

Brij Mohan and Guy Backman *Social Policy on the Cusp: Values, Institutions and Change*. New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc. 2020. 305 pp. Reviewed by William W.L. Wong, PhD, Former Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Hong Kong Baptist University. Prepared for *Social Development Issues*.

Social Policy on the Cusp: Values, Institutions and Change is comprised of 3 parts, Part One written by Brij Mohan and has 5 chapters. Part Two also consists of 5 chapters and is by Guy Backman. Part Three consists of two chapters and the authors are Stan Weeber and Eleni Makri respectively.

The writing of Part One is eclectic, deeply analytical, and mixes with anecdotal interfaces. In Mohan's own words it "gives a perspective in light of ideas that usually escape critical examination" (p. xvi). He emphasises de-mythologizing social phenomena. By digging into the past, in Foucault's way, the aim is to uncover root-causes of human problem. Part One has two key themes. Firstly, it is a critical reflection of enlightenment, hope, happiness, modernity, nihilism, post-colonialization (mainly India sub-continent), racism and AI-techno-totalitarianism. Mohan laments human absurdity and material progress. Due to "the loss of civility" (p.44), current human condition is but "a paradoxical outcome of dysfunctional development" (ibid.), and that "modernity, however, sharpens the jaws of oppressive machinery" (p. 50) as represented by authoritarian policies. Secondly, it examines social policymaking, social work education and social work practice. He notes that the de-coupling of micro-individual problem from the macro-societal sphere produces a therapeutic society, constituting individual-therapist dyad (ITD). Wellness of being is a shared responsibility manifested by policy choices (p. xvi) and ITD is a piece-meal individual problem-solving which undermines holistic development of social policy and cultural change.

In Part Two, Backman's writing is a combination of comparative-historical and empirical-evaluative approach. He highlights the plight of risk society (Beck, U.) and the runaway world (Giddens, A.) as scenarios of the chaotic world. Three of the chapters are historical accounts of social policy development ranging from post-war Western welfare countries to post-industrial and digital society. The comparison is country/region-based (UK, US, Nordic, Southern and Eastern European, China and Japan) with a focus on social welfare, social policy and social work. Comparative statistical data is employed in the analysis of issues such as poverty, social exclusion, refugees, migrants, ageing and child poverty. One chapter is about the inertia of change. He argues that inertia can be overcome by new social hope, trust (p.92) and human-centredness (p. 97). Another chapter is about digital economy and social policy. It mentions digital revolution, algorithmic solution, robotic technology and human relationship, eldercare and the dark side of digital culture (p.180). Painstakingly, Backman reminds reader of the relevance of Gunnar Myrdal's work such as *Asian Drama* and value-based social policy. Globally, no matter whether it is global north or south, poor governance and developmental issues are everywhere. Thus, values for the betterment of humankind should be the top priority of social policymaking.

In Part Three, Weeber examines the social policy implications of the development of smart cities, resilient city movement and the 5th Generation wireless network (5G) in the US. Weeber warns that the pro-business agenda which facilitates the development of a community digital infrastructure would leave the poor and vulnerable people behind. Climate change, digital surveillance and citizen privacy are discussed and, because of neo-liberal thinking in policymaking, community resilience becomes individual and family's responsibility. The chapter by Makri is about religious diversity and new global media workforce. Makri argues that a policy of religious diversity can be a good inclusive force for the globalised digital workforce, including the millennials and older employees. The strengths of different religions are outlined. They may motivate people to be caring and loyal towards their colleagues and organisations.

Implicit among the arguments, the book continues Karl Polanyi's analysis and argues that the current economic market and its related policies have created enormous social and economic inequality because of the state's neglect of her role in the protection of society. The book also depicts a picture which resonates Walter Benjamin's concern for the future of humankind as personified by the portrait of *Angelus Novus* (Paul Klee) that the past and present of the world are bitter and the future looks bleak. However, in a different note, the book is optimistic that if stakeholders could come together to "share a common vision about the world's cohesiveness despite grave inequalities around the globe" (p. xvii), and to act collectively, to reformulate policies that could "annihilate social and economic injustice to achieve universal human dignity" (p. xiv). In sum, the book conveys a strong message that by picking up the broken pieces of society, and through collective effort in reconstructing a new global moral order, that a social policy for people can then be realised.

Reference:

Beck, U. (1992) *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. London: SAGE.

Benjamin, W. (1968) "Theses on the philosophy of history" in *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books. pp.257-258

Giddens, A. (2000) *Runaway world: How globalisation is reshaping our lives*. London; Routledge.

Myrdal, G. (1968) *Asian drama: An inquiry into the poverty of nations, (Volume I, II & III)*. A Twentieth Century Fund Study. New York: Pantheon.

Polanyi, K. (2001) *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time*. Boston: Beacon Press. 2nd edn.