

**SOCIAL POLICY IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND:  
A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION (3RD EDITION)  
by CHRISTINE CHEYNE, MIKE O'BRIEN AND  
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*Social Policy in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2005) is rich in detail, fully contextualised to New Zealand and, in its third edition, up to date in important respects.

The eleven chapters in the book fall into two categories, though not crisply. The “case study” chapters (8, 9 and 10) cover income support, social services and health policy. The authors selected these topics because each has been subject to significant recent developments. In addition, the authors wish to present concrete material so they can illustrate their critical approach. Thus, each chapter is a blend of description and critical interpretation.

In one way or another, the remaining chapters present foundational descriptions of social policy in Aotearoa New Zealand, or conceptual material designed to comprise an interpretive “toolkit”. These chapters offer a parade of “theoretical traditions” or “perspectives” (liberalism, neo-liberalism, neo-Marxism, traditional and contemporary social democracy, feminism, anti-racism, and green political theory), “key themes” (justice, equality, freedom, need, risk, and citizenship), and “key constitutional, political, and cultural factors”. Full chapters are devoted to wellbeing as the goal of social policy (chapter 3), “policy analysis” (chapter 6), and social policy from a Māori perspective (chapter 7). The final chapter offers both a restatement of the authors’ priorities for effective social policy, as well as a summary of current themes and developments in social policy, such as the emphasis on growth and innovation and sustainable development.

Chapter 7, headed “Individualism, collectivism, and the recognition of te tino rangatiratanga” can also be read as a fourth case study chapter, if one accepts that “Māori policy” is a subset of social policy just as income support, social services and health policy are. The authors are unclear themselves, sometimes including it as a case study chapter (p.42) and sometimes as a thematic chapter (p.14).

As a text primarily for students, the book also includes chapter-by-chapter guides to further readings, boxed short introductions and summaries, and a reasonably

comprehensive glossary. The referencing is extensive across a range of source types, and the index is modest but serviceable. The introductions provide useful orientations to each chapter. However, the summaries strike me as oddly selective, and occasionally serve to introduce a point not clearly made in the preceding material. The book's introduction and the introduction to chapter 2 note four key periods in the history of social policy in New Zealand. But the summary lists "key points" regarding just two of these. This same summary also introduces a distinction between "Māori social policy" and "Pākehā social policy", but only the former is treated specifically in the text.

I would prefer greater distinction between descriptive and interpretive material. In some sections, the two lines of material are interwoven in ways that are not immediately obvious. For example, in chapter 2 we are strongly led to expect coverage of a history with four key periods – the 1840s, the 1890s, the 1930s and the 1980s (or sometimes, the 1980s and early 1990s). The introductory box promises an examination of "constitutional, political and intellectual history" (or perhaps "constitutional, political and cultural", as expressed in the textual introduction to the chapter on the page facing the box) in order to identify major patterns in policy development. Several additional features are noted in the box, namely European colonisation, an acceptance of the role of the state in social policy, a preference for providing for wellbeing through employment, and an active, though not necessarily generous, state.

Several possible ways of organising a potted history are evident in these lists. The chapter, however, has sections following the introduction on: the progressive model and its critics; periods of social development (2 paragraphs); Māori and the state: a welfare state for all?; Māori social policy; a tradition of an active state; the constitutional framework; the state and the politics of class; politics of pragmatism or ideas? (two paragraphs); late Victorian state "socialism"; towards a welfare state; the First Labour Government; full employment and the post-war consensus; 1984: a step to the right. The welcome temporal sequencing in the latter sections is somewhat undermined by the less chronological treatment of events and circumstances in the earlier part of the chapter.

The authors devote considerable attention to definitions (and the lack of definitions in the social policy literature as a whole). They define social policy as "actions that affect the well-being of members of a society through shaping the distribution of and access to goods and resources in that society" (p.3). Thus, to paraphrase, social policy is that which affects the means to the end of wellbeing. The authors note that social policy influence is not limited to state action, nor must the action be "deliberate" or "conscious". Social policy is affected by, and affects, the decision environments of non-state actors, as well as the social dimensions of economic, environmental and foreign policy, and so on. Whatever the value of conceiving the range of influences on means to wellbeing, I resist labelling these influences "social policy". "Social policy"

would include, for instance, individual hiring decisions motivated by racial prejudice (a non-state action that affects the wellbeing of a certain group of individuals and their families through denying them a job and thus constraining their access to goods and resources).

I have no quibble with the field of study carved out by the authors' broader definition, but it would be more accurately called "social policy and social behaviour" or something similar. My point is not mere semantics. In usage that I am aware of, "social" modifies "policy" – social policy is policy that bears on what state actors do or do not do that shapes the wellbeing of people and groups in society. We can call it "wellbeing policy", if the trouble is with the word "social", in the same way that "economic policy" concerns the economy and foreign policy concerns trade and security. However, the authors essentially abandon their broader definition, and default to a meaning largely consistent with what I have described as its conventional meaning.

