

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

**MAEVE QUAID, *Workfare: Why Good Social Policy Ideas Go Bad*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2002, 244 p.**

Maeve Quaid attempts to explain why social policies go in and out of fashion, by focusing on the evolution of workfare policies in the United States and Canada. The strength of the text is its discussion of workfare, in particular, and of the interactive role of various stakeholders in the evolution and devolution of this "good" idea across different jurisdictions. Quaid is less successful at providing insights for a broader understanding of the formation of social policy or helping us understand the relevance of workfare at a theoretical level.

Quaid begins by discussing what constitutes a "good idea" and reviews the variety of ways that workfare has been defined. The term "good" is not used to describe moral desirability or rational soundness, but rather any idea which in a particular political, social, and historical context, can be made to appear innovative, plausible, and acceptable by various stakeholders. Thus, "good" is a socially constructed notion which is politically expedient. This sets the stage for Quaid's later discussion of how various stakeholders collude or resist to make workfare a success or failure. The first two chapters, however, are the weakest part of the book, both in terms of intellectual substance and the somewhat circular style of writing.

In the central chapters of this book, we get the real "meat" of the text. Chapter 3 provides an overall history of the concept of workfare and explains how the idea has evolved differently in both countries. Quaid then presents six case studies of the development and outcomes of workfare policies in California, Wisconsin, New York State, New Brunswick, Alberta, and Ontario, devoting a chapter to each. For each jurisdiction, she outlines the political and social context in which these policies developed and shows how these contexts account for variations in the definition and application of workfare. For example, she explains how training and education programs came to constitute the main thrust of workfare in California and New Brunswick whereas the emphasis was on direct job placement in Wisconsin and Alberta. For each case, she discusses the role of politicians, administrators, evaluators, target groups and the public in maintaining or undercutting the image of workfare as a "good" idea.

The closing chapter draws attention to six hazards that may undercut social policy innovations. These include the opportunism of politicians who use promised reform to fuel their political careers with little concern for the practicalities of implementation; the tendency of policy makers to overlook the diverse and complex needs of a policy's target groups; the way social service administrators may subvert the application of a policy if they do not agree with its underlying ideology; the resistance of target groups to buy into yet another "new" solution to their problems; the inability of evaluators to constructively assess policies which have unclear objectives to begin with; and finally, the hazard of public opinion which may be swayed by media and/or lobby groups to withdraw their support for a policy, in favour of a new "quick fix" to complex problems. Quaid presents these hazards as a "model" for understanding the evolution of social policy; while this is a good discussion of potential pitfalls, it is not a model which greatly enhances our explanatory or predictive power.

This book would be useful for any researcher who is looking for an overview of major experiments with workfare in North America. However, to my mind, Quaid does not present enough theoretical substance to nourish heuristic thinking or suggest new strategies for policy development. From a sociological perspective, I would have appreciated more discussion of the significance of workfare for notions of social entitlement or stratification. My overall impression is that the beginning and the end of Quaid's book are not quite equal to the quality of material in the middle: rather like a sandwich where the bread is not thick enough to support the juicy filling.

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