

Book Review: Social Policy in the United States: Future Possibilities in Historical Perspective by Theda Skocpol

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Skocpol, Theda. *Social Policy in the United States: Future Possibilities in Historical Perspective*. Princeton Studies in American Politics: Historical, International and Comparative Perspectives Series, ed. Ira Katznelson, Martin Shefton, Theda Skocpol. Princeton and London: Princeton University Press, 2020. 334 pages. Paperback, \$38.87.

Theda Skocpol is a little hard to categorize. Trained in sociology, she writes often about political science and especially political policy—but always, she insists, with a sense of history missing in social sciences. She is also an activist who fought Harvard University when denied tenure by the sociology department in 1980, she thinks, because she is a woman. She won that fight, at a time when Harvard had twelve tenured females among more than 350 faculty members. Besides writing about comparative revolutions and about social policy and democratic welfare states, she quantifies the base of support for the Tea Party and for Donald John Trump. Among other revelations, she finds that the base is reasonably well educated, reasonably well off, and less “grass roots” than what she calls “Astro Turf,” that is, platforms funded by the Koch family fortune and the fortunes of other One Percenters.

This collection of important essays covers social policies, especially “safety net” programs—and specifically the weakening of such programs and the resultant shrinking of the working middle class. All essays were previously published, but not collected as a set. It now takes its rightful place among a series of studies about government and policy.

She marks it that debate about social policies is not only between “moralists” of right or left wing who fight over the very idea of government helping its citizens but also a fight between “technocrats” who fight over how we run whatever programs we enact. She also marks it that these debates almost never feature a sense for the passage of time, or even much knowledge about what has happened over time. Thus, she gives us the history of each attempted policy, noting three phases of development: Civil War and treatment of wartime veterans and dependents until about 1910; 1920s creation and deployment of programs for women and children; and the more

renowned New Deal “safety net” programs of Franklin Delano Roosevelt that extend into today’s “welfare” assistance.

There are surprises at each time period: Of the Civil War lifetime health care and lifetime pension programs not only for the veterans but also for dependents, she says it is “full-fledged federal patronage democracy” (p. 44). As for the understudied period of the 1920s (the apex of rhetoric about rugged individualism and “hands off” government), she measures the expenditure on education for children and health assistance for mothers and finds it both “generous” compared to the rest of the world at the time and also extensive, being close to universal. She notes that before the New Deal, what she calls a “maternal policy” of workmen’s compensation operated at the state level in a way that was more generous than Great Britain’s national “paternal policy” (chapter 3). Of course, these state policies did not occur in the South because of prejudice against Black women and children. As a southerner, I ruefully salute her for paying attention to place as well as time and for noting how my region’s sexism and racism have so unremittingly prevented extension of needed help because of color and gender.

The “elephant in the room,” is of course universal health care, and she says the US is both first and last, out there in Civil War before any country providing extensive and intensive health care for a huge group of veterans (and in a nonprofessional volunteer and drafted army), but subsequently lagging in attention to health care needs of the great majority. As always, she works not only hefty statistics but with mordant wit. Essays first published as President Clinton failed to pass health care are now reprinted and revised as Barrack Obama’s “Obamacare” system is being dismantled by southern political tactics much like those deployed against the three grand extensions of welfare in 1870s, 1920s, and the New Deal.

“In the name of the broadly shared values of work and parental responsibility, all Americans can be asked to contribute as workers, caregivers, and taxpayers. In return, the nation can afford to offer a modicum of economic security and social support to all families, not just in retirement, but throughout their active years of employment and the rearing of ‘our children’” (p. 311).

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