

For whose benefit? The everyday realities of welfare reform

Ruth Patrick

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The study upon which Ruth Patrick bases this book provides a vivid account of the lived experiences of out-of-work social security recipients in the UK during the years between 2011 and 2016; the period of David Cameron's premiership. It sets out on the one hand, to counter 'poverty-porn' media portrayals of the lives of social security recipients and on the other, to demonstrate the disconnect between dominant conceptions or narratives of social citizenship and the disempowering effects of the 'welfare reforms' imposed during this particular era. Using qualitative longitudinal research methods it explores the quotidian realities of the lives of some 22 recipients (several of whom were followed throughout the 5 years of the study); it describes their precarious connections with the labour market; it investigates the often counterproductive effects of the policies to which they were subjected; it reflects on the implications of the contrived stigma associated with their socially constructed status; and it recounts and analyses their diverse life-trajectories. The book concludes with a call for the reframing of the dominant policy narrative so as to prioritise substantive social security, rather than pejorative and persistent constructions of 'welfare dependency'.

For Whose Benefit? is an important book. Yet paradoxically, the people most likely to read it will be those who are largely familiar with the kinds of stories it has to tell and with the malign nature of the mythologies it debunks. In many respects Ruth Patrick has ably replicated several strands of past research, but what is valuable is that she has generated rich contemporary data that confirm the enduring validity of previous findings even in the context of a rapidly changing policy environment. In the midst of ever more frantic processes of 'welfare reform' the message from citizens forced into reliance on what was once called social security, is that they are still experiencing chronic insecurity, stigma and disempowerment.

Nevertheless, the book has two significant limitations. First, it is for the most part parochially focused on the UK. Though the author acknowledges that counterparts to the 'reforms' pursued in the UK may be found in other countries, her work might have attracted a wider readership had she drawn further upon research from elsewhere and so demonstrated the relevance of her findings in relation to global influences that currently affect and constrain social security policies around the world. Secondly, the book is framed within relatively narrow historical and theoretical boundaries. The findings it presents amount to a powerful demonstration of continuity as much as change. A more widely-framed analysis might have brought out the ways in which the immanent logic of the disciplinary mechanisms vested in current functioning of the UK's social security system resonates with that to be detected in earlier cycles of 'reform', dating back as far as the Victorian Poor Law.

Such a framing might have led to a rather more assertive conclusion. Upon first seeing the title of this book my mind was taken back to 1985 and a book entitled *Who's to Benefit? A Radical Review of the Social Security System*, by Peter Esam, Robert Good and Rick Middleton (London: Verso). That was a very different book. Ruth Patrick's conclusion is that Coalition and Conservative government reforms since 2010 failed to benefit – and in some instances damaged – those they were purportedly designed to assist. Esam, Good and Middleton's conclusion was that an earlier Conservative

government's reform proposals (The Fowler Review) would fail to meet human needs and be of benefit only to capital and the capitalist system. The innovative and detailed alternative they proposed was premised on a counter-narrative that challenged neo-liberal orthodoxies concerning the affordability of social security cash transfers and is, arguably, as relevant in the current era of austerity politics as it was then.

But this observation in no way diminishes the contribution that *For Whose Benefit?* can make, particularly if it is to be widely cited and put on students' reading lists as a source of contemporary evidence regarding the everyday realities faced by benefits recipients who are not so much citizens exercising social rights as the subjects of welfare conditioning.

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