Most people discussing the workings of social policy in other countries will have come across a common problem: the discovery that words we thought we understood turn out to mean something quite different to people who seem to be using them. ‘Social policy’ in some places is about the provision of public and social services; in others, it is about policies for society; in others again, it is about ‘social politics’ and the relationship of capital and labour. The ‘welfare state’ might be an idealized model of welfare, a description of what government does, or a set of social arrangements that have little directly to do with government. Social security might be about insurance, or health care, or income maintenance.

Daniel Béland and Klaus Petersen have set themselves and their authors the daunting task of explaining some of the differences of discourse in different countries. Analysing Social Policy Concepts and Language is a collection of essays about the way that some basic concepts are interpreted in different countries. There are 15 main chapters, covering 14 countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and some international organizations. There is no attempt to impose a common language or structure on the individual contributions, but there are recurring themes – particularly, consideration of different understandings of the welfare state and social security.

The authors have not necessarily interpreted their brief in the same way. Most of the pieces review the development of policy, typically usually in periods. Some – New Zealand, the EU, the OECD – are basically descriptions of common contemporary debates. Others discuss the usage of terms critically, in a way that tends to assume familiarity with the basic concepts. Some of the essays, such as those on the UK and Germany, are implicitly engaged in a debate with previous work. Probably the most successful chapters are those on France, Japan and Finland, because they lay out the language and conceptualization of issues clearly without assuming a shared vocabulary.

The editors claim that ‘for decades, social policy scholars … have used concepts … without paying much attention to where these concepts come from and how their meanings have changed over time’ (p. 297). That
is difficult to defend; it is pretty much equivalent to saying that there are no histories of social policy looking at what people have thought or said. However, the difficulty with reading those accounts is that they are not always based in shared meanings. Unless we happen to be one of the select group (such as Peter Baldwin or Abram de Swaan) who have a magisterial command of different languages and cultures, most of us do not know quite what to make of differences of interpretation once we go over the edge of our personal map. That is how a book like this can help.

The book does not always give readers a clear sense of different discourses in different countries. Most of the chapters do too little with the basics, focusing instead on the discussion of policy and the development of a generalized critique. There are nods in the direction of the likes of Briggs, Titmuss, Thoenes or Veit-Wilson, but we are not told what they actually say. Readers will typically come to the issues with some preconceptions, and there is not always enough information and guidance in this text to stop that leading to misreadings. For example, while it should be clear enough that ‘welfare state’ can mean many things, someone who starts with the idea that it is all about the role of government might not realize from the book that it does not mean that everywhere. Concepts such as ‘social protection’, ‘rights’ or ‘equality’ crop up from time to time, but there is not enough in these essays to work out what they mean in their specific contexts. Another problem concerns the material that is left out. I am not sure that it is possible to explain the peculiarities of discourse in the USA without considering race, the Netherlands without the pillars, or the UK without the Poor Law.

If the book does not do what it sets out to do, however, it does other things which readers may well appreciate. In the 1980s, published work on comparative social policy depended heavily on compilations of essays which considered, country by country, the institutions and issues which different countries were addressing. This book looks a lot like those books did, and it could be used much the same way – offering a generalized initial framework for the consideration of countries whose politics and policy are unfamiliar. The thematic focus on concepts binds the collection together, and it lends itself to essays that compare and contrast different approaches. Several of the essays stand in their own right as a useful foundation to grasping the construction of issues and policies in different countries, and in that respect they offer a helpful resource for students and teachers.

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