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Putting Universal Human Rights to Work: Policy Actions in the Struggle for Social Justice by Archibald Stuart

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Stuart, Archibald. *Putting Universal Human Rights to Work: Policy Actions in the Struggle for Social Justice*. New York: Gordian Knot Books. xi + 241 pages. Paper, \$20.00.

In *Putting Human Universal Rights to Work*, Archibald Stuart, an emeritus professor of social work, intends to lay out a logical policy strategy for increasing social justice. He notes, “Social justice can be a vague and abstract objective unless concepts and steps for action are defined in detail” (p. 3). Stuart focuses primarily on class struggle, relegating cultural or social issues to a second tier. He shows how privatization, capitalism, and the free-market often exploit workers and prevent people from escaping poverty. He delineates traditional arguments about equality of opportunity and equality of outcome, explaining how the former is touted as the pinnacle of social justice yet in fact further alienates workers from each other. In a shrinking or stagnant economy, finding a job is a zero-sum game, so simply offering more education does little to alleviate unemployment without concurrent restructuring of the labor market. His solution rests, in large part, on the provision of social security services and government regulation. He also suggests how the economy could be improved by different fiscal policies. For example, Stuart describes how tax credits might give consumers more spending money and thereby grow the economy.

Such an effort to increase the well being of a population in a state-level society would be very useful, but the book’s weaknesses leave it short of this lofty goal. Repeatedly, Stuart claims he will suggest means of building support for policy actions, yet he conflates all conservatives under the rubric of a “laissez-faire conservatism [which] expresses the theme that the uncontrolled private market should dominate the social and economic process and the best government is one that governs the least” (p. 11). Meanwhile, he characterizes his own social liberalism as “concerned with the social order and social conditions. It is based on the belief in the dignity and worth of each individual...” (p. 15) as if his adversaries did not share those same beliefs. His portrayal of one side as corrupt, uncaring capitalists and the other as moral and just does not create a space for working together and fosters the very antagonism he critiques.

Stuart reduces complex socio-cultural motivations to economic interests; for example, he explains, “The economic decline [of the mid-1970s] threatened low-income whites who were afraid of being displaced by African Americans who sought higher education as a means of competing for scarce, good jobs. The result was a backlash against the Civil Rights Movement that led many whites to shift to the conservative Republican party” (p. 8). He also links advances in civil rights to the robust economy of the post-World War II era while linking increases in social security programs to times of economic hardship. He relates the shrinkage of social services in this current time period to “the growing power of conservative forces, the decline in the number of persons employed in manufacturing, and a dramatic decline in union memberships” (p. ix), leaving the reader to wonder whether the introduction of social security in the Roosevelt administration was the result of a perfect storm.

Stuart addresses issues of identity as discrete qualities, such as race, gender, or physical ability, while very rarely examining intersectionality. He describes the belief in white superiority as simply an example of people’s need for hierarchy and an economic strategy, thus divorcing racism from its historical and cultural context. As a feminist, I have serious objections to his arguments about the position of women, including when he writes, “What has been especially notable is the number of women in leadership positions in occupations that had been exclusively male, with the result that the *so-called* glass ceiling is disappearing” (p. 181, emphasis mine). He then lists five women in government and business with powerful roles, as if the women’s

movement has achieved its goals because there are now a handful of women CEOs. Though he acknowledges the problems with the wage gap, he goes on to explain, “There are some occupations, [that] *by their nature*, will probably be dominated by one sex or the other. Women probably will be found more in occupations concerned with the care and teaching of young children and nursing, while men will continue to be found in more physically demanding jobs in construction and in baggage and freight handling” (p. 182, emphasis mine), so those jobs should simply be compensated more. This strikes me as sexism being passed off as progressive politics.

Surprisingly, Stuart fails to address adequately issues of immigration, arguably one of the largest social justice issues of our time, as an undocumented status leads to exploitation on multiple levels and supports the laissez-faire economy he is so disenchanted with. Even as his focus remains on the worker and on policy, it is a major lapse to ignore this pressing issue. Additionally, he does not even address the struggle for LGBT rights, which is perplexing because gains in that area are being made despite the fact the country is in recession, putting a kink in his argument that social rights are achieved during boom times when people feel less threatened by an increase in the workforce.

This book could be useful in courses on policy change to outline one position held by a particular political faction in the United States at a particular historical moment. It can also be used as an illustration of how to craft policy initiatives. I believe that this book will have limited usefulness for social science scholars, in part due to Stuart’s reliance on popular media for a significant proportion of his source materials. I read this book in hopes of learning how to turn social justice activism into concrete policy change. I came away disappointed.

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