

Book Reviews

Bent Greve (2022), *Rethinking Welfare and the Welfare State*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, £63.00, pp. 160, hbk.*

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This is a timely and useful review of the big issues that face modern welfare states, or at least those in Europe on which this book mainly focuses. It discusses not just demography, especially ageing, but wider changes in the nature of employment. It compares recent worrying political trends – notably, ‘populism and welfare chauvinism’. This is particularly useful. So, too, is the account of changes in the ‘welfare mix’ of state, market and voluntary organisations in different European countries. The author highlights the insecurity inherent in more automated labour markets. Large international economic forces are at work alongside the peculiarly national focus of welfare states. How far and how effectively are they responding? Are the old, supposedly distinct, ‘welfare regimes’ still recognisable? How far do welfare states retain popular support? Are they adapting fast enough?

So this is an ambitious remit. The result gives students a framework for thinking about these larger issues in a comparative framework. The most recent international literature is summarised and referenced in a way that will helpfully guide students through it. This is not a polemical tract. No ‘solutions’ are trotted out. At its core is a concern to show that the patterns of welfare provision are changing and to some extent converging. Serious challenges remain unanswered. All useful. But there are limits to this approach and to the diagnosis, especially for a British audience.

The comparative data is European Union dominated and is recent so the UK is often absent. The time series adopted for income inequality and poverty is rather short – from the early 2000s. The consequence is that its scale and importance is not as dramatic and shocking as it would have been looked at from 1980 including Britain and the US. A longer time series and a wider comparison would have been useful in showing how Continental European economies have operated in a different economic and political climate. Europe has not suffered any major reduction in welfare spending. Indeed, the share of GDP going to welfare services has increased recently. The combination of demography and squeezed ‘austerity’ budgets that has left some services in the UK close to break down is not reflected in this account. Finance is not a major problem. That is the author’s summary. British readers can draw their own conclusions.

The author relies quite heavily on large international data sets. There is a very useful summary of measures of human ‘wellbeing’ and how that varies between different kinds of welfare regime. But I wish there was more about what it is actually like to apply for and receive benefits and gain access to services in different countries. How easy and un-shaming is it to get access to services in different kinds of system? Have there been deliberate attempts to make it more difficult for immigrants, or new comers, as in the UK? This gap is not really the author’s fault. We need more comparative work of this kind.

*The original version of this book review was published with the incorrect author name in the book title. This has been corrected in the online PDF and HTML versions.

Finally, it would have been good to see more on what politicians, the press and social media are actually debating and on actual changes that are underway. What, if any, are the more striking changes to welfare benefit systems that are under discussion? There is nothing, for example, on a universal basic income, not that I am a proponent, or major adaptations to public and private pension schemes. It is all a bit lofty and not focused on the difficult local politics of change.

So it should be set to be read as the start of a discussion, not a route map to argue about.

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Derek Fraser (2023), *The Beveridge Report: Blueprint for the Welfare State*, London & New York: Routledge, £120, pp. 240, hbk.
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Derek Fraser will be well known to many of this journal's readers for his work on the Poor Law, urban history, and successive editions of *The Evolution of the British Welfare State* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1973-2017). His latest book provides a detailed account of the Beveridge Report on *Social Insurance and Allied Services* (London: HMSO, 1942) and its status as a 'blueprint' for the creation of the postwar welfare state and 'the most important official social publication of the twentieth century' (p. 1).

The book includes an introduction and conclusion and nine numbered chapters. The introduction provides a brief overview of some of the most important academic commentaries that the *Report* has elicited over the last eighty years, with specific references to the work of Correlli Barnett, Anne Digby, Rodney Lowe, Brian Abel-Smith, Peter Baldwin, and David Edgerton.¹ Chapter 1 summarises different aspects of the history of British social policy from the passage of the second Elizabethan Poor Law Act in 1601 to the end of the 1930s, and Chapter 2 describes some of the main changes that were implemented during the early stages of the Second World War before the Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services was constituted. As is well known, the Committee was originally expected to focus on 'administrative and technical shortcomings' (p. 36), and Beveridge viewed his own appointment more as a demotion than an opportunity.

The next four chapters are based on the author's meticulous reading of both the *Report* and the evidence on which it was based, alongside a large number of official papers and the famous House of Commons debate in February 1943. Chapter 3 describes the Committee's work in considerable detail, including accounts of background papers, delegations, and meetings. Chapter 4 reviews the evidence presented by a range of groups, including employers, trade unions, other existing providers, political parties and pressure groups, professional bodies, local authorities, and users' organisations; and Chapter 5 discusses the *Report* itself. Chapter 6 examines the responses elicited from the press and public, political parties and organisations, the Government, and the House of Commons. As the author explains, the Commons' debate played a pivotal role in establishing a clear sense in the public mind that Conservative support for Beveridge was much more lukewarm than Labour's.

The following chapters then focus on the road from Beveridge to the creation of what Anne Digby called the 'classic welfare state'. Although the *Report* has often been described as a 'blueprint', it left many further details to be worked out, and Chapter 7 describes this