

POVERTY by Ruth Lister, Polity Press, 2004
THE POVERTY WARS by Peter Saunders, UNSW Press, 2005

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Ruth Lister and Peter Saunders, in their respective books, discuss and debate the important issues around poverty – its conceptualisation and measurement, its causes and consequences, and whether poverty is a useful concept in developed countries.

Both authors have had a long history of research and writing in the area of social policy. Ruth Lister takes a sociological and gender perspective, and incorporates wider notions of social exclusion and citizenship, drawing on her experience with the Child Poverty Action Group (in the United Kingdom) and as a member of the independent Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power. Peter Saunders's starting point is as a social democratic economist, with his work as Director of the Social Policy Research Centre in New South Wales putting him at the forefront of Australian debates on poverty research and social security reform.

Given their backgrounds, it is interesting that Lister's book is the academic tome – with a careful analysis of the links between poverty and related topics of social exclusion, inequality, human rights and citizenship – while Saunders provides more of an emotive plea, both to recognise that poverty still exists in a wealthy country like Australia and for poverty research to move beyond debates over statistical measurement to analysing the causes and consequences of poverty on individuals and society. The approaches taken by the authors reflect the current state of the debate on poverty within their respective countries. In Australia, Peter Saunders's namesake and nemesis at the neo-liberal Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) seems to have captured the media and political debate, disputing that the existence of poverty is anything other than a failure by the poor themselves, abetted by overgenerous welfare state programmes. This approach seems reminiscent of New Zealand during the 1990s.

In the United Kingdom, poverty and its alleviation are centre stage for the Blair government, and while there may be debates over causes and cures, the acceptance of the concept of poverty allows Lister time to explore its deeper meanings and implications rather than ensuring poverty remains on the political agenda. She has the luxury of being able to explore the debates as to whether poverty is caused by individual traits

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or better explained by societal/structuralist concepts of class, gender, race, geography and disability. Her discussion on discourses such as othering (“the labelling and stigmatizing of marginalized social groups”) and social exclusion (which underpins the causes of social dynamics) provide the antidote to the CIS-based Peter Saunders and, when combined with discussion on human rights and citizenship, shows the need “to embed anti-poverty policies within wider policy debates” of a general social inclusion strategy.

When the academic Peter Saunders changes tack from an advocate to a researcher, his coverage of topics overlaps with those of Lister, though at the more intuitive level suitable for the intended audience of those in the front line of anti-poverty policy development and implementation. Lister’s book is far more academic, but essential reading for those in government departments dealing with issues of social development and exclusion, and also for notions of integrated and coordinated policy formulation. Both authors argue that for poverty research to be creditable it has to be grounded in the experiences of the poor, and commensurate with community values and norms, and both draw on the qualitative experiences of the poor to support their claims.

However, measurement of the extent and severity of poverty is the first element in the development of anti-poverty policies, requiring the setting of a poverty standard. Here it is a pity that neither author drew on the work of the New Zealand Poverty Measurement Project (Stephens et al. 1995, Waldegrave et al. 1996), because their use of focus groups provided a method for integrating household experience of surviving on low incomes with a quantitative poverty standard. Although this approach takes away the strictures both authors make about the arbitrary nature of most statistical poverty work, their warnings that poverty research must not be confined to ascertaining which groups in society will have a higher incidence of poverty are well made. Statistical measurement concentrates attention on lack of income as the cause of poverty, rather than asking what factors in society lead some individuals or groups to have a lack of income. Debate tends to focus on the level of the poverty standard rather than the factors required for individuals to function in society and achieve their capabilities, and measurement means that the dynamic, multi-dimensional and interactive nature of poverty is overlooked.

Both authors want to move the poverty debate forward from income poverty into the analysis of deprivation (along the lines of the Ministry of Social Development’s Living Standards Survey – see Jensen et al. 2003); capability, functioning and social exclusion (see Salmond and Crampton 2001 for a New Zealand forerunner); and poverty dynamics (Ballantyne et al. 2004 provide a New Zealand foretaste). This wider perspective on poverty permits a better analysis of the causes and consequences of poverty and exclusion.

Although Saunders is concerned with direct effects such as local labour market failings, or trigger events such as sick children or disability, Lister looks behind those issues in search of even deeper meanings, such as societal structures, denial of participation, infringement of human and citizens rights, and lack of voice and power. She places poverty in the context of socio-economic inequality and social class, and while social exclusion is separate from poverty, it provides a useful lens through which poverty can be analysed. The variables Saunders considers are more amenable to policy than those of Lister, and thus have greater potential for alleviation and amelioration of poverty. However, unless a longer-term strategy is taken to address the concerns that Lister raises, poverty will always be with us.

And although local poverty research is moving from statistical measurement and concentration on income poverty into this deeper understanding, New Zealand is still vulnerable to a return to the 1990s when poverty (then known as “the P word”) could not be mentioned in official circles. Poverty became a political issue when the implications for health care outcomes and educational attainment were shown: neither book really spends sufficient space to demonstrate how the issue of poverty can be maintained on the political agenda, especially through the analysis of the consequences of poverty. Instead, Saunders concludes with a request for both a set of inter-related poverty indicators and a European Union commitment to address poverty. In her book, Lister remains above that requirement, knowing that the United Kingdom’s well-respected Child Poverty Action Group will be at the forefront of political advocacy. Instead, she makes us confront our own views and notions of the concepts of poverty, its definitions, measures and causes, so that ultimately the understanding of poverty can lead to the correct explanations and policy prescriptions.

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