

## Alvin Finkel, *Compassion: A Global History of Social Policy*

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## REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

**Alvin Finkel, *Compassion: A Global History of Social Policy* (London: Red Globe Press 2019)**

VARIOUS BLURBS and descriptions of Alvin Finkel's *Compassion: A Global History of Social Policy* describe it as "ambitious," and for good reason. Finkel begins his survey of social policy in 200,000 BCE and concludes with the discussion of neoliberalism's effects around the globe today, a scope that few would be willing to take on. Surveying the bibliography (which is available only on the publisher's website), one can't help but be impressed with the sheer breadth of scholarship that Finkel brings together. As the publisher points out on the back cover, he dips into social policies "from Russia to Iran, Scandinavia to Vietnam," but that barely hints at the book's coverage. Surveying so much ground in a relatively slim volume necessarily means that big generalizations have to be made, and there will no doubt be scholars with deeper knowledge of specific national and temporal contexts who will take issue with parts of Finkel's analysis. But the value of *Compassion* extends far beyond the narration of social policies in different countries, regimes, and time periods, and lies in the broad themes that help to explain patterns of social policy around the globe.

Finkel's central argument is that "intertwining histories of compassion and social policy cannot be separated from histories of competition among social classes over the distribution of wealth and competition within elites over who

has the right to provide social aid and in what form." (1) As he points out, social policy is often considered a phenomenon of industrialized countries and its history is often recounted as a story of progress along recognizable stages. Finkel's global perspective profoundly challenges that view. There is no clear narrative of progress here, nor are there predictable models of the balance of power, or of the results of competition over resources and the logic of wealth distribution between elites and subordinate classes. Rather, Finkel shows that "gender roles, racial and ethnic divides, religious attitudes, and attitudes towards social hierarchies," (2) as well as politics and economic policy, have to be fully understood to appreciate how social policies were put into action.

The book is divided into three parts. In all three, Finkel considers how social policies were variously shaped by capitalism, imperialism, communism, and colonialism. Part I is a hugely sweeping history of social help before the First World War, from the sharing societies of early humans through feudalism, and the transitional to agrarian capitalism and industrialization. Part II looks at social policy from WWI to the Cold War. Scholars of the welfare state will be particularly interested in Finkel's engagement with Gosta Esping-Andersen's much-referenced typology of welfare states (corporatist, residual, and social democratic), which he considers a useful starting point to understanding how social policies developed in advanced capitalist nations but perhaps unable

to capture the complexity of why and how deviations from the path occurred – why, for example, corporatist welfare states have lower poverty rates than social democratic welfare states. In Part III, Finkel paints a picture of social policy under neoliberalism – a rather grim portrait, but one that contains the hopeful message that post-communist and post-colonial jurisdictions with competitive politics, well-organized women’s movements, strong civil society movements, a civilian-controlled military, and foreign interference mediated by local forces “did better overall.” (276)

For Finkel, social policy is an institutional expression of compassion. But compassion, in this study, is a complex and often contradictory concept. We might like to think of it in terms of empathy and unconditional aid, but Finkel points out that compassion could also involve pity and distrust towards the needy and disadvantaged. Such attitudes played out, for example, in the English Poor Laws and social policies in British colonies, which provided minimal support for the needy, and largely presumed that the poor were shiftless and inferior indigents who needed discipline rather than help. In other words, social policy was an instrument of social control, and Finkel provides compelling examples of how this played out in various contexts. As a working-class emerged in industrializing countries, for example, states and employers granted some concessions to keep their workers healthy, thereby holding off revolt. In the context of colonialism, social policies were often about controlling racialized subjects, extracting their labour and profiting off their bodies. In patriarchal societies, social policies were closely linked to the control of women’s morality, virtue, and reproduction. Eugenics and racist ideologies were embedded in social welfare systems not only in the obvious instances like

Nazi Germany, but also in countries like Canada and the United States.

Finkel also highlights, however, the ways that the powerless and disenfranchised mobilized around their own versions of compassionate social policy. Much of his focus in this regard is on socialist and labour politics, and successes of workers and unions in forcing governments to introduce policies like pensions, minimum wage legislation, income assistance, food programs, and more. We also hear about the efforts of women’s groups, abolitionists, anti-racist activists, and other social justice groups who agitated for better approaches to social assistance, and in doing so carved out the contested notion of one’s “right” to care. Finkel, to be sure, is always quick to point out that such programs can never be understood as completely separate from the motivations and interests of capital. At the same time, he makes the important point that battles over social programs were intimately tied to movements for democracy and citizenship.

This is much more, in other words, than a history of social policy and welfare states. It’s a history of inclusion and exclusion, the unevenness of democratic participation, the often-violent contours of citizenship, and of how we “humanize and dehumanize others” and why (277). Finkel reminds us that social policy has been and continues to be a vehicle for alleviating poverty, improving lives, and creating justice – but that condescension and domination are just as frequently mobilized in the name of “compassion.” These are valuable lessons, and this book is a necessary read, for anyone interested in using social policy to build a better world.

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