BOOK REVIEW PERSPECTIVES

Understanding the Environment and Social Policy by Tony Fitzpatrick (Editor)

Policy Press, 2011, 384pp, ISBN: 1847423795

Karin Bradley
Department of Water and Environmental Studies, Linköping University, Linköping SE-581 83 Sweden (email: karin.bradley@liu.se)

Understanding the Environment and Social Policy deals with the intersection of environmental policy and social policy. Though often treated as two different fields with different sets of literature, in practice, they are deeply intertwined. The book is primarily written from the perspective of how environmental challenges alter the field of social policy, but it also considers to some extent how environmental policy can be more attentive to the dimensions of social sustainability. The volume develops a thorough ecosocial perspective of ethics, policy, and planning. Its explicit aim is to help advance the emerging field of ecosocial policy making. The volume is part of a series of books oriented to students on the overall theme of “understanding welfare.” Despite a somewhat unappealing title, this book is an important work, not only for students, but also for politicians and practitioners.

The book is an edited volume consisting of chapters on environmental challenges and policy, social challenges and policy, environmental ethics, environmental justice, health, urban planning, green jobs, citizenship, and international development. Tony Fitzpatrick, the editor of the book and author of three of its chapters, sets the overall tone. It is primarily his contributions—using illustrative examples and writing in a transparent, humorous and sometimes unexpected way—that engage the reader.

Fitzpatrick is clear about the book’s political positioning, a stance that is often absent from course literature that maintains an assumption of neutrality. He situates the work in the center-left and the mid-green shades of politics. At the same time, the contributors are careful to avoid being interpreted as alarmists or “unrealistic” ecologists. Rather they seek to position themselves as sound academics—well informed about global, social and environmental challenges and the necessities for action. The analyses, questions, and perspectives raised in the book move beyond the well-known consensus politics and the tired policies of mainstream society, and hence attempt to rethink current models and measurements of development and growth. In this respect, the authors bring up deep-rooted problems of Western civilization, such as the linear notion of progress and Cartesian philosophy, as they simultaneously engage with current everyday politics and geopolitical reality.

What was lacking, however, was a more nuanced discussion about politics and the political—a more penetrating discussion about liberal democracy, current forms of political arrangements, and their capability (or lack thereof) to deal with environmental concerns. In Chapter Four, Philip Catney & Timothy Doyle briefly mention such theorists as Robyn Eckersley (2004) who argues that environmental responsibility and a “truly green state cannot be achieved within the frameworks of liberal democracy,” and that “new forms of democracy” need to be developed. However, this chapter does not explore these new forms. This is a key question if one wants to advance ecosocial perspectives. How might current systems of democracy and governance be altered to better encompass environmental concerns, collective identities, care for the commons, as well as distant environments and distant people? It would have been fruitful to expand this discussion and engage with current debates around the post-political condition (Swyngedouw, 2007), that argues for going beyond contemporary consensus-seeking governance models and explores meanings of “the political,” agonism, and radical pluralist democracy (both within and beyond the state) (see Mouffe, 2005).

Catney & Doyle believe in state governance; however, they admit that until now no state can be said to have effectively handled environmental concerns (i.e., there are no “green states”). They note the tradition of environmental thinking that is skeptical of the state and instead promote local governing. However, rather swiftly this strand of thought is dismissed for being unable to cope with global ecological problems. But what if Catney & Doyle had posed the question differently: What are examples of societies that have managed to govern their common resources in sustainable ways and have not contributed
to global ecological problems? This is the question put forth by Elinor Ostrom (1990). The answer is, according to Ostrom’s extensive case studies, small units of self-organized forms of governing, sometimes nested in multiple layers.

The contributors to this volume are most likely aware of this work, but do not mention it. Today we have global socioecological problems and states with which we need to work, but nevertheless it is important to consider if and how we can accommodate local and trans-local self-governance with state and transnational governance. It is also worth highlighting that the contemporary “commons movement” is engaged in self-organized forms of governing natural resources, production, agriculture, and energy production, as well as the digital commons (see Hardt & Negri, 2009; Walljasper, 2010). These types of movements, oriented toward self-organization and nonprofit-driven development, are likely to grow stronger in the wake of economic crises, and perhaps most particularly in the crumbling welfare states of southern Europe and the UK.

