

this theoretical perspective in contrast to other perspectives?" and "How in practice is structural social work theory operationalized and different from other forms of social work?". Answers to these questions are not readily apparent in this book.

The main thrust of Mullaly's argument seems to suggest that those of us who labour in social work are unaware of the ideological assumptions and interests in which our work is located and to which our work contributes. Through clarifying for us the ideological paradigms we can begin to see differently than through the neo-conservative or liberal ideologies we operate within and are unaware of. The result will be that we will turn our efforts to progressive and transformative ends in our agencies through how we relate to our clients, in taking on our managers, in working in our unions, in our professional associations and indeed in our lives.

Unfortunately, I am unconvinced that the contradictions between the dominant ideology and practice are so unclear for many social workers. Perhaps I am overly optimistic but I sense that there is more insight and resistance on the part of social workers and clients than has so far been acknowledged. This is why a more detailed examination of dialectical process in social work, which Mullaly has taken up in other writing, would no doubt be useful. In this text that discussion is much too short.

Finally, the actual outline and discussion of operationalizing structural theory in practice is lean. Like earlier Marxist and radical social work literature the critique makes sense, but what do we do differently as a result?

While there are some obvious weaknesses in this text as it relates to sex/gender and race/ethnicity, this book on structural social work is significant in continuing the theory building needed for a progressive and structurally transforming social work practice. Those of use engaged in this project need this book and others like it in order to advance this discussion.

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**Christopher A. Sarlo**, *Poverty in Canada*. Vancouver: The Fraser Institute, 1992, pp. 242 \$19.95.

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The back jacket of Sarlo's, *Poverty in Canada*, proudly proclaims this book to be "a provocative challenge to current approaches to defining and measuring poverty". The book was written to be a serious discussion on how poverty is defined with a proposed definition based on minimal "necessities" (Sarlo's word). Although the topic and his approach deserve the attention

of social policy analysts, economists, and political scientist, the book is a disappointment.

Sarlo's book begins with a rather inflammatory introduction wherein the author rejects the "accepted" operationalization of poverty. His introduction promises to be a healthy debate but Sarlo peppers it repeatedly with assertions that existing poverty lines are "grossly exaggerated", "inappropriate", "overstated" and "inflated". The word "exaggerated" appears five times in his introductory chapter.

Should we believe that 3 to 5 million Canadians live in a state of poverty? . . . I believe that Canadians have serious doubts about claims of wide spread poverty in this country. Scepticism is wholly justified. These estimates of the extent of poverty in Canada are grossly exaggerated. The fact is that poverty . . . been virtually eliminated. (p. 2)

From this introductory tone, Sarlo debates the advantages of the absolute approach, and the limitations of the relative approach, to measuring poverty. "The former approach focuses on the lack of basic necessities while the latter emphasizes inadequacy compared to average living standards" (p. 19). He argues that poverty is simply the inability to obtain "a nutritious diet, warm, dry safe housing, clean clothing appropriate to climate, sufficient personal hygiene items and health care" (p. 27). "Not having alcohol, tobacco, a one week holiday at the cottage and costly recreation does not make one poor" (p.28). To support his minimalist definition, Sarlo very cleverly and deviously quotes feminist and social activist Rosemary Brown stating that poverty is nothing more than the lack of "money to meet the basic necessities of life" (p. 26).

Sarlo loses control of his arguments in a rather self-revealing section on "vested interests" where he asserts that "a loose knit fraternity [no women?] of social activists, social workers, academics, bureaucrats and politicians" have a vested interest in the relative approach to poverty and "most of them made a rather handsome living off the poor" (p. 31). "It was a brilliant manoeuvre (to promote a relative approach) and one that went largely unchallenged. It was a straightforward functional response to the threat of extinction. It was not compassion but old fashioned self interest at work" (p. 32). This is an extremely ungenerous and cynical statement and could not be interpreted as enhancing the debate.

In Chapter 4, Sarlo embarks on his alternative approach. He argues that the absolute approach identifies those individuals who lack the basic necessities, allows comparisons over time and permits international comparisons of rates of poverty. The chapters that follow explore the minimum income needed to meet individual and family requirements for basic food, shelter and other "necessities" such as clothing, household items and personal hygiene. The comparisons of his assessment of need between cities and

provinces are quite interesting. Having recently moved to Regina I was intrigued with its low cost of food and shelter compared to other cities. Sarlo is quite pleased that his rates for basic need are consistently below other evaluations. For example, his assessment for individual annual food costs is 67% of the Agriculture Canada assessment and 58% of the Toronto Social Planning Council's assessment for a nutritious diet. This is not surprising as his list includes such items as baloney, sardines, white beans, and canned peas with a cost between 79 and 92 cents per meal. Without supporting evidence, he then argues that further savings would be possible by purchasing in bulk, sale items and shopping at a number of large stores.

Regarding shelter, he argues that "rent controls are a most inefficient way to deal with the problem of rapid rent increases. Ultimately they benefit only well off, long term renters. They adversely affect the stock of rental accommodation and are especially harmful to low income tenants" (p. 98). His statement is based on the supply-demand argument suggesting that rent controls generate an artificial shortage of affordable housing.

