Jnl Soc. Pol., **31**, 4, 747–752 © 2002 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S0047279402006815 Printed in the United Kingdom

Review Article

Richard Titmuss and Social Policy

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David Reisman, *Richard Titmuss: Welfare and Society* (2nd edn), Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001, vii+307 pp., £50.00.
Peter Alcock, Howard Glennerster, Ann Oakley & Adrian Sinfield (eds.), *Welfare and Well-Being: Richard Titmuss's Contribution to Social Policy*, Bristol: Policy, 2001, vi+249 pp., £16.99 pbk.

Richard Titmuss remains the towering figure of British Social Policy not least because he, more than any one else, established the intellectual credentials of Social Policy as an academic subject. More than half a century has passed since Titmuss was appointed to the first Chair in Social Administration (as the subject was then known) in Britain. Social Policy is now a well-established and flourishing academic discipline (I use the term loosely) in Britain. Around the world too the study of social policy and the welfare state – in its various dimensions – has grown phenomenally over the last two decades. In place of the single Fabian paradigm of the 1950s, the subject if anything has now an *embarras des richesses* as far as paradigms, concepts, theories and approaches are concerned. Comparative studies have become a major growth industry. More recently, global social policy has made its appearance as yet another special area of study. Titmuss's ideas, concepts and analytical perspectives have become a part of the burgeoning literature and growing academic tradition of the subject. Yet as these two books, in different ways, remind us, Titmuss is more than an historical figure in Social Policy. The questions and concerns he pursued so passionately are also our questions and concerns today. And the Titmussian legacy remains important.

Let me begin with *Welfare and Wellbeing (W & W)*, an anthology of Titmuss's writings. Its main purpose is to make the master's work available to students and others since most of his books are now out of print. The selections are grouped into six parts each with a commentary by a social scientist including the editors: the family, poverty and population; the 'welfare state'; Redistribution, universality and inequality; Power, policy and privilege; International and comparative dimensions; and

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279402006815 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the subject of social policy. The selections include most of Titmuss's celebrated essays, e.g., 'The Social Division of Welfare', 'War and Social Policy', 'The Position of Women', 'The Irresponsible Society', 'The Subject of Social Administration' as well as extracts from books including the posthumous Social Policy (1974) (SP). However *The Gift Relationship* (1970) is excluded as it has been reissued recently.

Surprisingly, the editors do not mention *The Philosophy of Welfare* (1987), a selection of Titmuss's writings with a substantial overlap with the present collection. Presumably it too is out of print. However, compared with that book *W & W* represents a broader cross-section of Titmuss's work in that it includes excerpts from his early writings (1938–43) as well as from *Problems of Social Policy (PSP)* (1950) and *SP*. This reviewer found the excerpts from Titmuss's early writings of particular interest. They are concerned with such issues as population, poverty and the dominant values of an acquisitive society ('our abject servitude to the dictates of money and all that it spells') which places money and wealth above people and measures national progress and well-being in these terms. What is striking here is the remarkable continuity and consistency – in terms of substantive themes, incisiveness of analysis as well as trenchant value-critique – between these pieces and the later, presumably more 'mature' works of Titmuss. The excerpt from *PSP* is also a most welcome addition not only because it offers us a sampling of this masterly account of the development of social policy in Britain during the war years (regarded by many as Titmuss's 'masterpiece') but also because excerpts from this study are not available elsewhere. One minor quibble about the selection. The editors might have included one of Titmuss's papers on health policy which examines the role of the medical profession and other interest groups in policy development and their influence on the structure and functioning of health services. Health policy and professional dominance, especially on the part of the physicians, were among Titmuss's major concerns and a paper on that theme might have been a useful complement to the more macro-level offerings in Part 4 ('Power, Policy and Privilege').

Of the six thematic areas it is perhaps 'Power, policy and privilege' and 'International and comparative dimensions' that underline some of the major weaknesses and limitations of the Titmussian approach. Thus the very term 'irresponsible' in the essay 'Irresponsible society' shows that Titmuss did not see the capitalist economy and corporate power in systemic terms. Arguably it is in the very nature of capitalist 'democracy' to insulate corporations, and the market economy more generally, from popular control – in short to place systemic limits on the reach of democracy. It is difficult therefore to see how private insurance and

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pensions industry can be accused of being the locus of irresponsible power when they are primarily accountable only to their shareholders. Thus 'democracy' can but have only a limited purchase on the freedom, indeed the *responsibility*, of corporations to pursue profit and growth aggressively. Corporate power in general and the power of finance capital in particular has of course been multiplied manifold by the process of globalisation since then.

However, to read 'Irresponsible Society' is also to be aware of the vast distance we have travelled since Titmuss's days – at least in English-speaking countries if not worldwide – in accommodating to, if not celebrating, the values and institutions of capitalism. Be that as it may, Adrian Sinfield's commentary on this section is largely concerned with inequality and says little about Titmuss's view of power. For example, Sinfield writes: 'Today inequalities in the United Kingdom are much greater than they were when Titmuss was writing ... Since 1979, inequalities have widened significantly and the latest official analyses indicate that they are widening still' and that 'policy matters, as Titmuss was always concerned to emphasise' (p. 140). True. But how can we get the right policies in place? Does Titmuss's critique of capitalism in 'Irresponsible Society' help us today in Blairite Britain? At the end of his paper Titmuss looked to the 'many fields and forms of public ownership' (p. 158) as the answer to the problem of irresponsible power. But he was speaking as a democratic socialist. Now that the 's' word has virtually dropped out of politics, what are we to make of Titmuss's prescription of public ownership (although as Reisman points out, in practice Titmuss did not advocate public ownership) in the globalised economy whose rationale is that society has to serve the market economy and not the other way round?