Perhaps it is in directions such as these that we can look for new seeds of ecosocial governance. The so-called best practices in the book are often drawn from the Scandinavian countries. Indeed, when it comes to environmental regulation and occupational health policies, these nations have been progressive. However, they also have among the largest per capita ecological footprints and growing levels of consumption. In official statistics, Sweden reports that it reduced its greenhouse-gas emissions by 10% between 1993 and 2005 and manages to rank highly on the Environmental Performance Index (see Chapter Three). However, recent research points out that the country’s record is not nearly as good if one includes the embodied emissions of imported products (Berglund et al. 2011). According to these latter calculations, the country has actually increased its emissions by 20% during this period. In this respect, the Scandinavian countries cannot realistically be seen as pioneering ecosocial development that takes into account the well-being of global environments and populations. Other development paths are surely needed. However, the book not only portrays the Scandinavian welfare states as “the way” forward, it also discusses alternative futures (e.g., downshifting, local exchange and trading systems, feminist forms of societal organization, and environmental citizenship). On these subjects, the contributors walk a fine line between being optimistic—believing in a combination of institutional solutions and grassroots initiatives—and being forthright about the difficulties of current situations and development paths.

The concluding chapter of the book is, in my view, the strongest. Fitzpatrick shows the importance of imagining and framing appealing ideas of the future, not only for the already convinced, but for all. If we cannot portray and believe in a more desirable future, how can we think that people will vote and work toward it?

This volume is vastly important and deserves to be read widely by students of social and environmental policy (for whom it offers excellent insight), and also by practitioners, politicians, and the general public. To make it attractive for the latter groups, a shorter and less scholarly version of the book would need to be produced.

References

Berglund, M., Jakobsson, K., & Aleklett, K. Sveriges klimatutsläpp är större än regeringen säger [Sweden's levels of greenhouse gas emissions are higher than the government says]. Dagens Nyheter September 14 (in Swedish).

Eckersley, R. 2004. The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hardt, M. & Negri, A. 2009. Commonwealth. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

Mouffe, C. 2005. On the Political. New York: Routledge.

Ostrom, E. 1990. Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Swyngedouw, E. 2007. Impossible “sustainability” and the postpolitical condition. In R. Krueger & D. Gibbs (Eds.), The Sustainable Development Paradox: Urban Political Economy in the United States and Europe. pp. 13–40. New York: Guilford Press.

Walljasper, J. 2010. All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons. New York: The New Press.

About the Author

Karin Bradley is Assistant Professor of urban and regional studies at KTH Royal Institute of Technology and Postdoctoral Researcher in the Department of Water and Environmental Studies at Linköping University. Her research concerns sociocultural perspectives on sustainable development, environmental justice, and alternative futures. Her doctoral dissertation was entitled Just Environments: Politicising Sustainable Urban Development and her work has appeared in Local Environment and International Planning Studies, as well as in several popular books and journals.

Henrike Rau
School of Political Science and Sociology, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland (email: henrike.rau@nuigalway.ie)

Understanding the Environment and Social Policy critically examines current connections between environmental and social policy and presents proposals for the future development of an ecosocial agenda that can address pressing sustainability problems. In this edited collection, Tony Fitzpatrick has assembled high-quality contributions from international scholars...
with expertise in social policy, environmental policy, and sustainability. The first part of the book provides an extensive overview of major theoretical debates around the ethics and politics of welfare and environmental protection. It also identifies current tensions and gaps between these two policy areas, and explores opportunities for “greening” the welfare state. The second part of the volume focuses on key policy arenas, such as transportation, planning, health, employment, and international development that represent important intersections between environmental and social concerns. Case studies and synopses of relevant policy research illustrate more general points made in each chapter.

The main question that connects the different chapters is: How to respond to the ecological crisis in equitable ways that protect society’s most vulnerable members? The book presents a wide variety of arguments from greater integration of environmental and social policy to addressing pressing problems such as poverty, pollution, and climate change. Fitzpatrick argues that “we need to turn environmentalism and social policy from distant acquaintances into firm friends and it seems we need to do so with some urgency.” Research presented throughout the volume shows that “green” fiscal measures, such as fuel taxes and pricing mechanisms linked to domestic resource consumption, can disproportionately affect low-income households. This highlights the need for environmental and social policy makers to address important ethical questions and to face uncomfortable tradeoffs between tackling poverty and exclusion, on the one hand, and preventing further environmental degradation, on the other.

