

Beyond the New Paternalism: Basic Security as Equality

A Book by Guy Standing (2002) Verso, London.

Reviewed by John Tomlinson, 2004.

In early December 2003 I finally got round to reading Philippe Van Parijs' 1997 *Real Freedom for All*, I needed to read it before the 10th National Conference on Unemployment being held later that month. Van Parijs, the doyen of the European Basic Income movement, presents an exceedingly tightly written ethical justification for Basic Income but I found it rather heavy-going compared with much of his earlier writing. And so it was with some mixed feelings that on a hot Sunday afternoon I picked up Standing's latest book *Beyond the New Paternalism* even though I had enjoyed some of his earlier writings.

Guy Standing is the Director of the Socio-Economic Programme of the International Labour Organisation in Geneva. *Beyond the New Paternalism* is a timely book as we face the last hurrah of the socially-conservative, economic-fundamentalist Howard Government and the onslaught of Latham's "third way social capitalism". Standing is well equipped to look at the similarities between George Bush's "caring conservatism", Tony Blair's "Third way" and some of the European countries in retreat from the policies of social protection of the welfare state. Australian readers will easily transpose our own home grown political poseurs for the Bushblairs of the world.

Essentially, *Beyond the New Paternalism* is a well-argued analysis of the reasons behind the decline and fall of the welfare state and a reinvigorated manifesto of the importance of and need for a decent system of social protection. Whilst Standing is cognisant of the importance of occupation in people's lives, this book is no tired defence of the 20th century's labourist tradition of either capitalism or state socialism. Several chapters describe in detail the difficulties that a preoccupation with the obligation to labour create for individuals and societies.

Standing looks at the rise of economic-fundamentalism in the United States and Europe and the subsequent "spread of labour insecurity" and "the crunch of income insecurity". Standing is at his best when he is demolishing widely accepted myths such as the ageing time bomb or the absolute virtue of enforcing mutual obligations on those who need to rely upon income support. This is so because of the breadth and calibre of his historical analysis of the pressures on the social insurance system in Europe and the welfare state elsewhere.

When he comes to discuss income insecurity he notes (among many inequalities) that the world's 200 richest individuals "have a total wealth greater than the combined income of the world's poorest 2.5 billion people". He argues "that there is no evidence that their income and wealth are necessary or even functional" before concluding "it is hard to imagine that the global problem of economic insecurity for the majority can be rectified unless the wealth and security of the elite are checked." His Chapter 4, in which he describes the "Eight Crises of Social Protection", should be mandatory reading for every Australian politician and media commentator before they open their mouths on welfare issues.

Whilst he seldom mentions Australia in this book, his Chapter 7 on the near universal consensus of paternalism is so real to Australian eyes. He might be quoting some US politician but I can hear Howard, Latham, Abbott, Vanstone, Gerard Henderson or Noel Pearson trotting out clichés about the feckless poor. This leads into his onslaught on “work for the dole” and “workfare not welfare” in Chapter 8. Anyone who finds themselves satisfied with the media grab bites, such as, “if they get social security then its only fair that they give something back in return” or “a job is the best form of welfare” would be disconcerted if they read this chapter.

Standing builds on Van Parijs’ *Real Freedom for All* in his chapter dealing with the need for a Basic Income and decent social protection in a most readable fashion. He brings a powerful linguistic logic to dissect the prevalent euphemisms used to disguise social compulsion. For instance, he points out that the notion of active labour market policy is disingenuous. “The word ‘active’ seems virile and strong, whereas its opposite, ‘passive’, suggests laziness, and lack of initiative. Who could possibly favour being passive if one could be active? In fact, active policy is little more than having the state telling people what they must do in order to receive some moderate state benefit, directing them to training or job schemes. By contrast, the much derided *passive* policy entails giving funds to individuals or families with minimal or no conditions, leaving them to make choices about how to conduct their lives and allocate their resources.”

I hope that all who want to understand how we got into our current socially-divisive predicament in this country and who would like to see Australia return to a more socially-just course will read Guy Standing’s book.