

By Alex Waddan. Cheltenham, UK, and Brookfield, MA: Edward Elgar, 1997. 204p. \$70.00.

Stathis N. Kalyvas, New York University

How did the Right win the battle of ideas surrounding the welfare state? How did liberals allow the debate to shift from social justice and poverty to dependency? In other words, how did important parts of New Right ideology permeate the liberal consciousness and become established parts of the conventional wisdom? This book discusses the rise and crisis of the welfare state in the United States and offers an argument explaining the ideological defeat of pro-welfare liberals by the Right. It provides a detailed overview of welfare state-building, beginning with President Johnson's War on Poverty (particularly the Economic Opportunity Act) and including numerous defeated initiatives, such as President Nixon's negative income tax and family assistance plan, and President Carter's Program for Better Jobs and Income. The book's twin focus is on social policy and the ideological context in which it is conceived and implemented.

Waddan is particularly keen on explaining "the open and agonizing nature of the collapse of faith in the capacity of social welfare liberalism to provide solutions" (p. 46). The central argument is that the way in which the welfare state was built in the 1960s undermined its future: the model underpinning it was not viable in the long term; whatever its merits, it could not last. Overly optimistic and naive liberal reformers defined poverty in a self-defeating way conducive to political and ideological confusion. Overall expectations surrounding the War on Poverty were unrealistic. A philosophical ambiguity and an ad hoc nature seemed to permeate the whole effort. The demise of the welfare state was inherent from the very beginning and in its very core. Even when the ideas enjoyed a political hegemony, Waddan argues, there was little consideration of the long-term implications of welfare policies. While governments engaged in the correction of identifiable social wrongs, there was either an unwillingness or an inability to think through the possible implications of each incremental measure, an absence of reflection about the societal costs imposed by welfare policies, and a reluctance to assume these costs and implement adequate reforms.

An example of how the unrealistic expectations of liberal reformers hurt their long-term goals is the way in which they sabotaged the Nixon-era reforms, particularly the family assistance plan, thus missing an opportunity to fortify a philosophy committing government to help the poor under virtually any circumstances. Welfare measures slugged along in a haphazard way: No real integrated structure was created, while the continued expansion of welfare rolls was not followed by a rationalization of the system. The fragmented nature of the welfare structure, particularly its residual-type elements, made it an easy target for opponents. As a result, when welfare policies met with the fiscal pressures stemming from the economic dislocations of the 1970s, particularly the recession of 1979-80, they were promptly defeated on the ideological front. It was an easy task for the New Right to connect the issue of taxation with the notion of the undeserving poor, turn poverty into dependency on welfare, and drive home its point that welfare programs undermined both the health of the overall economy and the dignity of the individual.

Although this is an interesting and plausible argument, it is just that: an argument. No competing explanations are offered, no alternative hypotheses examined. Indeed, Waddan readily acknowledges that his book is "essentially a commentary" on the crisis of the welfare state in the United States (p. 9). He does not make any particular effort to convince the reader why his

argument is more valid than others that have been (or can be) advanced to explain the same phenomenon. Moreover, even the causal mechanisms underpinning his argument are never specified; they are vague and shifting. A comparative framework could have helped in this respect. (In fact, the book's title is misleading; its subject is the politics of social welfare in the United States.) Although Waddan claims that the American case is a valuable guide to the problems encountered by the European welfare states, he takes a stand in favor of U.S. exceptionalism: "Clearly developments in the US cannot be divorced from the country's particularly idiosyncratic historical approach to social welfare issues; and obviously this tradition helps to explain why American liberalism has suffered such a spectacular and painful crisis of confidence" (p. 3).

Waddan then points out (p. 172), however, that the "relatively weak collectivist traditions" of the United States do "not fully explain quite why liberal advocates were so badly beaten." This vagueness underlines the absence of a rigorous specification of the central hypothesis. A related but more serious problem is the absence of theory from the analysis. Even though Waddan refers to welfare state theories (such as Offe's and Esping-Andersen's) at the beginning and end of the book, he makes no systematic attempt to connect his argument to these. On a more general level, while he makes several implicit assumptions about the role of ideas in the success or failure of social policies, there is no explicit theoretical discussion of either the role of ideas in policy-making or the interaction among ideas, interests, and structures; Waddan seems to ignore the thriving relevant debates.

The absence of original data, a research design, and a theoretical framework turns this book into a purely descriptive account of the politics of social welfare in the United States. It is certainly possible to argue that descriptive works do not require a full-fledged research design and theoretical framework but the presence of many implicit and explicit causal claims in the analysis interferes with the description. Although this book could serve as both a factual reference and a commentary on welfare politics in the United States, it is hardly the only one in the market. After all, the author himself suggests (p. 29) a book which, he claims, provides a lengthier and more comprehensive account than his of interpretations about the origins and long-term development of the welfare state.

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