

Book Review

Roth, W., & Peters, S. J. (2014). *The assault on social policy. (2nd ed.)* New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

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William Roth, Vincent O’Leary Professor Emeritus at SUNY-Albany, and Susan J. Peters, associate professor emeritus at Michigan State University, have attempted to interpret contemporary trends in social welfare policy through a progressive and liberal lens for those already knowledgeable about the history and basics of the American mosaic that is our welfare state. This second edition has been updated with a chapter on education that was added to those on poverty, welfare, disability, Social Security, health, children, and outsiders. A concluding chapter proposes radical democracy as the only corrective against corporate domination. The book ends with 264 endnotes and a useful index of terms, but just over 100 of the footnotes are dated since the first edition, with most coming from newspapers.

The short introduction warns the reader that the basic understanding is that social welfare policies have been under assault during the last decade, which has resulted in a crisis that requires “realistic, ‘big’ thinking” accompanied by “side trips, critiques, even ethical outrage” (p. xix). The reader will find that this book is more akin to a jazz riff than a carefully constructed evidence-based argument. The central recurring theme is that the rapid capital flows made possible by technological advances and deregulation of the financial services industry have empowered transnational corporations and disempowered nation states, leading to the decline in support for social welfare policies that require taxation. Corollaries associated with the theme include the beliefs that the haves are waging class warfare on the have-nots, that deification of markets has

commoditized almost everything and everyone, and that a form of newspeak has evolved in the media to persuade the have-nots that eviscerating social welfare programs through devolution and privatization is the American Way.

The first chapter introduces the idea of policy, but eschews defining the term. The main theme is that policy cannot be understood apart from politics, and that politics cannot be understood without understanding power dynamics and economics. Policy is both public (government) and private (corporations and institutions). Both are largely shaped by the haves in opposition to the have-nots with a focus on maintaining markets from which the haves can sustain profits. Neither haves nor markets are demonized since both can potentially structure policy to improve the life of the have-nots; however, corporations are largely demonized as autocratic – dominating private policy, coopting public policy, and manipulating have-not thinking through the media. In general, this chapter aims to convince have-nots to claim and assert democratic power by organizing.

The second chapter is a bit complex. It requires some familiarity with economic history and the workings of international law and global trade to be able to understand everything that is presented. The authors assert that free markets are not naturally occurring, but depend on legal structures. The rise of transnational corporations is linked historically to the U.S. creation of limited liability corporations, corporate personhood, and the free movement of capital worldwide. The power accruing to the trans-

national corporations has weakened the political, economic, and legal power of nation states, who must comply with corporate demands for dismantling social policy, labor organizing, and taxation.

The next eight chapters are where the jazz riff takes off as the authors play with the theme and corollaries. To illustrate, the third chapter links contemporary poverty directly to the private, corporate policy that promotes redistribution upward, higher disparities in wages and wealth, and low taxes. Along the way Roth and Peters digress to describe the expansion of lobbying, the cooptation of the nonprofit sector by the haves, the merged corporate-public neoliberal agenda to privatize or devolve social welfare programs, and the cause of the female wage gap (patriarchy) that minimizes female Social Security receipts. Their version of history following World War II illustrates the public investment in the Interstate highway system as a boon to corporations (oil, auto, and housing) and a means of segregating urban poverty in jobless ghettos. By the end, the reader may wonder why this chapter was titled "Poverty."

The riff continues in "Welfare" that explains how, to the haves, the problem is the redistribution of resources that is welfare. Welfare reform, accordingly, becomes welfare dismantlement, devolution of power to the states, and the beneficial shrinkage of the federal government. The authors then explain side issues such as the corruption of the electoral process by corporate money and the shift from positive reinforcement in social policy to a harsher and more efficient punishment approach in both TANF and law enforcement.

"Disability" policy has paternalistic roots in the national obligation to take care of those wounded during military service as far back as the American Revolution. The deeper consideration of civil and human rights for those with disabilities is much more recent, and as a result of Supreme Court decisions, an ongoing conflict. Access to public accommodations has improved since the Americans with Disability Act (ADA, 1990), but the conflict

between the promotion of employment in ADA and the unemployable eligibility criteria for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) shows the innate confusion of disability policies. The authors trace the cause of this confusion to corporate interests who prefer the interchangeability of labor units to the special accommodations required to employ people with disabilities. Corporate resistance to taxation is also perceived to be the prime opposition to increases in SSDI, special education, and vocational rehabilitation. Private charity only reinforces the paternalism, heightens the distinctions between worthy and unworthy recipients of services, and is defined by the private policy categories defined by the haves and corporations.