The need to challenge the fragmentation and compartmentalization of policy making, which often results in environmental and social problems being dealt with separately, represents a second key theme of this collection. This separation of goals has also characterized the nongovernmental sector. According to Fitzpatrick, “advocates of social justice and environmental sustainability have all too often spoken past one another and so blunted their influence on policy makers.” Transportation-related examples used by Glenda Verrinder (Chapter Eight), Stephen Wheeler (Chapter Nine), and Michael Cahill (Chapter Ten) vividly illustrate the serious consequences for society and the environment that arise from this lack of integrated or comprehensive thinking. Importantly, these and other contributors to the book see as a key priority the establishment of an ecosocial policy agenda that addresses welfare and environmental issues in a holistic way.

Does the current ecological crisis require a more radical transformation of current economic, political, and social structures and systems? The collection covers proposals that range from modest reforms and incremental changes in institutional setup to technological fixes and sweeping changes in the political system. Bottom-up and participatory initiatives such as local time banks, complementary currencies, and community-centered economic development also receive attention.

The volume further points to tensions between different social sectors that may or may not be irrefutable. For example, the often adversarial relationship that exists among environmentalists, government actors, and citizens in many countries can be attributed to divergent views on how radical a change is needed to address the environmental crisis. As Fitzpatrick outlines in his introduction, “most environmentalists call for a rethink much deeper than governments and electorates seem currently willing to go.” Similarly, several chapters reveal that contact and collaboration between social policy actors and environmentalists has been the exception, at least until recently, partly because of divergent positions with regard to the (un)desirability of unlimited economic growth. However, the rise of environmental justice movements worldwide indicates emerging alliances between antipoverty and green campaign groups that have hitherto remained separate.

The book also identifies major barriers to an eco-social transition. These obstacles include the hegemony of a productivist, growth-oriented ethos, the overemphasis on paid employment as a source of material security and identity, and the very limited opportunities for meaningful public participation in political decision making. It also shows that pronouncements calling for a complete reassessment of the environmental and social effects of economic growth (as well as related “limits to growth” arguments) remain on the margins of public debate, especially during recessionary times. There is ample evidence throughout the volume that economic recovery and job creation will continue to be given priority over both ecological and social justice goals for the foreseeable future. For example, recent drastic cuts in public spending in many developed countries have intensified the competition for scarce public resources, which equally affect both environmental and social policy initiatives. This situation is a major obstacle to the transition to a “green” welfare state.

A theme that some contributors touch on (which a second edition of this book could develop further) is the role of time in environmental and social policy. “Greening” social policy clearly requires fundamental time-related changes in the design, implementation, and evaluation of policy measures. Here, Fitzpatrick observes that “social policy has to think more about the longer term. At present, governments are at best concerned with the short to medium term.”
Much contemporary policy making adopts a view of time that leaves little or no room (and no time) for meaningful public participation and deliberation. More importantly, research presented in this volume reveals that short-term thinking remains a major stumbling block to sustainability. There is a need to challenge the dominance of electoral cycles as major timeframes for policy making and implementation. Many debates presented in the book show clearly that the “greening” of the welfare state requires a long-term approach to policy, although this is not always made explicit.

This book is an important and timely collection that makes a very significant contribution to the sustainability debate in the social sciences. Importantly, it sets the agenda for future research in environmental and social policy. Complex subjects are presented in a clear and accessible way, with a good balance between more theoretical material and relevant examples. The use of images, charts, and other visual aids makes for a very engaging teaching text suitable for both undergraduate and graduate programs. The glossary is another useful tool that many readers will appreciate. Importantly, the concise format will appeal to policy makers, practitioners, and advocates in community development, social policy, welfare provision, and environmental policy. A second edition could perhaps be extended to include a chapter on methodological challenges in the socioenvironmental assessment of policy, and on recent trends in social scientific sustainability research toward inter- and transdisciplinarity, qualitative and quantitative scenario building, and backcasting.

