



Book review

Theoretical Criminology

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DOI: 10.1177/1362480617696117

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David Garland, *The Welfare State: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2016; 176 pp.: 9780199672660, £7.99 (pbk)

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Perceptive capitalists have long understood that they need reformist anti-capitalism to ensure their survival, while irrational capitalists have insisted on fighting social democracy against their own best interests in the long-run. As David Garland points out in a marvellously dialectical passage, '[t]o avoid self-destruction capitalism needs a set of countervailing forces' (p. 137). 'And welfare states are the embodiment of these forces established in a functional, institutional form.'

The book is divided into nine chapters. Garland asks what a welfare state is, what existed prior to it and what the circumstances of its genesis were, before going on to probe key challenges to the welfare state—including neoliberalism and nativism—and ask what the future trajectory taken by this political device might look like. That covers a lot of ground, even for a Very Short Introduction. No doubt specialists will find material missing that to them will seem absolutely essential. But the very parsimony of Garland's book is its foremost strength. It fills an appreciable gap in the literature, serving as a pithy summary of what the welfare state has been, what it now is and what it may yet become.

Chapter 1 asks what the welfare state is. Garland proposes three distinctive elements: the welfare state offers a minimal form of poverty relief; a series of social services (including social insurance schemes and public institutions of education and healthcare); and instruments for macroeconomic management. Garland argues that the very notion of a 'welfare state' is something of a misnomer: they are 'not primarily about "welfare"' in the pejorative sense of granting cash transfers to the poor, but about providing 'social insurance, social rights, social provision, and the social regulation of economic action' (p. 3). The main beneficiaries of these actions are 'not the poor but the middle classes and those in employment'. Mortgage subsidies to the homeownership middle classes and tax breaks for multinational corporations are a significant drain on many governments' coffers. It is a peculiar feature of contemporary political orthodoxy that welfare for the rich provokes so little ire while welfare for the poor is the source of all manner of moral panics and carnivalesque television programming.

Chapter 2 asks what preceded the welfare state's arrival by the mid-20th century. Welfare states were a reaction to an absence produced by unfettered market capitalism, constituting the second half of what Polanyi called the 'double movement', a swing from the tyranny of *laissez-faire* to the protective cover of de commodification. Still, all states had to some extent been concerned with the welfare of their inhabitants prior to this. Even authoritarian regimes have had to shore up their legitimacy one way or other. In this respect, Foucauldian biopolitics is not anything particularly new: poor relief and social aid have been practised for millennia, albeit selectively, remedially and under the moralizing oversight of religious institutions. Traces of this genesis can be found in modern welfare states.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the early days of the welfare state. Garland recognizes in part the historical fiction that is the grand narrative of a swing from *laissez-faire* to de commodification from the 19th to the 20th centuries. In the 1870s, 'the Victorian state—despite its *laissez-faire* principles and the Treasury's efforts to minimize expenditure—was already an activist, social policy state' (p. 36), a point that connects with contemporary re-readings of neoliberalism as an ideology of expansive statecraft. Garland also effectively summarizes a source of tension at the core of the welfare state: that it was developed to 'humanize capitalism', and yet also to 'make it more resistant to the challenge of socialism' (p. 42). This made it attractive to parties of both left and right, but also turned it into a constant tug-of-war between opposite political forces. The only notable political feature that Bismarck, Hitler, Roosevelt, Clinton and Bush have in common is that they could all sign on to some version of the welfare state. The welfare state as such—the idea of 'humanizing capitalism'—is not an idea that divides, even if its actual, concrete instantiation does.

To address this issue, Chapter 5 asks what varieties of welfare capitalism exist. Here Garland is content to draw on Esping-Andersen's (1990) 'three worlds of welfare capitalism' typology. Garland gives a passing nod to its limitations: after all, 80 per cent of the world's population is left out of Esping-Andersen's account, including China and India—whole continents, in fact. This (admittedly acknowledged) exclusive focus on the West is one of the major impediments to understanding the dynamic of markets and states. If one is to understand the way welfare capitalism is headed today, one simply must study China's brand of authoritarian capitalism and try to divine what the divorce proceedings between liberal democracy and market society hold in store for the West. One might also cast a glance towards the Gulf States' brand of nativist welfarism, founded on the backs of a disposable class of migrant labourers—a reminder, Garland writes, of the 'role played by the universal franchise in creating universalist welfare states' (p. 78)—and consider whether their example does not (and did not) forewarn the nativist politics of dualization currently thriving in the Euro-American heartland.

The final four chapters collectively focus on the challenges and probable future course of welfare states. Garland is scathing of neoliberalism, which he understands as entailing tax cuts, privatization, financial deregulation, credit expansion, the deterioration of public services and the introduction of New Public Management in managing the day-to-day affairs of the state. Garland argues (with Jamie Peck) that workfare was rolled out not to create jobs for those out of work, but to create workers who would accept whatever low-quality jobs might be available at the lower rungs of the service economy. In a line of

reasoning echoing Wacquant's (2012) analysis, neoliberalism is held to be not so much about slimming down the state but about retraining its focus.

The book's relevance to criminology is largely indirect. One short paragraph discusses the interconnections between neoliberalism and prison expansion in the United States. Of course, one recurring motif in the book is the central role played by the welfare state in stabilizing the social order and elevating human well-being: capitalism would be infinitely more damaging were it not tamped down by the welfare state, this book suggests. Between the lines, Garland seems to be arguing that crime is lowered and punishment made less severe in those countries that enjoy the benefits of a generous, universal welfare state.

Garland remains a cautious optimist. He sees 'challenges' on the horizon, primarily related to the problem of work in a post-industrial era of increasing automation and mobile capital. Under such conditions, the crucial question remains how to effectively deal with 'long-term joblessness, precarious employment, [and] mass unemployment' (p. 126). Of course, unemployment has been vanquished by the welfare state in decades past and it may do so again. It remains to be seen whether Garland's upbeat reformism and insistent belief that tinkering with the machinery of markets, providing an 'essential counterweight to problem-prone capitalist economies' (p. 138), is capable of resolving the novel tensions—one is tempted to say *contradictions*—at the heart of capitalism in the new millennium.

There are reasons to be sceptical. Instead, we may be entering a post-humanizing period in the history of capitalism. If there is anything to lament it is not so much the disappearance of 'the welfare state' as such—it means too many things to too many people—but the retreat of those particular ideological movements capable of bringing capitalism to heel.

References

- Esping-Andersen G (1990) *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Wacquant L (2012) Three steps to a historical anthropology of actually existing neoliberalism. *Social Anthropology* 20(1): 66–79.