

Book Reviews

The Social Condition of the Aged

Old People in Three Industrial Societies. ETHEL SHANAS, PETER TOWNSEND, DOROTHY WEDDERBURN, HENNING FRIIS, POUL MILHØJ, and JAN STEHOUWER. Atherton Press, New York, 1968. xvi + 478 pp., illus. \$15.

The policies that societies develop to deal with the problems of the very young and the aged indicate the priorities given to human values. The old, who in particular consume social resources while offering no potential contribution to social output, tend to be neglected in all industrial societies. Since resources are limited in any society, it is essential to locate the problems and needs among the old that are unlikely to be met through usual family means and resources, so that public policies can reach the most needy.

In comparison with many other social groups in the population, the aged have not been the object of great research interest. Many of the data available to inform public policy have been fragmentary, and many of the social theories concerning the dislocation of the aged in industrial society have not been subjected to stringent empirical test. This book, by social scientists in three countries, brings together comparable data from large probability samples of persons 65 or older in the United States, Britain, and Denmark. These data are relevant to many of the major issues that have been raised concerning the life of the aged in industrial society, and they are a welcome addition to our fund of knowledge. The authors carefully reviewed the literature before designing their interview and made judicious choices from the possible universe of questions. Although they have not exploited their data to the fullest, the relevance of the information obtained will make this work an important resource for investigators and government officials.

The authors were very much influenced by questions implied by the work

of Talcott Parsons and other social theorists who have argued that in industrial societies many of the functions of the family are diminished or replaced. With industrialization, so it is argued, come greater mobility, looser social ties, a shift from extended to nuclear families, and the isolation of the aged from occupational, community, and kinship relationships. This study thus provides data on such issues as the functioning of older people, their sources of social support, the persistence of kinship ties, sources and levels of income, community attachments, and the like. The picture that emerges from this wealth of data is that the social theorists have been somewhat more gloomy than necessary about the effects of industrialization on the family and the social isolation of the aged from kinship and community ties. A relatively large proportion of the aged in all three countries maintain reasonably active and engaged lives, have continuing contact with kin and others, and appear to have made a satisfactory adjustment to their social role and their declining physical status.

The aged, however, constitute a very large and growing group; and the authors—in emphasizing the overall picture—neglect the heterogeneity of the populations they studied and the fact that there are minorities of significant size that lead lives of low quality and of relative isolation in old age. Nor does the book treat of the 4 to 6 percent of the aged who are institutionalized, frequently in custodial institutions of poor quality or in mental hospitals to which they are improperly committed because of the lack of community facilities for them. (Along these lines, Peter Townsend's earlier study of the institutionalized aged, *The Last Refuge*, should be read as a companion volume to this book.) The authors are not oblivious to such problems and, indeed, they note them from time to time; but

the book for the most part addresses its attention to the modal group, and a hasty reader can derive an incorrect impression.

Even the adequacy of the conclusions concerning the modal group depends on whether or not the reader is willing to accept the implicit and explicit assumptions of the authors as to what constitutes for the aged a satisfactory level of health, kinship and community ties, and social participation. The social theories of aging are imprecise in their implications, and the assessment of whether the aged are sufficiently integrated into community life depends on the standards that are deemed appropriate. The conclusions one might come to depend substantially on how one chooses cutting points on various distributions, and the authors in their discussion tend to forget how arbitrary their standards are. It is to their credit, however, that their data are sufficiently detailed that the careful reader can apply his own standards and make his own judgments. My own view is that the authors have a point in concluding that social theories have exaggerated the social isolation of the aged, but that the picture they themselves paint is too optimistic. In my judgment, the latter error is the more dangerous one, for it serves those who favor inaction. It is clear, however, that the authors are not in this class.