About the Author
Henrike Rau is Lecturer in the School of Political Science and Sociology at the National University of Ireland, Galway. She has a background in sociology and psychology and her current research focuses on sociocultural and political aspects of consumption, especially with regard to (un)sustainable transport patterns. Dr. Rau currently leads a work program in ConsEnSus, a four-year research project on consumption, environment, and sustainability funded by the Environmental Protection Agency, Ireland (http://www.consensus.ie).

Ylva Ugglə
Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, Örebro University, Örebro, SE-701 82 Sweden (email: ylva.uggla@oru.se)

The book Understanding the Environment and Social Policy, edited by Tony Fitzpatrick, provides an inclusive discussion of the interdependence between environmental and social policies. Sustainable development has been the dominant discourse of environmental policy for over two decades. It implies that environmental concerns, social justice, and economic development must be harmonized. In practice, however, there are several contradictions and conflicts to deal with in the endeavor to achieve sustainable development. Likewise, as Fitzpatrick points out, the discourse of ecological modernization has “set the agenda for discussions of public sector goods and services,” implying an emphasis on technological innovation and market-based policies to manage environmental degradation. This discussion has neglected social policy and the core idea of sustainable development. Understanding the Environment and Social Policy provides a contribution to remedy this indifference.

The book convincingly demonstrates how environmental policy and social policy are intertwined and elucidates various synergies and tradeoffs between the two. The editor and contributors present different perspectives on environmental concerns, environmental ethics, and environmental justice; introduce current debates on globalization and the role of the state and governance; and discuss issues such as health, transportation, planning and care that intersect in various ways. This overview of different perspectives and empirical areas provides a broad and accessible introduction to some of the key issues in a multifaceted policy field. One of the book’s strengths is that it deals with a number of complex debates and policy areas in a clear and comprehensible way.

Understanding the Environment and Social Policy aims to introduce a broad variety of issues and debates of relevance at the intersection of environmental and social policies. The intention is to highlight possibilities for sustainability without ignoring the clash of interests and structural obstacles that often stand in its way. This commendable enterprise points to one of the questions social scientists have to deal with in environmental research. How shall we as researchers approach the many difficulties and obstacles that are inescapable in this area without giving ourselves up either to discouragement or to naïve utopian thought?

The book avoids oversimplification of complex issues and the idea of easily gained so-called “win-win” solutions that appeal to many politicians. These points are particularly emphasized in the contribution by Philip Catney & Timothy Doyle. At the same time, Fitzpatrick’s concern and message is clear: environmental degradation and climate change must be addressed, and to do so he advocates “a politics based around the principle of sustainability.” The message is that actually we do not have a choice. To leave something more than a guidebook for how to avoid catastrophe, we have to change direction. In this re-
the soundness of diverging opinions and free debate is acknowledged, resulting in the idea that sustainability cannot be anything but a portal or “an entrance into a series of debates.” A free society needs to foster open discussion and we have to tolerate disagreement. On the other hand, the book stresses the need for a new trajectory and calls for harmonization of the variety of voices in contemporary ecosocial policy deliberations.

With reference to the chapter by John Hannigan, Fitzpatrick argues that social scientists’ use of a social constructionist perspective acts as a “veil to bind our eyes.” It is not difficult to agree with the intent of this observation. However, I challenge the view of social construction on which it is based. For example, Hannigan states that “according to the constructionist perspective, social understanding, knowledge and perception of both nature and environmental risk is inherently subjective.” However, the concept of social construction is based on the idea that human understanding, knowledge, and perception always arise in social contexts. Thereby, the idea of “inherently subjective” understandings and perceptions is misleading. This is, however, not the same as saying that environmental problems do not exist or that we cannot know anything about them. Instead, the social constructionist perspective can help us analyze the variety of ideas and opinions that we find in the sustainability debate. It could shed light on and help us to come to terms with some of the difficulties and obstacles that we face in discussing sustainable development.

While Understanding the Environment and Social Policy provides a comprehensive introduction to relevant debates (one of its explicit purposes) overall, the reader is left without tools to assess how and why various actors come to adopt different conclusions and standpoints. For example, how can we understand that there are different primary explanations for the “environmental disturbance” and different environmental ethics? And how can we decide which direction is preferable? As mentioned above, the chapter by Hannigan discusses social constructions and policy processes and presents the concepts of discourse, frame and framing, and story lines. This theoretical perspective is described, but its potential to contribute to understanding certain policy debates and controversies is never put to work in other parts of the book. Further elaboration of this and other theoretical concepts would have enabled readers to draw some general conclusions that pulled together prior contributions in the book.

