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Justice in a Time of Austerity: Stories From a System in Crisis, by Jon Robins and Daniel Newman, (Bristol: BUP, 2021), xx+ 224 pp., £9.90 ISBN: 978-1529213126

This book is about *access to justice* and the reality of it in peoples' everyday lives. More precisely, as the authors lay out in the first few pages, it is about access to justice in the civil and family courts. The book sets the reader on a clear and unapologetic path, by showing how the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 reforms were 'radical' in a wholly negative destructive sense (p.1). Additionally, the austerity policies imposed in the UK made their way into all corners of the country. This book is painfully topical and important. It offers a rich and nuanced empirical account of the reality what the labels 'legal aid' and 'access to justice' bring with them to those who work tirelessly, within the restraints of social welfare law to support people who need help; and those whose lives are made even harder by cuts and restrictions to their social welfare needs.

The main aim of the book is to show how the denial of access to justice can have catastrophic consequences for individuals and their families. To this end, one of the most exciting and lasting features of the book is the empirical data collected and the power it has to show what access to justice and the lack thereof, means for people in their everyday lives. The methodology the authors chose is simple and effective. Over 12 months, they spoke to people about what 'access to justice' meant to them, what was at stake for them, and where they went for help; they also interviewed professionals who were on the front line – if, indeed, anybody was there (p.3). Further, the book was written in the 50th anniversary year of the law centre movement and clearly reads as an important tribute to this.

The book is made up of ten chapters. It is beautifully written and provides a fine-tuned balance between placing welfare laws in their political context with wider impacts for the UK; while also showing the impact the laws have on people and the impossible decisions they are faced with. An example given is that of a mother, who was refused public funding and ultimately evicted. 'When someone is forced to choose between rent and keeping their children fed, they cannot be viewed as 'intentionally homeless' when they choose the latter.' (p.56) – a case that came before the supreme court and resulted in an important judgement for the future of the welfare system. The book is structured around four themes, reflecting the concerns of the interviewees. These are: *housing crisis*: chapters 1,2,3 cover themes of eviction in the housing courts, social housing issues, the aftermath of the Grenfell fire, and homelessness. *Food poverty and welfare benefits*: the rollout of universal credit is one of the main themes in chapter 3,4,5. *Immigration and asylum*: chapters 6,7 cover immigration, 'hostile environment' policies and the treatment of asylum seekers. *Family*: chapter 8 focusses on family break-ups and their consequences.

This book is a valuable asset to the literature on access to justice, it is unique in its approach to persistent themes by telling stories of peoples' problems to illustrate convincingly how the welfare system is broken. It is refreshing that the book covers a wide geographical spread and thus can speak authoritative about the situation in the UK, rather than focus on London or Manchester, for example. It also provides a historical account of the legal advice sector which sits nicely alongside the different stories the reader follows throughout the book. Although researched and written a few years ago, the topics covered in this book could not be more urgent at a time of cost of living crisis in the UK. Prices for goods and services are escalating and many people are struggling to make ends meet. The current crisis enhances the urgent attention needed around the four themes discussed in this book, and affects those the most who are already struggling. For example, in the area of housing, there is a risk for thousands across

the UK of being forced into homelessness due to the cost of living crises. As we know this has spill-over effects into other areas of social welfare needs.

The book clearly demonstrates the complicated eligibility criteria for legal aid, the obstacles that are faced when applying for personal independence payment (PIP) (e.g. p. 66), Employment and support allowance, and the damage a misunderstood DWP assessment can do. Chapter 6 *caught in a hostile environment*, for example, describes how some people, by no fault of their own, are stuck in an expensive, impenetrable bureaucracy without any hope of release into a well-deserved *normal* life. Especially striking is the vast amount of Windrush cases that are traumatised by decades of harm. Bottom line, as they authors put it: ‘There needs to be a new look at the whole immigration rules. There needs to be a new look at the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishing of Offenders Act. It just isn’t working.’ (p.104)

As mentioned above, this book is also an homage to the law centres movement. The authors do an excellent job in sharing with us some of the stories they encountered, exposing relationships between law centres, citizens advice, and the local community. The book is very powerful, as it speaks with the voices of those who help people, as well as the voices of the people that have received help, and those who desperately need it.

Overall, I can highly recommend this book. It is captivating, honest and exposes so many issues people face with accessing justice in the UK. The book ends with recommendations in order to revive the idea of access to justice (p.173) to start to mend the damage of the post-2013 regime. All ten recommendations offered, build on the shortcomings of the system we read about in the book. They are clear, make sense and are summed up with the argument: ‘... the 2013 legal aid cuts represent the death of an idea: the end of the post-war political consensus around ‘access to justice’ and, in particular, the notion that legal redress should not be the preserve of the wealthy.’ (p.184) The authors urge for a revitalisation of the transformative idea that legal aid had in mind.

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