In "Social Security," the authors avoid the customary distinctions between public assistance and social insurance in this chapter, understanding the retirement benefits associated with Social Security as different from the insurance aspects (SSDI and survivors benefits). Strangely, they consider Aid to Dependent Children (now TANF) to be part of this insurance role. They perceive the retirement aspect of Social Security to be a pact between generations rather than as an earned entitlement. The graying of America has fueled the class warfare being waged, in the authors' view, by the haves against the have-nots that takes form in media portrayals of the looming insolvency of the Social Security Trust Fund, references to the mythology of greater efficiency of and improved rates of return in the private sector, and speculations that the transfer of resources from younger to older is unsustainable. Privatization, of course, is the corporate desire because the trust fund would flood capital markets.

In "Health" the authors espouse a belief that only a single payer health care system can effectively address the market inefficiencies of the dominance of corporations today. When once haves were vested in the public healthiness of the have-nots to avoid contagion, the improvements in medical care (vaccinations and antibiotics) have removed support for have-not health that is not contagious (obesity

and diabetes). Patient access to the highest quality of health care is determined through social networks while the have-not patient-as-consumer myth has fallen prey to the corporate-to-corporate negotiations between managed care companies, provider organizations, and insurance companies. Even government, despite the growth of Medicare and Medicaid, takes second place to the corporations, eroding individual freedom of choice in a system of technological complexity and sketchy access to information. Even physicians become subservient to the private policy of corporations; however, the authors interpret this trend as a hopeful sign pointing toward democracy as the American Medical Association advocates for unionization of medical providers.

“Children” includes a riff against the imprecise use of *role model* to promote child indoctrination into the corporate values of insatiable consumption and ever-increasingly more efficient productivity. This chapter is also a lamentation against the inadequate redistribution of money in support of families with children and the escalation of violence toward children in our society including, for some reason, the harmful effects of war on children. “Education” misinterprets the history of public education in America as an egalitarian exercise in democracy and freedom, denies the narrowing of the black-white achievement gap, denounces standardized tests of educational achievement in No Child Left Behind, and decries the disparity of educational resources between wealthy and poor local school districts. For-profit higher education and corporate infiltration into public education are soundly condemned. The reader may be left wondering how educational progress is to be measured without testing and question the wisdom of decentralization of standards when local control of public education created the perceived deficiencies now being addressed.

“Outsiders” includes a riff on the objective/subjective debate over social categorization, but quickly descends into a critique of incarceration and the overlapping categories of homelessness, drug use,

addiction, and mental illness that comprises the incarcerated population. Profits before people results in warehousing rather than rehabilitation. Opposition to immigration is contextualized as a nativist analogy to Nazism.

The concluding chapter, “Democratic Change,” is a quixotic proposal for “direct rule of civil society exercised by and for the people” (p. 188) which is interpreted to require rejection of unfettered free markets and the two-party political system dominated by the corporations. Because both corporations and bureaucracies have become totalitarian, in the authors’ view, then the proposed solution tends toward a form of market socialism in which workers control the markets and means of production.

This is a book that may find a degree of ready reception among many social workers and social work educators who have already rejected capitalism, value egalitarianism, interpret human nature as inherently empathic, and imagine that there is an alternative to social structures endowed with power and authority. Although I readily agree with the authors’ critique of corporate dominance and long for the repeal of the mythology of corporate personhood, I cannot bring myself to endorse this bleak and altruistic, but unrealistic, interpretation of social policy. In order to interpret the political and legal trends of the new millennium as an assault on social policy, the authors must ignore the advances made under Bush’s prescription drug program; improvements in civil liberties for people with disabilities, as well as gay and lesbian couples; the millions who have obtained health insurance due to the Affordable Care Act; the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit; and the expansion of SNAP. Corporate America does not speak with a single voice. Progress toward the expansion of human rights in this country may be slow and occasionally face a setback, yet that progress continues precisely through the mechanisms these authors attempt to claim uniquely for radical democracy – “community organization, genuine participation, skillful use of power, education, reason, and so on” (p. 193). May that work long continue.