

**Review: Edward Broadbent (ed.), *Democratic Equality: What Went Wrong?* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).**

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Over the past two decades, the social policy realm has witnessed a counter-revolution against many of the gains of the Keynesian era, especially in the Anglo-American democracies. Under the guise of deficit-fighting and international competitiveness, neo-liberals have attacked the principles of social equality and social justice that had been at least the rhetorical foundation of Keynesian policies. The contributors to *Democratic Equality* demonstrate that the social impact of these changes has been devastating and therefore call for a renewed emphasis on substantive equality.

The strength of the collection lies in its critique of the contemporary discourse around social policy. There has been a wholesale attack on the notion of substantive equality or equality of outcome. Social policy is increasingly focused on the liberal ideal of equality of opportunity. Passive income supports have come under attack, increasingly replaced by benefits tied to labour market participation. Rather than working to reduce inequalities, “Third Way” social democrats such as John Richards focus on ‘social exclusion.’ The discourse of ‘social exclusion’ is scrutinized by Ed Broadbent and Ruth Lister. Broadbent passionately criticizes the notions of social cohesion and social inclusion as attempts to make greater inequality more acceptable. The ‘Third Way’ in both its British (Blairism) and American (Clintonism) variants comes under attack from Broadbent, Lister and Barbara Ehrenreich.

Jane Jenson takes an open-minded look at the ‘children’s agenda’ advanced by the federal government in Canada. While the Canada Child Tax Benefit has helped some families, the focus on children and equality of opportunity “has come with a cost. It has made other dimensions of equality, such as equal access to democratic institutions or fostering gender equality in the economy, the society, and the family somewhat more difficult to pursue” (112). Adults without children have become virtually invisible in social policy and are dismissed as the undeserving poor. The debate over social benefits for children and single-mothers is taken up in the chapters by Richards, Ehrenreich and Lister.

Overall, the topic and the contributions are hardly groundbreaking. Readers of Canadian political science will likely be familiar with the arguments by Richards (in support of the ‘Third Way’), Jenson (on Canada’s changing citizenship regime), Armine Yalnizyan (on the growing income gap), Robert Hackett (on the role of the media) and Jim Stanford (on the financial boom). As well, Bo

Rothstein presents the standard case for universal rather than selective social benefits in terms of democratic legitimacy, procedural justice and economic efficiency. Among the other chapters, Dietrich Rueschemeyer argues that a certain level of substantive equality is necessary to ensure democratic citizenship and a broad level of democratic participation. Rueschemeyer and Jenson both make the argument that an egalitarian political system requires material support for disadvantaged groups. Daniel Savas provides a snapshot of opinion polls on attitudes toward inequalities and the role of the state. The widespread sentiment in the US against state intervention to reduce inequalities is far beyond that in any other nation, though Canadians were the closest.

Ian Angus and G.A. Cohen, with their respective arguments for a radical form of community economic development and socialism, appear as outsiders among the rest of the contributors who advocate, at least implicitly, a return to Keynesian welfare states. Angus supports the development of local, small-scale alternatives to the market through greater use of credit unions and “diverse forms of ownership of local enterprises” which he describes as a “subsistence-oriented economy” (106). He states that “the task is to build within the shell of the old society the incipient forms of the new” (107). This vision lies somewhere between classic anarchism and contemporary theories of the social economy. While containing attractive elements, it does not represent a convincing counter to the power of the state and global capital. Cohen, an analytical Marxist, presents the case for socialism through the analogy of the socialist camping trip. His sober realism towards the feasibility of democratic planning leads him to examine market socialism as a second-best position. Cohen’s essay suffers, as he as much as admits, from the failure to address the process of advancing toward socialism. In its lack of attention to the issue of historical agency, it is a classic case of utopian socialist writing. However, he is not alone among the contributors in failing to investigate ways to move forward.

Unfortunately, the collection fails to adequately address the subtitle: *What Went Wrong?* There is little historical or theoretical attempt to address the particular confluence of events that generated and allowed for the development of the Keynesian welfare state (KWS). Nor is there an intervention into the debates around the nature of the economic crisis that undermined the KWS and ushered in neo-liberal hegemony. Debates over globalization may have become tiresome to some, but the lack of attention to this process is glaring. In passing, Broadbent makes an evocative reference to the need “to collectively challenge the hegemonic position of the United States in shaping the direction of global financial institutions” (xx).

This topic is not taken up, though it does suggest the power of the external constraints. Broadbent admits that domestic policy autonomy has been weakened but insists that different political choices are still available.

Broadbent seems to grant primary significance to the role of elected politicians in the wax and wane of egalitarian social policies. Progressive social policies apparently emerged from above, bestowed by political leaders who had learned from the experience of the Great Depression. He credits “the politically ecumenical group of leaders who took the initiative following the Second World War to launch the social rights-based welfare state” (xxvi). Similarly, the emergence of neo-liberal hegemony is reduced to a battle of ideas with Thatcher and Reagan looming large over the contemporary political scene. While ideas and leaders are important, it is still necessary to explain how neo-liberalism achieved political success. What social forces pushed neo-liberalism? And why wasn't there a stronger and more successful defence of the welfare state from the left? Rueschemeyer and Angus mention the bureaucratic nature of the welfare state, but there is no discussion of democratic administration. Perhaps the greatest blind spot is the disinterest in examining the limitations of social democratic politics during the ‘golden age’ that prevented a coherent response to the neo-liberal assault.

The way forward is not clear. Generally, the contributors hold out hope that a better world is possible (social democracy for most, socialism for Cohen), but there is little sense of how to get there. One gets the sense that many of the authors believe that if the voters could come to their senses and elect more social democrats, all would be good in the world. Broadbent argues that different welfare regimes exist and that during the 1990s, “Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden demonstrated great flexibility in policy in confronting domestic and global economic challenges. Maintaining high levels of economic productivity, they also retained strong egalitarian social policies” (xix). In this sense, domestic politics matter more than global challenges. Similarly, Jenson and Yalnizyan point to the different responses among provincial governments in Canada. However, the different European ‘models’ remain unexamined. Richards points out that in the late 1990s Sweden and Finland were the only two OECD countries to make bigger cuts to program spending (as a percentage of GDP) than Canada (39). An investigation of these ‘models’ would reveal their own problems and contradictions.

Forms of political agency remain largely untheorized. Richards insists that “[b]uilding a mass political party on the foundation of organized labour has become a fundamentally flawed strategy” (32).

Jenson looks to anti-poverty groups and the labour movement. Ehrenreich mentions the campaigns for a liveable wage and moments of welfare rights organizing in the US. Hackett calls for a popular movement for media democratization. Angus bids adieu to the proletariat and looks to social movements “which hold out the promise of renewing the project of democratic socialism” (103). Buried in an endnote is his belief in the need for a political party to help push this agenda forward. Little is said about renewing the labour movement through social movement unionism or the imperative of organizing new sectors of work. Jenson is alone in pointing to the importance of unionization for greater income equality, both historically and at present. It is true, as Standford concludes that a critique of the status quo is a necessary starting point for change. This task is accomplished within this book. Unfortunately, the task of theorizing political change lies beyond its scope.