

Cameron Parsell, Andrew Clarke, and Francisco Perales (2022)

Charity and Poverty in Advanced Welfare States

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Charity and Poverty in Advanced Welfare States is a thoughtful and engaging book, providing insight, and provoking challenge in equal measure.

Parsell and his co-authors maintain that “charity [as presently enacted] is not well suited to address the material dimensions of poverty”, and that there is a “need for a revised model of charity” that has “the capacity to contribute to social solidarity... [that]... bridges social divisions and is inclusive of the poor”. To this end the authors ask important questions which frame the content and determine the objectives of their book:

... how can we understand and conceptualize society’s willingness to engage in charitable acts towards the poor, and how can charity be reimagined to contribute to justice in an unjust society? (Frontispiece)

The ‘Advanced Welfare States’ of the book’s title are not individually identified, but by implication comprise the constituent countries of North America, Europe, and parts of Oceania. The introductory chapters (1-3) provide an overview of the debates relating to the role of charity in existing welfare states and an outline of the author’s theoretical approach. Australia, the home country of the authors, acts as a case study of welfare retrenchment and associated ideological trends (Chapters 4 & 5). Four of Australia’s predominant national news outlets provide the raw material for an analysis of the role of media in shaping public opinion and views on charity (Chapter 6), and the authors’ own ethnographic research on the attitudes and motivation of charity ‘givers’ (Chapter 7) and of charity ‘recipients’ (Chapter 8) is Australia based. The concluding Chapter 9 presents the authors’ “lofty ideal[s]” (p.184) of how charity’s role in contemporary and future societies can be “reimagined” (p.172).

While the Australian case studies are intrinsically interesting, the question arises – but is not addressed – of how representative Australian trends and trajectories are of developments in other advanced welfare states. As Esping-Anderson demonstrated over 30 years ago, neoliberalism has spawned several variants of welfare states. More recently and specifically, Joel Duggen (2022), following Castles (2001), has

argued that Australia is a ‘unique welfare state’ whose history and development differs significantly from other countries claiming the ‘welfare’ epithet.¹

There is much to be gleaned from this book about the sociology and psychology of human behaviour and individual motivation – especially with regard the complex and often conflicting motives of charity workers – and the Australian case studies are informative about the trajectory and impact of welfare retrenchment and the role of media in fostering government policy and ideology. For the purposes of this review however, I will focus on three issues which arguably shape the principal narrative of this book, namely: how charity can be reimagined to more effectively contribute to social justice. First is the question of the *asymmetry* between the ‘givers’ and the ‘receivers’ of charity, with the former identified as active agents and the latter as passive recipients; an imbalance which Parsell & Co² argue needs to be rectified if social justice objectives are to be achieved. Second is the argument that charity, as presently practiced, requires a change from a focus on “ameliorative charity to transformative charity” (p.172); that is, to move on from dealing with the symptoms of poverty to recognise and effectively challenge the *systemic and structural causes* of poverty. A third, more contentious theme relates to the promotion by neoliberal welfare states of *ethical citizenship*, a political ideology that attempts to appropriate charity as an instrument in generating social cohesion.

Asymmetry

Charity, at its most elemental is defined as, “the voluntary giving of time and resources to strangers” (p.7). It is seen as an “individual virtue, a fundamental expression of human generosity and a sign of a flourishing and caring society” (p.7). Yet, as the authors demonstrate in their ethnographic study (Chapter 7), motivations for ‘giving’ – from dropping a few coins in a street beggar’s cup to committing time (sometimes a lifetime) and expertise to deal with chronic deprivation – can be complex, mixing compassion and empathy with guilt in a desire to make a difference. Charity recipients also react in a variety of ways (Chapter 8). While gratitude and relief may be evident, embarrassment, ignominy, shame, and stigma predominate. This is the essence of asymmetry, the imbalance between the proactive giver

¹ When nearing the conclusion of this review a colleague alerted me to a 2022 article by Parsell et al. published in *Social Policy & Society*. Focusing on Australia, this article provides a lucid and elegant summation of the main themes of *Charity and Poverty in Advanced Welfare States*. Here the authors acknowledge the ‘uniqueness’ of Australia among welfare states. This article is not referenced in *Charity and Poverty*, possibly because it was published after the book had gone to press.

