

**BASIC INCOME STUDIES**  
*An International Journal of Basic Income Research*

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Vol. 4, Issue 1

BOOK REVIEW

April 2009

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Brian Steensland, *The Failed Welfare Revolution: America's Struggle over Guaranteed Income Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 330, \$35 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-691-12714-9.

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Brian Steensland has written a remarkable book about the rise and fall of “guaranteed annual income plans” (GAI) in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. By analyzing media data and government documents from the Nixon and Carter administrations, he offers an interesting interpretation of these failed attempts to provide minimum income security for all Americans.

The main feature of GAI plans was the provision of a minimum and uniform annual income for both unemployed and working poor. These programs were, in Steensland’s words, “the boldest attempt to transform U.S. welfare policy in the twentieth century because they attacked the problem of poverty so directly” (p. 3). Nevertheless, GAI plans ended up being “the road not taken”.

Steensland presents three general arguments to explain this failure. First, he argues that the main obstacle to GAI plans was the existence of a dominant cultural distinction between undeserving and deserving poor based on their perceived adherence to the work ethic. While previous welfare policies had been based on the work status of recipients, GAI plans allocated welfare benefits on the basis of economic need. Steensland believes that placing all the categories of poor people in the same set of policies was unacceptable to many sectors of American society.

Second, GAI plans were conceived in multiple ways by various supporters. While advocates from different ideological perspectives (libertarians, moderates, and socialists) conceived it as a promising way to alleviate poverty, business groups believed that these plans could solve other problems such as fiscal crises and administrative bloat within the government bureaucracy. Steensland

suggests that these multiple interpretations contributed to propelling GAI proposal forward and, at least initially, masked its threat to the categorical logic of the welfare system that was in place.

Third, Steensland points out that the debates over GAI proposals did not simply manifest a clear difference in perceptions of poverty and welfare but also contributed to producing these changes in perception.

Steensland develops these three arguments in eight chapters. In chapter 1, he analyzes the origins of GAI plans during the Johnson administration. He shows how, prior to the appearance of this new idea in the governmental agenda, it had been debated in limited circles of policy experts, economists, legal scholars, and activists. Chapter 2 focuses on the period from 1966 through 1968. It was during these years that government experts publicly considered GAI as a policy alternative; business and economists lobbied on its behalf, and activists began to defend the right to economic security. The first attempt to put into practice a GAI plan, during Nixon's first six months in office, is evaluated in chapter 3. Steensland explains that, although Nixon was initially not a supporter of this kind of policy, under the influence of experts his administration ended up proposing a GAI plan.

Chapters 4 and 5 analyze the four-year discussion over the Family Assistance Plan (FAP) promoted by Nixon's administration. Steensland examines the debate over Nixon's first version of the FAP, observing that even though GAI proposals were initially conceived as a response to the high poverty levels of the period, their public justification shifted to work behavior, program costs, revenue sharing, and the deficiencies of the welfare system itself. As a consequence, the GAI plan failed. Two related policies, the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), were subsequently introduced. While the SSI plan was essentially a GAI program for the aged, blind, and disabled, the EITC was a negative income tax plan for the working poor. Chapter 6 presents the Program for Better Jobs and Income (PBJI), which was a GAI plan promoted by the Carter administration.

In the last two chapters, Steensland offers the most analytical and least historical part of the book. Chapter 7 analyzes the lost opportunities, consequences and lessons that can be learned from the failure of GAI plans in the United States. In talking about the lost opportunities, Steensland speculates that GAI programs could have mitigated the conservative direction of subsequent policy development. First, Nixon's program would have removed the easiest target of attacks on the welfare state because there would no longer have been a public assistance program that served solely the undeserving poor (p. 219).

Secondly, Steensland thinks that once implemented, a GAI program would be harder to retrench because many of the recipients would have been well situated to protect it from its critics (p. 220). Although GAI legislation never passed, the author argues that it was a driving force behind welfare retrenchment. The debates over GAI policy not only established the terms of debate for the welfare backlash that began in the 1970s, but they also gave rise to a more economic approach to analyze and design welfare policies. These debates also provided the foil for the growing critique of the entitlement mentality and reinforced the distinctions between categories of the poor in both program design and public discourse. Steensland believes that the broadest outcome of the debate over GAI proposals was the naturalization of the labor market as the only legitimate source of economic security (p. 226). At the chapter's end, he examines a few lessons to be learned from the failure of GAI proposals. According to his evaluation, both the contemporary reasons to support a GAI (poverty, changing conditions of labor market, inadequacy of contemporary antipoverty measures) and the obstacles (i.e., the cultural distinction between undeserving and deserving poor) are still the same.

Finally, chapter 8 examines the particular lessons that welfare scholars can learn from studying the particular case of GAI plans in United States. Steensland develops his argument about the importance of culture as a variable that can determine the success of redistributive programs. He does not propose to supplant existing approaches of social policy studies but to bring greater "theoretical hybridization," that is, to analyze with more detail the influence of cultural factors on the design and implementation of public policies.

All in all, Steensland makes a strong case for considering cultural factors more seriously in the study of social policies. Yet the main cultural factors identified in this book have already been taken into account by scholars working within analytical approaches. For instance, both the idea of reciprocity and the distinction between deserving and undeserving poor have been vehemently discussed and considered from a normative perspective as factors that affect the political viability of basic income proposals in varying contexts. While it is true that cultural factors have often been dismissed in empirical approaches to basic income and distributive policies, scholars from more analytical traditions have long been aware of the importance of the factors that Steensland highlights in his work. However, this is a welcome book for all those interested in universal programs of income distribution. It offers a valuable historical account of one of the most important attempts to implement a basic income program, showing that even when a proposal can be justified from many perspectives, this does not guarantee its success.

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