Fitzgerald and his contributors stress the need to take environmental issues seriously, not least the challenges posed by global warming. For instance, the first chapter of the book entitled “The Environmental Challenge” outlines the causes and consequences of climate change and discusses various mitigation measures. This presentation is primarily based on a linear model of science for policy, where scientists provide knowledge and politicians make decisions. In discussing environmental issues, not least the issue of climate change, science is also an important actor in policy making. As other scholars have pointed out, climate policy and regulation are inseparable from atmospheric science (van der Sluijs et al. 1998; Miller & Edwards, 2001; Weart, 2011). In this fusion of science and policy, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change functions as a center of authority that must uphold its credibility in the eyes of both the scientific and political communities. The book does not give much attention to this more complex role of science in environmental policy. Given the breadth of debates and perspective presented, it would have been reasonable to discuss in further detail the role of science and the interdependence between science and policy.

In sum, this book is worthwhile for readers looking to better understand the intersection of environmental and social policies. Understanding the Environment and Social Policy presents a broad variety of relevant issues in a clear and thought-provoking way, and thereby stimulates further useful discussion.

References

Miller, C. & P. Edwards (Eds.). 2001. Changing the Atmosphere. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
van der Sluijs, J., van Eijndhoven, J., Shackley, S., & Wynne, B. 1998. Anchoring devices in science for policy: the case of consensus around climate sensitivity. Social Studies of Science 28(2):291–323.
Weart, S. 2011. The development of the concept of dangerous anthropogenic climate change. In J. Dryzek, R. Norgaard, & D. Schlosberg (Eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society. pp. 77–81. New York: Oxford University Press.

About the Author

Ylva Uggla is Associate Professor of Sociology at the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CUReS) at Örebro University. Her research encompasses multilevel governance, environmental politics and regulation, and urban planning. Recent projects concern climate change adaptation in local politics and planning and the negotiation of urban nature in planning processes and city marketing.
Rejoinder from the author
Tony Fitzpatrick
School of Sociology & Social Policy, Nottingham University, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD UK (email: Tony.Fitzpatrick@nottingham.ac.uk)

First, I am deeply grateful to Karin Bradley, Henriike Rau, and Ylva Uggla for the time they took to read and comment upon Understanding the Environment and Social Policy. I am appreciative of their view that I and the contributors have helped to develop a much needed debate.

The debate has been ongoing for several decades now, especially in the field of development studies. The task of thinking through the likely impact of climate change for social policies, and the implications of social policy and existing welfare systems for environmental policy more generally, is a daunting one. Thankfully, various economists, philosophers, social scientists, and, of course, politicians and activists have been nibbling around the edges since the 1970s. For the most part, however, and in most countries (the UK included), that body of work has failed to break into the hallowed halls through which policy makers and commentators pace. Some of the debate has been focused on social policy directly and some of it has been more tangential; some of it has been highly technical, though much has been deeply prescriptive and even utopian. This has added to the sense, shared by many of us who teach and research this subject, that “social policy” is a slippery term. Beyond the core concerns of “social administration,” social policy issues frequently occupy a ghostly, liminal space, hovering around a diverse series of disciplines and morphing into a variety of forms.

My objective when designing the book was therefore an ambitious one. On top of the fact that the “Understanding Welfare” series is primarily designed for students and others new to social policy, I wanted to portray the extent to which these issues are somehow simultaneously old and well-established, yet also new and cutting-edge, for policy makers but also for many lecturers, researchers, and practitioners. I also wanted to capture the “core” administrative issues traditional to social policy, and which speak to its practical, problem-solving concerns, while opening them up and highlighting the extent to which the ground has been shifting, demanding new agendas and revived, idealistic energies. If these ambitions were at least partly fulfilled, then it is due to the efforts of the book’s contributors and let me thank them—not for the first time!