² While Parsell’s voice is predominant in the text, the book is demonstrably a co-production. Thus ‘& Co’ is preferred to the innominate ‘et al.’.

and the passive receiver, demarcating the superior position of the former over the subordinate position of the latter. For Parsell & Co, “poverty subverts a person’s capacity to feel part of society” (p.172). To overcome the stigma of poverty, poor people need engagement, solidarity – ‘between helper and helped’ – and agency. A truly transformed charity model in Parsell & Co’s assessment will require treating “the recipients of charitable care as equals” (p.180). This one of the lofty ideals that make up the authors’ reimagined model elaborated in Chapter 9.

Most, if not all, charities acknowledge at least some of these features of asymmetry and recognise that effective charitable assistance requires more than the provision of soup, food, clothing, and shelter. Many deploy strategies designed to amend the imbalance by working collaboratively with their clients and empowering them through empathy and training, and in providing employment. Yet, as the authors’ ethnographic analysis suggests, the adoption of such “person-centred approaches” (pp.162-63), while widely acclaimed, is not always fulfilled. Declarations of a person (or client) centred focus on charity websites often belie the difficulty and effort required to abide by and to implement these principles in the face of limited time and resources and in the absence of appropriate training.³

Systemic and structural causes of poverty

A pervasive message of *Charity and Poverty in Advanced Welfare States* is that neoliberal concepts of charity first and foremost perceive poverty as a personal rather than a social problem. Complementing their principle of treating the recipients of charity as equals, Parsell & Co’s reimagined model of charity requires the redirecting of charitable activity away from a focus on the alleviation of the symptoms of deprivation to a longer-term, preventive strategy which addresses the systemic and structural causes of poverty.⁴

As with asymmetry, many – though again by no means all – charities have recognised, at least in principle, that such a redirection of effort is a desirable objective.

³ The principles and execution of a person/client-centred approach have been much debated since the psychologist Carl Rogers came up with the concept in the 1950s. Their translation from the psychological realm to the social realm can be problematic and few charity workers receive more than superficial training in their operational practices. Person/client centre approaches in the ‘delivery of care’ should not be conflated with personal/ individual explanations for the occurrence of poverty.

⁴ Parsell & Co are clear that such a redirection of charitable activity does not require the abandonment of charity for the relief of immediate suffering. Further, there is no hint in their text of support for the *Killing with Kindness* ‘philosophy’ that some charities have intermittently championed. See: Open Democracy (2015) *Your kindness could kill*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/how-did-it-come-to-this-help-homeless-posters-tell-public-that/>

However, while treating recipients of charity as 'equals' may well be a realistic goal, asking charities to engage directly with systemic and structural causes is an altogether more demanding ambition. Parsell & Co are aware of the problem. Charities' own terms of reference (mission statements), together with legal restrictions that accompany their accredited charitable status and/or their remit under outsourced funding, can and do place limits on their activities beyond the ameliorative. Further, even when such restrictions can be circumvented, lack of internal resources – time and inhouse expertise – to articulate and execute meaningful engagement with structural forces will effectively be ruled out. Few charities have the luxury of independent action in these respects. Those that do are generally larger, well resourced national or international organisations.

In a book that has so much to offer, *Charity and Poverty in Advanced Welfare States* disappoints in that it circumvents the question of what exactly is meant by 'systemic and structural causes'. Advocating governments to end poverty by addressing it through improved social policy such as increases in unemployment benefit and social housing supply seem rather tepid in the context of the problems faced. Similarly, while calling for fundamental change "to societal expectations about what is desirable action towards people in poverty" (p.175) is entirely commendable, it lacks incisiveness and specificity. Comments on human and social rights have perhaps a more substantive ring but are not developed. Similarly, while support for "political activism" is clearly sincerely made, the authors again avoid specifics retreating too easily, for example, into a generalised endorsement of the liberation theology perspective espoused by the Catholic rebel Gustavo Gutierrez (pp.176-77). What constitutes the 'systemic and structural' is perhaps a question not readily answered without a defined context but one that might have been expected to be tackled head-on in a book that advocates 'structural literacy' as fundamental to a reimagined model of charity.⁵

Ethical citizenship

The third recurrent theme in *Charity and Poverty in Advanced Welfare States* is 'ethical citizenship', a political stratagem deployed by neoliberal welfare states, which exploits charity as a mechanism for generating social cohesion.

