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scottish justice matters



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BOOK REVIEW

Poverty in Scotland 2014. The Independence Referendum and Beyond

John H McKendrick, Gerry Mooney, John Dickie, Gill Scott and Peter Kelly.

Child Poverty Action Group available from

<http://www.cpag.org.uk/bookshop/policyresearch/poverty-scotland-2014>



POVERTY IN SCOTLAND 2014

takes a closer look at the changing political landscape within Scotland and outlines the evidence in relation to poverty, its main dimensions, dynamics and its uneven social and geographical impacts. Ultimately the book successfully challenges the myths perpetuated about poverty and those who live in poverty. The book is divided into six sections covering the nature of poverty, the evidence, welfare and constitutional questions, principles for a more equitable Scotland and perspectives from Europe and beyond.

In his introduction, Gerry Mooney highlights the regressive austerity measures currently being implemented in the UK. From the first page, Mooney completely undermines the idea that 'we are all in this together' and points to the disproportionate impact of current welfare reform on women, children and other groups in the population. He concludes that the problem is ultimately

not the amount of resources we have but the distribution of that wealth (p.10).

The first half of the book focuses mainly on statistical measures of poverty. There is a lot of clear evidence both presented and explained. However, there could have been room for more qualitative evidence reflecting the voices of those living in poverty, to give a voice to the numbers as it were. In chapter eight, John McKendrick interweaves quotes from people living on a low income. This is very effective in highlighting the stark reality of life for many people. The book would have benefited from more of a mix of qualitative and quantitative evidence.

As the latest in a series that began in 2002, this edition focuses on the Scottish Independence referendum in September 2014. The authors' consideration of what this means for Scotland and its potential future is particularly engaging. The arguments for and against are presented directly in section four.

Chapter six contrasts the Scottish Government's commitment to reduce income inequality by 2017, with the reality of its persistence. What then makes the book refreshing is that it is followed by a full section on key principles to address and reduce poverty, insecurity and inequality. Chapter 16 by Stephen Boyd, stands out: it outlines the salient issues of wages, the labour market and low pay, pointing out that "it is difficult to conceive of an agenda so damaging to the interests of workers and communities while being so irrelevant to the challenges facing the economy" (p.213). Throughout the book gender inequalities are highlighted, and then brought together by Angela O'Hagan (Chapter 19) to show that despite current promises of "jam tomorrow", the bread is cut pretty thin in 2014" (p.233). Section five, on principles for a more

equitable Scotland, echoes Wilkinson and Pickett's (2010) argument that everyone benefits from more equal societies and takes this further, as all the authors are passionate about the ability to address the persistence of poverty.

The book also contains some interesting and pertinent explorations of international contexts of poverty and anti-poverty policy. The insight gained from looking at Spain, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Canada and the Nordic states constitutes a real bonus in section six. It reinforces the idea that the status quo can change and Scotland can learn a lot by looking at the pitfalls and successes of other countries.

For those teaching social policy, social justice or anything related to inequality and poverty this book is recommended. The chapters are 'bite-size' and perfect for student reading while not being overwhelming. There are also several tables that will be very useful for teaching undergraduates the factors relating to poverty in a clear and helpful way. While social justice as a concept is not directly dealt with, matters relating to it are interspersed and I would place this as a must read for anyone interested in social justice.

Overall, the book presents more than simply a picture of poverty: it highlights the importance of political decisions and the steps that need to be taken to tackle poverty, which, in the words of Nicola Sturgeon at the book's launch, is a "badge of shame on everybody". On this note, *Poverty in Scotland 2014* successfully brings attention and a renewed focus to the root causes of poverty in Scotland.

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