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BOOK REVIEW

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Pete Alcock, *Understanding Poverty* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 304, £21.99 (paperback), ISBN: 1-4039-4093.

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The notion of poverty, and those individuals that experience its burden, has a long-standing history among all societies. One cannot deny that being poor, but more importantly growing up poor, is an expensive proposition, related to such outcomes as out-of-wedlock births, incarceration, premature death and morbidity, as well as the lack of means to remove oneself from the situation. In the most recent iteration of his text on poverty, Pete Alcock discusses poverty outcomes by incorporating the most current developments in research and policy that have occurred over the last decade, both within and outside the United Kingdom (UK).

The book is organized into four readable sections. Part 1 – The Context of Poverty, contains four chapters that provide an introduction to the what, who and why of poverty, as well as concluding comments in chapter four that provide an outline of the context of poverty from an international perspective. Without this introductory discussion of the underlying dimension of poverty, one could not fully comprehend the extent of the material presented in the preceding three sections.

In Part 2 – Definition and Measurement, chapters 5–8 expand upon the introductory section by providing a more detailed discussion into how poverty can be defined, and once defined, how best to measure it, as well as discussing the dynamics of poverty and the notion of social exclusion and how this leads to problems of social polarization and differentiation. Alcock provides a detailed discussion about the differences between an absolute and a relative definition of poverty.

An *absolute definition of poverty* is an objective, and even scientific, definition based on the notion of “subsistence,” which involves determining what is the least amount of income needed to sustain a person. One criticism often made about an absolute definition of poverty is that different people need different things in different places according to differing circumstances. On the other hand, a *relative definition of poverty* is a subjective assessment based upon an existing social standard that involves an element of judgment within its definition. A relative measure of poverty involves a measure of the average standard of the whole of society in which poverty is being studied, and is usually associated with social welfare programs and measuring the gains toward eliminating poverty. Irrespective of the definition used to assess poverty, the common thread among the definitions is that low income results in a lack of necessities.

Once the notion of poverty, and the ways that it can be measured in a society are defined, it is possible to see which individuals are most likely to be at risk for the consequences of poverty. This is just what the author does in Part 3 – Social Divisions and Poverty. The four chapters that make up this section, provide a discussion of the covariates of poverty: gender, race and ethnicity, age, and disability status.

On the issue of gender, Alcock argues that women are at a greater risk of poverty and that their experiences can be quite different from those of men. Facts that support this idea are that women experience an unequal status with men in the labor market, and they tend to have greater responsibility in household production, such as child rearing and caring for other dependent adults in the household. As with women, racial and ethnic minorities have been linked to having a greater risk of poverty. The plight of racial and ethnic minorities, Alcock argues, can be attributed to the overt discrimination they experience in the labor market, which has resulted in lower wages and social exclusion.

On the issue of age, the general observation is that the very young and the elderly tend to have a greater poverty. While child poverty is not a new social phenomenon, it is one of the more persistent concerns of society and is often compounded if the child is part of a racial or ethnic minority. Similarly, while the elderly have a greater risk of poverty, the added dimension of being a woman of a racial or ethnic minority further compounds the issue.

Finally, on the issue of disability, this notion covers a wide scope of physical and mental conditions. While disability may not be a permanent state, the relationship between poverty and disability can be complex. As Alcock points out, the data suggests that the disabled are at a greater risk of poverty and that

those who care for them are also at a greater risk of poverty and social exclusion. However, much of the deprivation associated with these individual characteristics (gender, race, ethnicity, age, disability) could be minimized or alleviated by either the expansion or modification of existing social welfare programs, which is the topic of the concluding section.

Alleviating or minimizing the plight of those in poverty, as well as those at risk of poverty, has a long-standing history in the political agenda of the western world in general and of the UK in particular. The book's final section provides a detailed assessment of the UK's past and current social policies initiatives to alleviate poverty's adverse outcomes. Current policy initiatives have focused on either the horizontal or vertical redistribution of income – where a *horizontal* redistribution focuses on the underlying social insurance approaches to social security, while *vertical* redistribution has been the underlying focus of social assistance. However, the causes and consequences of persistent poverty are more complex and require policies that move beyond traditional prescriptions based upon the approaches of social security and social insurance. While such policy norms are effective when dealing with short-term bouts of poverty that result from downturns in the business cycle and provide those affected with much needed financial support in their time of need, social programs based on the basic income principal could provide those with the greatest need – those less fortunate who continually face the burden of poverty – a source of financial support beyond mere subsistence. Any future debates and discussions on alleviating poverty in the industrialized economies, the UK or otherwise, need to follow a policy prescription that takes a hybrid approach combining the ideas of social security and insurance with the basic income principle. Under this type of policy initiative it may be possible for the persistently poor to have the means to remove themselves from the situation.

The latest edition of Pete Alcock's very readable *Understanding Poverty* will contribute to any individual's understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty, as well as provide some fresh perspectives and discussions for both academics and policy makers to consider in their future discussions of remedying poverty. As with previous editions, it would not be surprising to find that this recent edition becomes the standard by which other texts on the subject of poverty are measured, both in the UK and abroad.

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