While notions of ethical citizenship can be traced back at least as far as the British Idealist philosophers of the early 20th century, it is the more recent PhD work of Andrea Muelhlebach and her subsequent publications (Muelhlebach, 2012) that provide the inspiration for the inclusion of ethical citizenship in this book.

⁵ Parsell & Co identify 'structural literacy' as a prerequisite for the successful interaction of volunteers and employees with charity recipients (p.181).

Muehlebach, taking her cue from the catholic concept of subsidiarity, investigates the rise of voluntarism in the Lombardy region of Italy following the withdrawal of state support for social services. Muehlebach's anthropological field research reveals that this surge in volunteerism among the local population was seen as an 'expression of social solidarity' among socialists and as an 'expression of charity and love' among Catholics. It is this sense of 'obligation' manifest in the voluntary giving of time and resources which ethical citizenship taps into and, as Muehlebach argues, paves the way for the "mass mobilization of an ethical citizenry that is put to work by a neoliberal state that nurtures selflessness in order to cement some of its most controversial [welfare retrenchment] reforms" (Muehlebach, 2012. p.16).

In contrast with asymmetry and systemic/structural causality, ethical citizenship hardly gets a mention in Parsell & Co's final synoptic chapter. The reasons are complex. Despite some apparent early enthusiasm for the concept on the part of the authors – in that it seemingly promotes social cohesion and echoes some of the sentiments embedded in mutual aid and localism as well as the Australian concept of "mateship" (p.92)⁶, and in addition resonates, albeit fleetingly, with the philosophies of Kropotkin and Pope Francis – Parsell & Co are ultimately very critical of the concept. In their final analysis, ethical citizenship is seen as representing a 'model' for the delivery of charity in which the "actual needs of and the lived experiences of the poor are shrouded over" and where the recipients of charity are "positioned as mere fodder for the ongoing performance of ethical citizenship on the part of volunteers" (p.170). The pathway from (tentative) approval to dismissal is charted via an innovative application of Bruno Latour's 'sociology of translation', known more commonly in the anglophone world as 'Actor-Network Theory' (ANT).

Notwithstanding Muehlebach's case study and Parsell & Co's citations of intent from various Australian politicians, evidence for the successful deployment of ethical citizenship in advanced welfare states is scant. In the UK, for example, policies that approximate ethical citizenship have been numerous over the past few decades: 'Active Citizenship' under Margaret Thatcher, 'Third Way' under Tony Blair, and 'Big Society' under David Cameron. All these initiatives had 'their day in the sun' but were rapidly blanked out by a 'precipitous nightfall' (See Espiet-Kilty, 2016). Given the lack of evidence of sustained implementation, it's tempting to dismiss ethical citizenship as little more than an ideological trope masquerading as social praxis.

⁶ See: <http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/mateship/>.

Summation

In conclusion, I would reaffirm the comments made at the beginning of this review. *Charity and Poverty* is an intriguing and informative book: impressive in its presentation of complex sociological theories and concepts, instructive in its demonstration of the 'status' of charity in contemporary Australia and other advanced welfare states, and provocative (in a good way) in its critical assessment of charity's potential role in furthering social justice. If I have one over-riding concern, however, it is that while 'the State' and 'civil society' get a fair hearing, the important role of the third pillar of the celebrated triad – 'the market' – is regrettably underdeveloped.⁷

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⁷ Given their final critical rejection of ethical citizenship, it is regrettable that Parsell & Co did not revisit their denigration of the work of Jason Hawksworth (p.45) and David Harvey (p.51) on welfare retrenchment. Their demotion of outsourcing and the punitive nature of neoliberalism seems in retrospect a confected opposition driven by an overzealous promotion of the novelty of ethical citizenship.