So where do we go from here? Other than getting out of bed every day and starting again, frankly I do not know. In a world where repeated financial crises have become almost normal, where the incomes of hundreds of millions are being squeezed (and their patience is being tested), and where the old problems of global poverty remain, both remarkable opportunities and troubling dangers surround us. Of course, neoliberal globalization is multifaceted. It did not win its victories to the same extent, in the same way, and in every place. Local cultures, institutions, and practices matter. Nor, then, will it be resisted to the same extent in the same way, and in every place. If we are to develop a post-neoliberal settlement, then different battles must be fought in different corners of the globe. Yet, across diverse national borders and cultural horizons, there is also a common recognition among those straining for the birth of the new. If we are to roll back the boundaries of the free market—with its ethic of short-term self interest and profit—then some degree of concerted action is required.

My own country, the UK, is one in which opposing forces, and opposing movements, are crystallizing. On one hand, many believe that three decades of neoliberal globalization have brought us to the edge of ruin. These are not just the “usual suspects.” They are many who welcomed the housing and consumer booms of hypercapitalism, but who now recognize they were enjoying a few leftover scraps from a party which, closed to all but the super-rich and the political class, was going on elsewhere. Even some on the Right have added their voices to this disaffected chorus. Nonetheless, orthodox, there-is-no-alternative thinking still holds sway and forces that exist in a permanent 1980s time warp have been massing. “Yes,” we are told, “global capitalism has shipwrecked but that is bound to happen occasionally. Socialism is still dead. So even if free markets have failed, the solution can only be more free markets.” The UK welfare state is now under assault to a degree never attempted even by Margaret Thatcher.

This is where the comments offered by Bradley, Rau, and Uggla are most relevant and potent so far as Understanding the Environment and Social Policy is concerned. The book does not deal sufficiently with the nature of political action and social change. Let me offer some background, first of all. As every editor throughout history will tell you, even with the best will in the world, people do not always deliver. Academics are usually very nice people who say “yes” far too often, but, as deadlines, commitments, and real life pile up, this sometimes turns into a long, lingering “sorry.” The book was originally going to have two additional chapters, one of which would have dealt with political and social movements. Never mind; we are where we are.

Karin Bradley confronts this issue of the political head on, highlighting the extent to which our very idea of politics—let alone specific political institutions—may need revising. I could not agree more.
That said, the chapter by Philip Catney & Tim Doyle does provide part of the solution. Although Elinor Ostrom is obviously not guilty of this—and we had planned to discuss her and the “commons movement” in one of the two missing chapters—some within the green movement have been guilty of wishful thinking when it comes to collective action problems. You can be highly critical of particular states and governments, you can even demand that “the state” bugger off, but this requires even more attention than before to possible collective action solutions. A local meeting will enable us to irrigate a field, but what is appropriate on a global and regional scale? Philip and Tim wanted to offer a corrective to those who would wish such questions away and to suggest that alternative ways of thinking and organizing are most advanced in the global South.

In terms of my own chapter, “The Challenge for Social Policy,” I am also aware that the best performing countries, on the various environmental league tables that have been devised, still fall far short of where we would wish them, and everyone else, to be. I hint as much (on page 72), and if I did not make enough of this point it is because my desire to be upbeat got the better of me. This hardly ever happens and so when it does I run with the impulse!

Henrike Rau draws attention to the role of time and its political significance within the policy-making process. Again, I could not agree more and have written on this theme elsewhere (e.g., Fitzpatrick, 2004a; 2004b; and see the chapter by Adrian Little in Fitzpatrick & Cahill, 2002). At the moment, when UK politicians think about time it is very much along the lines of “we are living longer therefore we are going to have to work longer,” and the state retirement age is ratcheted up as a result. Many new university students will not retire until the 2060s (if they are lucky!). Unfortunately, few politicians pay much attention to the “we” who are living longer or to the “we” who will be forced, directly or indirectly, to work longer years. This is in large part because they wish to avoid a mature conversation about the many possible ways in which “life” and “work” can relate to one another.

Finally, Ylva Uggla identifies a tension between the intellectual openness that the book embraces and its demand for a “new trajectory.” There is indeed some strain here but I hope it is a creative one. It is the difference between a group of people who all want to travel to a similar destination, but who disagree largely about the mode and rapidity of travel, and another group who disagree fundamentally about where we should be going and why. The book’s tension aspires to the first kind rather than the second.

