the Beveridgean Welfare State in the 1940s to the late 1970s. Sinclair's discussion of this inequality is trademarked by an emphasis on "social closure," whereby dominant groups in society restrict access to resources.

Chapter Six, entitled "Why are people so mistaken about welfare? Myth," brings me to Sinclair's political stance. In it, he lists five widely held "opinions" which, he insists, are really "misconceptions" (p. 123) that are debunked in this and his other chapters. I more-or-less agree with one of the five ("Social welfare gives too much to the undeserving, is a disincentive to employment and many claimants defraud the system") yet Sinclair affords little space to persuading sceptical readers like me to change our minds. Instead, much of Chapter Six is devoted to explaining why we and the general public are so misguided; unsurprisingly, the right-wing press is mentioned, as are what he calls "comforting

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internalised fictions" (p. 129), although he does not apply the latter term to some on the Left of the political spectrum when they favour what is politically palatable over the truth. His discussion of "the echo chamber effect," in which a tendency for people to engage only with those who agree with them leads to "dissenting voices" being regarded as "marginal and extreme" (p. 131) risks sounding ironic, given his own dismissive attitude towards non-mainstream Social Policy viewpoints that are popular outside the Left-dominated discipline. Elsewhere, some of his own arguments are questionable; examples include his view that higher state expenditure on the elderly "stimulates economic growth" (p. 127), and his dismissal of the oft-supposed benefits of "privatisations" such as British Telecom being sold off in the 1980s—a view he supports only by comparing pre- and post-1980 UK economic growth rates (p. 98).

Some will say that Sinclair's enthusiastic moral commitment is laudable; he never claims impartiality and his book is, throughout, a refreshingly lively and personal account which stresses normative issues. Marginalising what some, at least, regard as discredited viewpoints might serve a noble purpose in a world in which the mass media weighs heavily against the political Left. Nevertheless, textbooks which do not embrace diversity of opinion might be a turn-off to students, as they can serve to close down debate when they should be opening it up.

That said, this textbook's virtues outweigh its arguable weaknesses. Crystal clear in its descriptions (see, for example, page 14/15's neat summary of key contributions to the welfare state typology literature), always challenging and engaging, and never longwinded (it is just over 100 pages in length, not including endnotes and references), it comfortably fulfils its promise to "illuminate" welfare and therefore easily merits a place on any introductory Social Policy course's reading list.

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