As regards 'International and comparative dimensions' there is no doubt about Titmuss's involvement and contribution in these areas. First, *The Gift Relationship* (1970) remains an early classic in comparative analysis in social policy and in 'lesson learning'. Titmuss drew far-reaching conclusions from this study, not only about blood donation and procurement but also about residual and institutional social policy and more broadly still about the place of altruism and egoism in modern societies. Whatever we think of the limitations of that study there is no gainsaying its profound impact on the world of social policy, at any rate in Britain and the United States if not more widely. Second, Titmuss was also involved with a number of developing countries as an advisor on social policy. Finally, in his sketch of the three models of welfare in advanced industrial societies he not only built on the pioneering formulation of the residual and institutional models by Wilensky and Lebeaux (1956) but

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added a third, the achievement-performance model. More recently Esping-Andersen's (1990) celebrated typology of welfare regimes may be said to have developed Titmuss's theoretical insight and contribution further.

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that these models make only a brief appearance in Titmuss's lectures at LSE, published posthumously. Works published in his own lifetime scarcely refer to models and typologies. Moreover as Glennerster's commentary points out, an 'Anglo-centric element' pervades much of Titmuss's writing, with a highly selective presentation of social policy in different countries suggesting that 'somehow the British way is better than those of other nations' (p. 173). Unlike, for example, Anthony Crosland (1956), a socialist contemporary of Titmuss who made many favourable references to Swedish welfare in his classic work on socialism, Titmuss's own focus of interest and analysis remained very much on Britain. Comparative analysis was marginal to his interest and 'lesson learning' very much a one-way street. The idea that Titmuss believed 'that students would understand their own institutions better if they had the chance to compare them with those of other countries' (p. 171) has therefore to be taken with a grain of salt.

However these are minor reservations. Overall, this edited volume is an excellent introduction to Titmuss's work and to his pioneering role in establishing the broad contours of the discipline. It should also serve as a valuable introduction to the personal voice and distinctive writing style of this leading figure in the development of Social Policy. To read these essays is also to be aware of that unique blend of moral authority and intellectual perspicacity which gave Titmuss a commanding stature in the world of social policy scholarship.

David Reisman's book is a substantially expanded version of his earlier study of Titmuss (1977). This revised edition takes into account Titmuss's early writings (1930s and 1940s), his many unpublished lectures as well as the sizable literature on Titmuss that has since become available. It is a pity the author does not provide an introduction to this edition which might have alerted the reader to what is new and in what ways, if any, his assessment of Titmuss here differs from that in the earlier edition. Reisman makes good use of Titmuss's unpublished lectures to qualify, extend or round off the Titmussian perspective as it is known to us from his published works. This material is new and interesting and shows that Titmuss took a wider view of welfare than would appear from his publications. For example, he saw full employment and economic growth (in short, Keynesian macroeconomic policies) as major contributors to welfare although his published works on social policy rarely men-

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tion these. Overall, however, Reisman's assessment of Titmuss differs little here from that of the first edition.

Like its earlier edition the book is in four parts: The Status of Social Policy, Selectivism, Universalism, and The Failure of the Market. In each section the relevant ideas, concepts and arguments of Titmuss are presented largely without comments followed by chapters which assess and try to 'extend' the Titmussian perspective. The object of the extension is to 'meet the needs of a world Titmuss never knew' (p. 52) and also because 'social policy must move on if it is not to be left behind' (p. 53). This suggests that social policy as an intellectual enterprise remains caught in a time warp, presumably still cocooned within the Fabian state-collectivist paradigm. Apparently the author is unaware of the sea-change that Social Policy has undergone since Titmuss's days. That this may be the case is evident from the absence of virtually any references to Social Policy literature except for works by or on Titmuss. Thus the reader finds that much of Reisman's critique of Titmuss and the so-called 'extension' of his perspective involve ideas that are by now common currency, and a part of the ongoing debate, within Social Policy and more broadly within the political economy of welfare. To a large extent Reisman's critique of Titmuss is of course also a critique of the state-centred, collectivist, Fabian-socialist paradigm of welfare which dominated early post-war Britain and of which Titmuss may be considered the outstanding exponent.

Reisman is an economist seemingly of a small 'l' liberal persuasion and his critique, though broadly based, reflects this standpoint. He favours a plural, mixed economy of welfare and argues for a far greater use of market mechanism within the welfare sector, e.g., vouchers, user fees and the like. It is perhaps fair to say that, unlike its predecessor, this edition coming twenty-five years later cannot claim to tell us much that is new. Nonetheless the book is useful on a number of counts. First, it reconstructs systematically and on the whole fairly accurately the Titmussian perspective on welfare. This is important given that most of Titmuss's publications were essays, mainly lectures or addresses concerned with a specific theme, and that he did not care to elaborate his perspective on welfare in a systematic way. Secondly, the book offers a comprehensive, detailed and thoroughgoing critique of the Titmussian approach to welfare not available elsewhere. Finally, Reisman – a professional economist – writes about Titmuss and social policy as an 'outsider'. He is able to cast a cold eye on his subject – in both senses – pulling no punches and following through the logic of his critique relentlessly. In this respect the book is in clear contrast to *W & W*, a work of Social Policy 'insiders' writ-

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ing about the founding father of the discipline, with commentaries tending to 'accentuate the positive' and not offering much by way of a critical reading of the master. However this is not to imply that Reisman fails to appreciate or emphasise Titmuss's strengths and achievements. Indeed in different ways both books remind us that 'Titmuss's work put moral and philosophical issues at the heart of debates about the welfare state, and gave them a central place in the academic study of social policy' (Paul Wilding, quoted in Reisman, p. 26). That may be the most important legacy of Richard Titmuss.

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