

BOOK REVIEW

The Australian Welfare State: Who Benefits Now?

Greg Marston and Catherine McDonald with Lois Bryson

Palgrave Macmillan Melbourne, Australia 2014
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I liked this book. For someone who has spent several years teaching social policy and the welfare state to first-year social work students, this book was a pleasure to read—if reading about inequality and disadvantage in Australia can be considered pleasurable.

Popular, orthodox views that *welfare* refers exclusively to those people, for example, the unemployed or homeless who receive cash benefits to support their subsistence, are challenged and explored in depth. The authors posit that a close relationship exists between the creation of poverty and wealth in the way welfare is delivered. We are reminded of growing inequality in Australia, the persistent (if not strengthening) conceptualisation of *deserving* and *undeserving* recipients of the welfare state, the rise of middle-class welfare, and the perpetuation of false perceptions that welfare is only those most visible cash transfers. The thesis convincingly illustrates how the public portrayal of welfare in Australia is often way off the mark as it is not actually *the poor* who benefit most from the Australian welfare system. The narrow focus on the behaviour of the disadvantaged in Australia, or moral judgements about them that seem to dominate, restricts debates to the management of risk and the rationing of resources. Such narrow understandings due to a myopic, and perhaps misleading focus, fail to address structural contributors and the real needs of people. This is particularly pertinent to Australia in 2014, in terms of reallocations of responsibility and management, from the state to the private sector, charities and individual Australians and how the nature and purpose of the state is dramatically changing in that process.

This book builds on previous work by Lois Bryson published in 1992 that examined the welfare state and who benefited from it. Marston, McDonald and Bryson ask the same question about the period in Australia from 1992 to the prime ministership of Kevin Rudd. The authors aims to: explain the major structural and institutional developments in the Australian welfare system since 1992; analyse the political and policy approaches to poverty and inequality; assess the extent and direction of redistribution in the key areas of health, education, social security, superannuation and tax expenditure, the community and housing; and link welfare approaches to the redistributive outcomes of the welfare

state (p. xiii). The authors achieve their aims in a clear, easy-to-read style that will be useful for students, practitioners, educators and anyone interested in understanding the welfare system. As each key area is presented, the negative and positive impacts for different groups in society are explored. What becomes evident during the course of reading this book is how Australia's welfare policy bounces backward and forward depending on the ideological priorities of those in power and the disproportionate benefit for the better-heeled segments of society in each key area are both well-explained and justified.

The material is evidence-based and draws on research in addition to seminal works on welfare in Australia. The authors do not merely present facts. They explore historical and theoretical explanations of common misunderstandings concerning distributive mechanisms, negative attitudes towards welfare and the links between these attitudes and the design of the welfare state. Gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality and religion are identified as "intersecting and recurrent axes of inequalities" (p.129). Intriguing notions of social experimentation are discussed, such as that of "basic income" as proffered by Guy Standing (2011) where a basic subsistence wage could be provided to all people regardless of whether they are in the labour market or not.

There is insufficient room in this review to address each section in detail. A welcome addition to this book, however, is the inclusion of the social determinants of health and environmental discourses that are complicated by the disconnection between economic, social and environmental policies. Overall, the analysis is located within a moral- and value-based framework that ensures particular relevance for anyone in the welfare sector and beyond. I particularly like the exercises in this book designed to elicit a critically reflective process in the reader, to challenge beliefs and negative perceptions that may have previously gone unrecognised and, in this process, highlight the structural factors and partisan positions that define *need* and responses to that need. The exercises are ideal for students from a range of disciplines who often struggle with these challenging concepts. The questions at the end of each chapter would facilitate useful discussions around key issues.

As to its limitations, I must admit I have found few, despite the slimness of the book. The authors establish clear aims and the book achieves what the authors set out to do. The major areas of social policy are covered in a historical and comparative context and are examined critically. Competing perspectives and their influences on the welfare state and the well-being of all Australians are addressed. I read this book comfortably in two sittings and learned a few things along the way. I would like to see every Australian engage with this book—not just students, educators and professionals.

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