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Book Review: Social Policy and the Commonwealth: Prospects for Social Inclusion

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CATHERINE JONES FINER AND PAUL SMYTH (EDS), *Social Policy and the Commonwealth: Prospects for Social Inclusion*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 247 pp. ISBN: 1-4039-2166-0; US\$69.95 (hbk).

This is a valuable addition to the international literature on comparative social policy, bringing together contributions from a range of experts on the theme of 'the Commonwealth and Social Inclusion'. The book is organized in three sections: (1) an overview; (2) national case studies: Jamaica, Botswana, South Africa, India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand and Canada; and, (3) a discussion of the Commonwealth as a transnational institution. The editors Catherine Jones Finer and Paul Smyth have structured the contributions to this collection most effectively and, in contrast to some editors, have taken seriously their task of providing a valuable overview and conclusion. It was intriguing to read the biographical note of one of the editors, Paul Smyth, who is Professor of Social Policy at the Centre for Public Policy at the University of Melbourne and Director of Research at the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne. The latter affiliation sent me to my bookshelf to re-read *Power for the Poor: The Family Centre Project – An Experiment in Self-Help*, written for the Brotherhood of St Laurence by Michael Liffman (1978) describing an innovative attempt to tackle poverty. David Donnison in a foreword pondered that the world will not often provide so large a volume of resources for 60 families over several years. He suggested that the project served to raise questions about: professions and helping relationships; leadership within agencies; and the challenges faced by welfare ventures run by and for poor people.

The volume under review is concerned with poverty and exclusion and offers a rare insight into what Catherine Jones Finer describes as 'a decent sort of international club for its member states large and (especially) small' where former colonies may be able to play, not merely upon Britain's 'imperial guilt', but upon the guilt of its white-settled Dominions in general (p. 25).

The case studies illuminate diverse historical and cultural contexts. In a short book review it is impossible to convey the richness of the case studies. Leila Patel and James Midgley describe how the Mandela government made a concerted effort to formulate a developmental approach to social welfare that would abolish the racist heritage of the apartheid era in South Africa. The authors note particularly the efforts of the United Nations (UN) to promote a social development perspective through its World Social Summit in 1995 following which the South African government adopted an important policy document known as the *White Paper for Social Welfare* which aimed to promote equity, participation and social investment. Patel and Midgley commend the political and economic transition but acknowledge the ever rising social costs as evidenced by high unemployment, rising levels of crime, domestic violence, child sexual offences and the exponential growth in the numbers of people affected by HIV/AIDS.

Laksiri Jayasyriya argues that changes in all aspects of political, economic and social life in Sri Lanka have been exacerbated by ethnic conflict and expresses the view that Sri Lanka runs the risk of emulating the Brazil of the 1970s which witnessed a prosperity favouring the middle class, leaving large sections of the poor untouched. A thoughtful essay on 'Colonial Heritage and Ethnic Exclusion in Malaysia' by Souchou Yao, writing as a Malaysian Chinese, provides a thought-provoking analysis: from British colonialism's view of Malays as 'gentle, childlike people living their simple life in innocent contentment' (p. 148) leading to what the author describes as the 'infantalisation' of the Malay subject. The failure of non-Malay communities or the Commonwealth to provide a radical critique of ethnic exclusion is regarded as highlighting the poor, underdeveloped civil society and public sphere in Sri Lanka.

Malcolm Stewart in a chapter on Canada discusses how politicians in the province of Quebec negotiated for control in such strategy areas as pension policy and immigration; instituted a network of integrated, community based health and social service centres; and, adopted a series of supportive family policy initiatives. Susan St John suggests that there is a readiness in New Zealand in the 21st century to discuss the meaning of social inclusion and a new view of the interrelationship between economic and social policies where the official discourse includes words like poverty, social inclusion and social capability. The theme of 'the Third Way' provides a unifying focus for several chapters suggesting that the 'Old Commonwealth Dominions' are receptive to policy currents that offer a humane alternative to neoliberal retrenchment, US dominated economic globalization and the dismantling of social protection.

For this reviewer the chapter by Patricia Harris on social inclusion, globalization and the Commonwealth provides an exceedingly balanced critique of the way the term social inclusion became a plank of Blair's New Labour and entered the field of policy analysis and development studies. She cautions that this, at first sight, heart-warming notion, promising greater cohesion and more shared opportunities, begs a host of questions about 'who gets to belong, to what sort of collectivity, and on what terms' (p. 29). Harris locates the term within an historic tradition whereby western theorists and administrators have pondered the relationship between market and society and in particular concerns about social order, social solidarity, and social participation and social justice. The author concludes that at an international level the principle of social order would call for laws to keep transnational capital honest while social justice would require taxes on the world's wealthy to be used for redistribution across the globe. Solidarity would demand protection of human rights so that there would be – quoting Marshall (1949/1965: 102) – a general enrichment of the concrete substance of civilized life.

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