

Kelly Bogue: the divisive state of social policy.

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Kelly Bogue (2019) *The Divisive State of Social Policy*. Bristol: Policy Press, 204 pp (ISBN 9781447350538) Hbk £75.00

Based on her PhD research conducted between 2011 and 2016, Kelly Bogue's *The Divisive State of Social Policy* succeeds in providing an illuminating—and horrifying—account of the impact of austerity and the 'removal of the spare room subsidy' or 'Bedroom Tax' on families in Britain. Divided into seven chapters and an appendix with participant information and demographics, the book weaves together several theoretical and empirical strands. Chapters 1 and 2 sets the stage for the subsequent empirical chapters, describing the genesis of the 'Bedroom Tax' and outlining the history of social housing in the UK, neatly guiding the reader to understand the politics inherent in social housing. While these chapters are the least fervent of the book, Bogue's concise definitions and particularly her description of how the 'age of austerity' came to define current British politics, are exceptional (p.1).

Chapters 3 to 6 are the empirical chapters of the book and where the value of Bogue's research is most apparent. Drawing on a study involving 31 participants in the anonymised housing estate of 'Tarley' on the outer edge of a Midlands city, Bogue weaves together policy, ethnographic field notes, interview extracts, and a Wacquantian analysis of advanced marginality and territorial stigma. While the 'Bedroom Tax' is a key focus of the text, Bogue stresses that the situation around housing insecurity was dire even before its implementation. She skilfully demonstrates the numerous ways in which symbolic violence is enacted on those experiencing housing precarity, drawing on interviews to underline the ways in which, for example, rent arrears prevent a social housing resident from downsizing—the supposed aim of the Bedroom Tax—therefore accruing more rent arrears because of the need to pay the Tax, and ultimately, ensuring that the resident is in a perpetual cycle of inescapable precarity. Moreover, the author deftly highlights an easy solution to the current situation: 'expanding the overall pool of affordable housing' (p. 66). The book concludes with a reflection on each chapter's themes and key points, as well as a general discussion of the retrenchment of the welfare state and urban

marginality (Wacquant, 2008). Bogue concludes that 'the Bedroom Tax is an insidious policy that proceeds to wear down the most vulnerable in subtle and gradual ways' (p.161), demonstrating the symbolic violence inherent in current housing policy.

Bogue's skill as a writer comes through the chapters in numerous ways. In the early chapters where she sets the stage by guiding the reader through policy and history, she stays on topic, avoiding tempting tangents, signposting to other sources, and underscoring the implicit links between housing and class, and the temporally cyclical nature of 'the housing question'. She aptly constructs the book so that the reader is guided to understand that the Bedroom Tax is a *process* not a single government action that arrived unanticipated with the Welfare Reform Act of 2012. Bogue's deliberate, dignified yet impassioned writing highlights how the Bedroom Tax is simply the most recent manifestation in a long history of symbolic and material violence enacted against the most vulnerable and precarious members of society. This is exemplified in Chapter 3, where Bogue deftly explains that 'the Bedroom Tax was introduced into lives that were *already* financially insecure and precarious' (p. 47).

The Divisive State of Social Policy is eminently relevant to those interested in critical social policy analysis. While Bogue is primarily writing about the implications of the Bedroom Tax on social housing residents, her argumentation is far broader and provides an insightful critique on normalised precarity as part of a neoliberal regime. Indeed, the author adroitly illustrates how the imposition of the 'Bedroom Tax' represents a neoliberal trend whereby 'individuals are subordinated while simultaneously being cast as agents of their own fate' (p.91). Her ethnographic research, interwoven with a clear knowledge of policy and academic literature, makes the book timely and insightful. Bogue incorporates into her writing contemporary issues such as the rise of far-right nationalist politics, and a fear of the 'other'. Clearly, this book will be of interest and relevance to readers of *CSP* and to scholars and activists located within the fields of sociology, human geography and social policy. All, in fact, who are concerned with the evolution of precarity and marginality.

References

Wacquant, L. (2008) *Urban outcasts: A comparative sociology of advanced marginality*. Cambridge: Polity.

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