On the positive side, the book sustains a distinctive New Zealand focus. The authors illustrate how factors in the colonial legacy, Māori culture and values, and an active and innovative state show through in specific decisions and actions. The book is rich with historical details, in an even richer interpretive frame. As a result, to take just one example, we learn that the "Old Age Pension", introduced in 1898, is an iconic manifestation of New Zealand liberalism in the second distinct period, and is emblematic of a strong shift in views of the ideal role of the state in society. We also learn that the pension was innovative for New Zealand, ahead of Britain by a decade, far from universal in eligibility, ultimately poorly taken up, yet even so a harbinger of "subtle changes" in the conception of social need.

Overall, the book sets out intellectual tools, asserts their interpretive value, but only on occasion sustains a complete interpretive argument. The reader is, somewhat dauntingly, invited to make her own connections and conclusion. Thus, to consider again the Old Age Pension, we are reminded in chapter 4's section on liberalism that New Zealand liberalism in the 1890s was not the European *laissez-faire* variety. In New Zealand, "liberalism developed an acceptance of government participation in the economy and in providing rudimentary services to support individualism" (p.70). Further, we read that liberalism emphasises "pragmatic responses to difficulties" (p.71). In this example (and many others) the interpretation of the Old Age Pension in chapter 2 relies on theoretical presentations in chapter 4.

The main theories are somewhat better supported, however convoluted the tour, than are the lesser ones. A reader who wishes to follow the authors' injunction to critically assess social policy through the perspectives of feminist, anti-racist and green critiques of social policy has very little to go on. We understand that these perspectives are "critical" of the assumptions not only of liberalism, and neo-liberalism, for instance, but

also that they question the foundations in social life upon which these theories are based. (Māori theoretical perspectives are included in this round-up of critical perspectives by reference, but are not developed alongside the others, except perhaps as indigenous variants – with Māori perspectives on wellbeing and the Treaty of Waitangi presented as an element of anti-racist theory).

I turn now to consider how chapter 8 (one of the 3, or perhaps 4, chapters to focus on one area of social policy) measures up to the authors' purposes and approach to a critical introduction to social policy in New Zealand. The stated purposes of the chapter are "to anchor the theoretical and conceptual work in specific major areas of policy" – in this case income support – with significant changes in recent years and to "apply the theoretical and conceptual frameworks outlined in previous chapters in analysing policy development in concrete areas of policy" (p.14).

The chapter presents a sophisticated summary of income support policy from 1990 to the present, based in relevant scholarly research and policy documents. The authors remind us of their definition of social policy when they write, "It is not appropriate to focus solely on the actions of the state as if those actions reflected all that is encompassed by the term 'social security' or 'income support'" (p.163). Here, I think, they reveal two dangers in their insistence of a broad definition of social policy. First, I doubt whether anyone active in the social policy arena would attempt an exclusive focus. Moreover, having warned the reader, the authors proceed to focus on state actions, taking into consideration, as I suggest is appropriate, their effects on others' actions.

As evidence of their interpretive approach, the authors provide a clear distinction between "structural" and "individual" explanations of the causes of poverty and solutions. Yet, they explicitly link this distinction to theories covered earlier in the text only in the summary of key points. Further argument for the importance of the choice of theoretical frame is provided in the authors' case for why "technical details" and quantitative data need to be supplemented by qualitative information about people. This distinction is sustained in their analysis of the policy choices made over the period covered, and the effects on people in poverty.

The introduction to chapter 8 presents the chapter's conclusion that a "widening disparity between those who are in the primary labour force and those who are in the secondary labour force, or are outside the paid labour force, is persistent and structural". Further, the authors claim that "if poverty is to be overcome, significant innovation in income-support policy is required to ensure that the income disparity and well-being deficit do not lead to the development of a more permanently divided society" (p.164). For all the descriptive and analytic strengths of the chapter, I do not find adequate support for these claims. The best that can be said is that the authors

argue that under the National Government's policies, which showed a shift from a structural to an individual causal frame, poverty worsened. For the most part, however, the reader is expected to apply their own "cover story" drawing on the material presented in the thematic chapters.

In conclusion, I found *Social Policy in Aotearoa New Zealand* to be both good and useful, and having only minor flaws. But it will not be everyone's cup of tea. A reader who prefers orderly overviews, clear chronologies and thematic developments will be frustrated by the density of the material. Similarly, a reader who relishes density of material will be pained by the number of assertions, especially conceptually based, that lack careful argumentation as they are made. Many readers, especially students, may benefit by reading the thematic chapters after the case study chapters. A chronology would be helpful, too, especially for readers not familiar with New Zealand. Clearly the authors have not written the book as if making social policy is, or should be, a rational problem-solving exercise. But neither, I think, have they yet successfully modelled the critical approach they wish us to adopt.

In sum, this is a book to be approached with care and thought. It supplies a variety of maps ("theoretical and conceptual frameworks", and a short history), but there is significant mystery in the itinerary, destinations and commentary. The tour of social policy in Aotearoa New Zealand presented by Cheyne, O'Brien and Belgrave will repay the serious student, particularly one with the interactive support of peers or teacher in a classroom environment. It is not for the faint-hearted solo traveller.