

Rodley George (2002) *Socioeconomic Democracy: An Advanced Socioeconomic System*. Praeger, Westport. Reviewed by John Tomlinson.

The title of this book *Socioeconomic Democracy* provides an accurate pointer as to what it contains. Essentially Rodley George sets out his ideas on how Americans might find a way to provide a universal income guarantee and at the same time put in place a form of democratic control of the excesses of individual wealth present in the USA. It is the latter idea of a “maximum allowable personal wealth” as a basis for providing an improved socially just system capable of insuring an income floor that really preoccupies Rodley George. There is one chapter specifically devoted to discussing universal income guarantees and this concept is referred to throughout other parts of the book but never again in any great detail.

It is an American book written for Americans. At its best some of the historical analysis is reminiscent of Walter van Trier’s delightfully written PhD thesis *Everyone a King*. Unfortunately, George often makes asides about American founding fathers, which may be widely known to students of US history, but are simply irrelevant to readers from other countries. Another annoying feature of the book is that page numbers are not provided to the quotations on the grounds that George wants his readers who are interested in chasing up ideas to familiarise themselves with the quoted writers rather than just the quoted sections. Such a technique may well stop undergraduate students simply grabbing the quotation and slipping it into an essay but it is not useful to researchers who might well have time to read some section of a book but are not going to go to the bother of reading an entire text in the hope that they’ll find the section in order to check the accuracy of George’s interpretation of the other writer or to pursue a greater understanding of a single point. It is an untrusting technique. George should well know that lazy students would just cite George’s quoting of the other author or look up the quote on the world wide web. The final annoying thing about the book is the prevalence of abbreviations that he uses as shorthand for many of the concepts he discusses.

With these qualifications, this book is still a useful addition to the literature. George has the courage to take on the task of trying to find a way to control the excesses of American capitalist accumulation as a way of paying for his proposed income guarantee. In part he needs to do that because he wants to improve the social wage system in America whereas European (and even Australian) writers are inclined to assume, because of the presence of more widely accepted tax legitimacy, that they have done their job once they have worked out the percentage of tax required to pay for the income guarantee.

The chapter on income guarantees is comprehensive, however, even given time lag involved in getting a book published, is a bit dated and though it acknowledges the vitality of the Basic Income debate in Europe makes it little reference to the Canadian experience and the ideas set out in Lerner, Clark and Needham’s *Basic Income: Economic Security for All Canadians*. I was also surprised he did not cite American writer Michael Murray’s (1997) important contribution to the debate in his book “...*And Economic Justice For All*.” George devotes one chapter to looking at these issues in relation to Muslim beliefs.

George is far more “involved” with his concept of Maximum Allowable Wealth. He defines Socioeconomic Democracy as “ a model socioeconomic system in which there is some form of universal guaranteed personal income as well as some form maximum allowable personal wealth, with both the lower bound on personal material poverty and the upper bound on personal material wealth set and adjusted democratically by all society.” Imbedded in the text is the assumption that the United States of America is a democracy or at least capable of becoming one.

Given:

- the fiasco of the 2000 Bush victory in Florida,
- the increasing incarceration of Black and poor Americans,
- the disenfranchisement of large numbers of American citizens,
- the massive and increasing income inequalities,
- the poor voter turn outs,
- the increasing militarisation of the civilian population in the wake of what Americans term “9/11”,
- the unaddressed issues of permanent non-citizens,
- the weakness of American labour unions, and
- the inordinate control that corporations have over voting outcomes;

I have little hope that less affluent individuals in the United States will ever exercise democratic choice in ways I would understand was democratic. This is so because vulnerable people have particular interests. The majority of the population may not share those interests. In such situations a 50% plus one type of democracy cannot safeguard marginalised peoples’ interests. George would have been assisted in his analysis had he read Will Hutton’s (1996) *The State we’re in*. Though by now he has probably read Will Hutton’s (2002) *The World we’re in*.

I was surprised that George, in a book dealing with the history of America and democracy, did not mention one of the great contributors to the debate. I would have thought that the arguments set out in Alexis de Tocqueville’s (1862) *Democracy in America* would have been necessary to address if one wanted to argue that American democracy was capable of consistently arriving at democratic solutions to economic questions.

George can present a fine argument and has amassed a wealth of material in this text. I particularly liked his capacity to turn an attack on itself. For instance:

just as there is a discussion about whether welfare benefit should be “targeted” to the specific needs of specific individuals or be made universally available regardless of circumstances, so the general philosophy of taxation to pay for any such individual or social benefits can be oriented to “targeting” those most able to pay for it or spreading out the tax liability more or less uniformly over everybody regardless of specific ability to pay. Here, one of the four possibilities could be a society democratically deciding that it is optimal policy to “target the poor for help”, while simultaneously “targeting the rich for help” (p.44).

I also enjoyed his point (pp.14-15) that in the US state and federal governments now provide convicted felons with free health care, so long as they remain in jail, George suggest that these governments should consider extending this policy to provide free health care to law abiding persons outside jail.

Bibliography

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- van Trier, W. (1995) *Everyone a King*. PhD. Thesis Department of Sociology, K.U. Leuven.

The Author's rejoinder to this review follows:

Dear John,

I have looked at your review of our book *Socioeconomic Democracy: An Advanced Socioeconomic System*. I note that in your review you do not mention the simultaneous beneficial impact of a democratically set maximum allowable personal wealth limit on many of the serious societal problems currently confronting humanity. In its last chapter, the book demonstrates that over 25 serious and acknowledged societal problems would be significantly and simultaneously reduced or more or less eliminated with Socioeconomic Democracy and the economic incentives it democratically creates.

These problems include (but are by no means limited to) automation, computerization and robotization; budget deficits and national debts; bureaucracy; children; crime and punishment; development; ecology, environment and pollution; education; the elderly; feminine majority; inflation; international conflict; intranational conflict; involuntary employment; involuntary unemployment; labor strife and strikes; medical and health care; military metamorphosis; natural disasters; planned obsolescence; political participation; poverty; racism; sexism; untamed technology; and the general welfare.

Since the resolution of all these unnecessary societal problems is the reason a democratic society might want to establish SeD, not mentioning these ramifications of SeD is found curious.

Rob George

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