Furthermore, on the issue Uggla raises regarding social constructs, it seems to me that John Hannigan’s chapter captures the essentials very well. No one new to such debates could doubt his central point that understanding, knowledge, and perception always arise in social contexts. Uggla also observes that the book should have offered more of a consistent review of the importance of social context—consistent not necessarily in terms of the conclusions reached but of the tools and concepts deployed.

Perhaps. It might indeed have been possible to design an overarching theoretical framework, for instance, between “thin” and “thick” versions of social constructionism and ask all contributors to speak to it. Indeed, such a contrast is implicit within my comment in the book’s introduction:

[S]ocial scientists are fond of using the term “social construct” to underline the extent to which “facts” are, to whatever extent, assemblages of social categories, discourses, interpretative frames, paradigms and understandings... Yet nor should we use a constructionist veil to bind our eyes.

As Uggla seems to acknowledge, this was not meant to suggest that, because there are antirealist forms of social constructionism (to which I object), all forms of social constructionism are thereby condemned. This point is, however, separate from the question of whether all of the chapters should have utilized a similar conceptual apparatus.

This may be where we just have to disagree. There is plenty of work within the sociology of the environment that speaks to the issue that Uggla raises, and offers a “tighter” overview of such debates. But when designing the book—given the liminal nature of social policy and the near silence of what I have sometimes called an “ecosocial welfare” agenda—it seemed more important to establish that there is a conversation rather than to get people to sign up to it using the same set of tools or theoretical framework. Yes, social policy researchers should question the means by which something is or is not recognized as a social problem, both within the policy-making process and elsewhere, as well as the links between science and policy. Nonetheless, within the social policy community, specific concepts such as discourse, repertoires, narratives, framing, and storylines will mean much more to some than to others, especially since underpinning them are some heavy questions about causation, epistemological and ontological relativism, the relationships between the cultural and the material—well, the list goes on. For some, social policy is a kind of applied sociology—the term “sociology of policy” has become prominent recently—but others come at it from other directions, with alternative vocabularies.
In short, the book is indeed conceptually and methodologically “looser” than Uggla might have wished. Yet, it is also trying to kick-start a conversation accented around social policy issues. Hopefully, in time, that conversation will devolve into particular dialogues: sociology, political science, philosophy, social work, economics, law, and so forth. Out of these dialogues some grand synthesis may then emerge, but I would not want to prescribe at this stage what inflection it must possess.

Social policy scholars and researchers face a perennial dilemma. If they try wandering the corridors of power, begging the privilege of occasionally being able to whisper the conclusions of their research into the ears of policy makers, then they risk recreating the world as it is. Business-as-usual politics threatens to crush imaginative and idealistic passions, which we need more urgently than ever. But, if we drift too far away from the world “as it is,” preferring to wander the visionary landscapes of a better society, then we may render ourselves impotent in another way.

Throughout my work, I have tried to defend a radical pragmatism—akin to the more commonly used term “real utopias”—knowing that this risks upsetting radical purists on one side and hard-headed pragmatists on the other. *Understanding the Environment and Social Policy* was designed with the same objective in mind and I am grateful to Bradley, Rau, and Uggla for approaching it in this spirit. Further progress must come from those with a similar impulse. The commentators have each suggested additions for a second edition and, should this ever happen, I will try to accommodate those ideas and remember to thank them accordingly.

**References**

Fitzpatrick, T. 2004a. Time, social justice and UK social policies. *Economy and Society* 33(3):335–358.

Fitzpatrick, T. 2004b. Time and social policy. *Time and Society* 13(2–3):197–219.

Fitzpatrick, T. & M. Cahill (Eds.). 2002. *Environment and Welfare*. New York: Palgrave.

**About the Author**

Tony Fitzpatrick is Reader at the University of Nottingham, UK. He is coeditor of the journal *Policy & Politics* and was principal editor of the three-volume *International Encyclopaedia of Social Policy* (Routledge, 2006). In addition to *Understanding the Environment and Social Policy* (Policy Press, 2011), his other recent books include *Voyage to Utopias* (Policy Press, 2010) and the second edition of *Welfare Theory* (Palgrave, 2011).