

# Book Review

Peter Abrahamson

**Christian Aspalter. (2023). *Ten Worlds of Welfare Capitalism: A Global Data Analysis*. Singapore: Springer, 236 p. ISBN: 13-978-9811978623 (HB).**

For more than 25 years, Christian Aspalter has studied welfare systems across the globe, and this book summarizes the results and conclusions of this grand scientific endeavor. It is a rich and complex study, giving us his accumulated insights into welfare state theory, methodology, and empirical illustrations, revolving around the concept of welfare regime. The focus is both explanatory, and descriptive and prescriptive, that is, it not only tries to explain welfare regime developments and differences but it also wants to show the actual consequences on people's lives within each of the identified ten regime types, and suggests policy remedies for the identified social problems. The perspective is truly global when analyzing data from 155 countries representing regions from all over the world. It takes off from the comparative sociological tradition initiated by the publication of Gøsta Esping-Andersen's *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* published in 1990. It is not only inspired by Max Weber's ideal-type methodology but it is a dynamic, fully empirical-based, and fully empirical-sensitive version of ideal typical models. Hence, testing the theory of the ten worlds of welfare regimes, first published in 2017 with quantitative data, but instead of Esping-Andersen's choice of variables of de-commodification and stratification, Aspalter employs the concepts of pover-tization, inequality, and, based on the combination of the two, dehumanization.

When naming the welfare regimes, Aspalter does not use geographical refer-ences as done by many others, such as the Scandinavian, Continental, or East Asian regime, but follows Esping-Andersen's approach by naming them accord-ing to dominating political ideology. To Aspalter, space cannot be a determining variable when identifying welfare regimes. Yet, many of the countries belonging

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to various welfare regimes do cluster geographically, as is clear from book's Table 1 listing the characteristics of the ten ideal-typical worlds of welfare regimes. Here, the sources are numerous case studies that were either commissioned by Aspalter over the years for his various studies, or independent scientific papers, books, reports, etc. (Thus, the list of references in this book took 35 pages single-spaced in the manuscript format; and about 700 publications are mentioned.)

The first three regimes are identical to Esping-Andersen's *three worlds*: social democratic, Christian democratic, and neo-liberal, but the seven following regimes refer to cases and places outside Europe and the United States. The fourth regime is called anti-welfare conservative and refers to countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, while the fifth, called pro-welfare conservative, refers to countries in East Asia. The sixth regime named slightly universal refers mainly to South Asia, while the seventh, called selective rudimentary, refers to states of the former Soviet Union. The eighth regime is called communist or socialist and has now only one reference, that is, Cuba. The ninth regime is named exclusion-based and refers to the Middle East, while the tenth and last regime entitled ultra rudimentary refers to countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

These results were published in 2017, but with this new book, they are analyzed on the backdrop of Aspalter developing the so-called composite standardized relative performance indexes. These indexes measure the relative performances of each welfare regime exactly on a large number of dimensions and sub-dimensions, which are summed up into three, namely, povertization, inequality, and dehumanization. Aspalter calls this a global spectral analysis. Hence, inequality is not measured, for instance, only by Gini-coefficients but by a composite index of indicators of right to live global gap, gender health gap, gap to gender equality in education, and wealth and income gaps. On the other hand, povertization is measured by the indicators of access to improved water sources and improved sanitation, poverty of health care services, poverty of health, diseases of poverty, crime, and corruption. Finally, dehumanization is measured by a combination of inequality, poverty, oppression, social exclusion, and exploitative power relations. In its most simple form, the dehumanization matrix plots inequality on the  $x$ -axis and poverty on the  $y$ -axis, and the result shows that each position of welfare regimes corresponds rather perfectly with the predicted, theoretical outcomes of the earlier constructed ten worlds of welfare regime theory.

The welfare regimes form a hierarchy with the original three worlds (social democratic, Christian democratic, neo-liberal) and the communist regime occupying the first sphere, as labeled by Aspalter; while the extremely rudimentary welfare regime, as he writes, sadly occupies the last sphere, with all the other regimes occupying the second sphere. The analysis clearly shows that, not surprisingly but importantly, universal benefits have a lasting global impact on the well-being of citizens. However, the data not only present averages for the various regimes but, of course, also values for each country. One of many interesting findings is that Sweden, for many years spearheaded as the best performer, no longer occupies

that position within the social democratic regime. The same is with Germany in the Christian democratic regime and the United States in the neo-liberal regime.

As if this was not enough, Aspalter adds yet another dimension to the overall analysis, that of normative theory of *developmental social policy*. It is a non-statistical meta-analysis and forms the prescriptive part of the book. One of the recommendations put forward is that of a Universal Basic Income, originally a North-West European (NWE) initiative, which since 1986 has been promoted among others through the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN, originally basic income European network). It is also referred to as unconditional cash transfers and has gained much attention and discussion over the years. Many observers find that time is ripe for this, as they see it as a radical approach to, once and for all, get rid of poverty by guaranteeing every member of the society an income above the poverty line. This reviewer, originally very positive to the idea, is rather skeptical. However, not for reasons often mentioned, such as disincentive to work or too expensive, but because it is a complete knee drop to uncontrolled capitalist exploitation. As to the level of benefits, Aspalter is very vague and predicts that it, depending on the country, would vary from US \$200 to 2,000 per person per month.

Whatever remedy suggested to do away with poverty globally will presuppose increased taxation, and to this end Aspalter suggests taxing the super-rich by imposing a marginal wealth tax on people owing more than US\$100 million, and a marginal income tax on those making more than US\$5 million. As this reviewer understands it, the wealth tax is only to be imposed once, it is a one-time tax based on the past wealth and as such cannot impede any incentives to work and invest and create in the future. In parallel, it is suggested to completely stop taxing the poor and near poor.

Furthermore, Aspalter embraces the idea of defamiliarization in all aspects of social policy and accredits feminist and gender scholarship for bringing it to our attention as necessary in order to do away with discrimination of women and trans-gender persons. It is also suggested to cut all kinds of means- and asset tests, which are viewed as the biggest drama in the history of social policy, since such various social assistance programs trap and maintain people in poverty, and this follows from the idea of implementing a universal basic income scheme. Yet, probably the most radical suggestion is to get rid of social insurance systems and replace them with provident fund systems, supplemented with (smart) universal benefits and entitlements.

As a final observation, and even when it is a bit unfair to expect Aspalter to consider more issues than he has already included, this reviewer found it surprising that the book does not engage with a critical discussion of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Certainly, not everyone will agree with Aspalter, but equally certainly, if we really mean the age-old commitment to create a world with decency for all, his analyses and suggestions are very qualified and inescapable as an important input to current global social policy discussions.