In Chapter 7, Sarlo pulls together his assessments and establishes new lines of poverty based upon location and family size. Using income data from Statistics Canada, he concludes that 3.8% (957,000) of Canadian individuals are poor as compared to the conclusion drawn from Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut Offs "Poverty Line" that 13.1% (3,328,000) could be considered poor. Sarlo then argues that even his rate is inflated because it includes people who are not really "poor" such as university students, individuals who have dropped out of the work world for volunteer pursuits such as religious or artistic activities, and recent immigrants who will soon be financially secure.

One of his most interesting sections is titled, "Gender breakdown" where he includes both children and adults in his total of all poor. He declares that 55% of all poor are female; therefore, "the focus on just poor adults rather than all poor persons, including children, gives rise to the largely exaggerated claims regarding the 'feminization of poverty'" (p. 136),

Towards the end of his book, Sarlo presents a series of tables in which welfare recipients by province are compared to his calculation of basic need. The tables present six different applicants from "single employable" to "single parent with 3 children". His tables demonstrate that most recipients receive as much as 20% more income through welfare than they actually require and are, therefore, not impoverished. The suggestion that welfare payments should be decreased is implicit in his argument. He follows this discussion with the argument that seniors and disabled persons are adequately taken care of through the public pensions and welfare/disability programs.

In the section on the provincial minimum wage, he claims that it is sufficient for single adults without dependents but admits that it is insufficient for more than two individuals (families). In spite of this situation, he argues forcefully that increasing the minimum wage would actually harm the least disadvantaged. This section (pp.181-83) presents a fascinating and convoluted argument. Not drawing from direct sources, Sarlo quotes a column in the *Toronto Star* in which a number of Black American male economists build the case that minimum wage laws adversely affect young people "with the effects on black teenagers being considerably more severe" (p. 182).

This section is particularly interesting because Sarlo continues to quote a newspaper to support his position of keeping minimum wages low. It is fascinating because Sarlo consistently argues a positivistic quantitative definition of poverty and complains bitterly about the lack of empirical data and research. Yet, he offers no empirical evidence nor cites any recognized systematic inquiry into the effects of raising or lowering minimum wages. It seems like an obvious question: if the minimum wage was raised 50 cents, how many jobs would be "lost"? After all, the minimum wage has been raised in the past. Furthermore, he makes an unacceptable argument that raising minimum wages harms the poorest of the working poor without making even the slightest reference to the individuals who benefit by low wages. One wonders what the owners of a *Pizza Hut* would think. Taking his argument to the extreme, the lowest of the minimum wage is slavery and according to Sarlo's definition, it seems quite logical: all of the "basic necessities" are covered and the recipient is sure of steady employment.

What about food banks? Again, Sarlo has an answer and his own words best capture his perspective: "The recent foodbank phenomena can be viewed as the result of a happy marriage of interests between producers and distributors of food who have significant surpluses and volunteer groups seeking donated food" (p. 186). He goes on to say that many food bank visitors have poorly budgeted their resources, are used to a better standard of living and are seeking to improve it, or are going simply because the "food is free and any time an important, valuable item is given away a crowd will gather" (p. 189).

Regarding child poverty, Sarlo is willing to admit it may involve more than one million children but he is very clear on where the responsibility lies. It rests squarely on the parents who, according to Sarlo, have sufficient resources for the "basic necessities" through the existing social security system. "Irresponsible parents are far more of a threat to children than an uncaring welfare system" (p. 191).

According to Sarlo's moralistic perspective, a major portion of Canadian society has no right to enjoy a barbecued steak and share some hospitality with a few friends. They have no right to take the bus and view

a movie or play at the local theatre and visit a Pizza Hut after the show. They have no right to give their children guitar lessons, or play on the local baseball team, or go to summer camp. They have no right to expect dental care for themselves or their children unless they are on "regular social assistance". Sarlo correctly points out that most recipients do not qualify as "regular". Sarlo completely ignores recent social research which demonstrates that the middle class have been losing ground and joining the ranks of the poor (Ternowetsky and Thorn 1991). However, he is quite clear that inequality is not his concern.

It is sad that the best thinkers of the Fraser Institute could do no better than this book to explore this relevant and timely topic. The Fraser Institute has a clear objective, "the redirection of public attention to the role of competitive markets in providing for the well-being of Canadians" and its editorial advisory board is comprised of seven men, all economists. It seems as if their ideology, confused with a moralistic and punitive tone, has clouded their ability to present a clear argument. This book, which promised to be a good debate, falls short. Unfortunately, the Barbara Amiels of this world will take this book seriously and herein lies the danger — that in this time of fiscal restraint, Sarlo will be quoted and referenced supporting a reactionary orientation in the name of "fiscal responsibility". Patrick Johnston (1994) raises these concerns and urges a definition of poverty that is relevant for a modern industrialized country.

Should you buy this book? If you have high blood pressure, perhaps your twenty bucks is better spent on a donation to your local food bank but on the other hand, you should be aware of the convoluted arguments against a fair definition of poverty.

#### REFERENCES

- Johnston, P. (1993). "The Threat to Canada's Poverty Lines: Implications and Strategy," *Canadian Review of Social Policy* 31: 89-93.
- Ternowetsky, Gordon, and Jill Thorn (1991). *The Decline in Middle Incomes: Unemployment, Underemployment and Falling Living Standards in Saskatchewan*. Regina: SARU, University of Regina.
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