

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

GREGG M. OLSEN, *The Politics of the Welfare State: Canada, Sweden, and the United States*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press. 2002, 250 p., Index. \$29.95 paper.

The Politics of the Welfare State compares the welfare states of Canada, Sweden, and the United States. The author successfully counters convergence theorists who argue globalization has rendered irrelevant the role of politics in social policy. The book is well written, comprehensive, and yet concise, with enough tables and figures to satisfy the statistically curious without intruding on the book's essential storyline. Altogether, this book is a welcome addition to discussions of the welfare state.

Previous studies of the welfare state have frequently compared across a large number of countries. Often, these studies have lumped Canada in with the United States or the other Anglo countries. The author's choice in situating Canada between Sweden and the United States makes for a particularly refreshing change, one insufficiently mined in the past.

These themes, as stated in the introductory chapter, document the "cross-national variation in the goals, character, scope, and impact of welfare states;" to explain these variations through an examination of the interaction of "a wide range of socio-economic, socio-cultural, socio-political, and institutional factors;" and to show that these cross-national variations between welfare states continue "despite the powerful, and largely similar, domestic and external forces impinging on all nations today."

The rest of the text is divided into two parts. The first part examines national contrasts (chapters 2 and 3). Chapter 2 examines the components of welfare systems as a whole and more narrowly the welfare state component of the three countries. He focusses on three policy domains: labour market policy, health care policy, and family policy. Chapter 3 examines broader welfare state models and typologies and where each of the three examined countries may be situated.

The second part examines a series of explanations for the observed variations in the three welfare states. Chapter 4 provides a short review of structural-functionalist and structural-Marxist accounts of the functions performed by all welfare states and their failure in large part to examine gender and race in the origins and development of the welfare state.

Chapter 5 reviews cultural and ideological explanations for the observed welfare state differences in the three countries, again pointing out some limitations to this form of explanation in general. Chapter 6 examines the role of societal actors from the perspective of pluralist, instrumentalist/corporatist, "bottom up," and feminist theories. Chapter 7 concludes the second part with a review of polity centred/neo-institutionalist theory. It is clear the author views the theoretical perspectives presented in chapters 6 and 7 as offering the strongest explanation for the observed differences in the three countries.

Chapter 8 concludes with an examination of recent changes to the welfare state in the three countries. The author explores the degree to which "globalization" has resulted in pressures for policy convergence. His conclusion is that, while Sweden has had to make adjustments, its welfare state remains distinct from the American model. Unhappily, the Canadian welfare state, by contrast, has moved closer to the American model, adopting policies that are less universalistic, more means-tested, and market driven than in the past. The author suggests, contrary to arguments of inevitability, however, that the evidence suggests states still have the capacity to chart their own course – if the political will is present.

It is difficult to find real fault with this book. It would be useful (such as in Chapter 2) , however, to more broadly detail the relationship of welfare state/systems to other spheres of society, as in correlating low unemployment levels in the United States with imprisonment rates (the highest in the industrialized world) and with its large standing army. A couple of other minor suggestions: the discussion of Lipset's theory of Canadian and American value differences in chapter 5 should acknowledge recent critiques that suggest his depiction of differences may need to be reversed. For example, recent evidence suggests Canadians are today far less deferential to authorities than are Americans. The discussion of the declining power of American unions after the 1950s should also include some consideration of the role of the Cold War and the anti-communist crusades of the period.

This book could be used in a variety of university courses in sociology and political science. Given current debates over health care in Canada, it also should be a must read for Canadian politicians and policy-makers, who too often look south for their policy directions.

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