The book has some other deficiencies. The data for the study were obtained in 1962, and many of the findings pertain to health and the utilization of health services. Although Medicare has been in effect for some time and the utilization data are therefore of no more than historical interest, this study published in 1968 does not discuss the implications of Medicare or the possibility that the findings reported may no longer be relevant. For example, during the calendar year 1967, 8.6 million of the aged in the United States—constituting 58 percent of the 14.8 million aged who used medical services in that year—each incurred medical expenses exceeding \$50, beyond which charges are reimbursable by Medicare. Approximately \$1.5 billion was reimbursable, encompassing approximately two-thirds of the medical expenditures incurred by the aged. Also, the authors give insufficient attention to the likelihood that some of their results pertaining to health may be products of the different ways in which the medical systems of the three countries organize their services. That the aged in the United States more

often receive hospital care and the aged in Britain more often receive domiciliary care reflects such a difference. Domiciliary services in Britain compensate in part for a scarcity of hospital beds and do not necessarily signify better medical services. The facts are what they are, but it is not clear to me what conclusions are derivable from them. Moreover, although the influence of response tendencies in surveys has been well documented, the authors often fail to see the possibility that some of their results may be artifacts of that influence. For example, do women suffer greater incapacities than men of comparable age, or are they just more willing to report their incapacities to an interviewer? Indeed, given the care with which this study was conceived and executed, the analysis is doubly disappointing. The indices used are statistically crude, and the analysis of the data is primitive. For the most part, the authors present simple cross-tabulations, generally failing to assess the strength of association among variables and neglecting to partial out the effects of a variety of intercorrelated independent predictors.

The implications of the study for social policy are underdeveloped as well. Many of the conclusions are platitudes. The authors do not sufficiently delve into their own findings to locate particularly vulnerable groups, to suggest public policies that will help meet their needs, and to explore mechanisms for implementing such policies. Too much of welfare legislation fails to reach the most needy and underprivileged, and it is these groups in particular to whom we must be especially responsive. Although the proportion of aged persons suffering from desolation is small, the number of such persons is not insignificant and they require community help.

A survey of this sort tends to view the problem of aging from only one of many perspectives. By obtaining data on the social contacts of the aged with relatives and friends, one can observe that there are many informal sources of help and support within families and the community. But such studies do not provide information on the social costs and difficulties experienced by families who take on the care of aged relatives and who are willing to assume large burdens because of love and loyalty. These are qualities worthy of support in any society. And if a community can develop a system of social services to assist families that take on such responsibilities and to help relieve their

burdens and social costs, it is not inconceivable that love, loyalty, and responsibility can be encouraged and increased. Unfortunately, the authors are not sufficiently specific in deriving implications from their very rich data.

The similarity of the situation of the aged in the three countries studied is extraordinary. In part, the homogeneity of results is due to the fact that the situation of the aged in the United States, however poor by comparison with that of younger Americans, is better than that of the aged in other countries. Although social services for the aged are superior in the Scandinavian countries and Britain to those of the United States, even there services are underdeveloped and inadequate and do not reach a sufficient number of the needy. It is difficult to detect the influence of different social policies if one looks mainly for the effects they have throughout the very large populations of aged in the respective countries. It is likely that larger consequences would be observable in comparing more closely the most disfavored poor of these countries.

Average pension payments in the United States are only 29 percent of average industrial wages; a third of all the income units among the aged are more than 20 percent below the median for that group. As one finishes examining this study it is still not clear just how far off the mark the typical social theories of aging are. It is clear, however, that much remains to be done in assisting the impoverished aged.

DAVID MECHANIC

*Department of Sociology,
University of Wisconsin, Madison*

Some Economic Plants

Tropical Crops: Dicotyledons. J. W. PURSEGLOVE. Wiley, New York, 1968. 2 vols., xx + 719 pp., illus. \$8.50 each.

The objectives of the work entitled *Tropical Crops: Dicotyledons* are clearly set out in the preface by its author, who has had a wide experience as an agricultural officer in the tropics. The book is intended to contain the information which might emerge in a survey course on tropical agriculture or be welcomed by those who find themselves in unfamiliar tropical situations and are in need of general knowledge about the plants and the practices for their cultivation. It is thus a very general handbook and contains much miscellaneous

information, although its style and wide coverage often preclude the information in depth which the more specialized user might require. Nevertheless, the book should be valuable to those who undertake work in underdeveloped countries or who wish to inform themselves about unfamiliar crop plants and their husbandry. In these days of increasing interest in the tropics, the book may therefore meet a real need.

The author made certain arbitrary choices which often explain what the book does, or does not, contain. Since it deals only with dicotyledonous plants, the very important monocotyledonous tropical plants, among them palms of all kinds (including the coconut), bananas, the pineapple, sugarcane, yams (*Dioscorea* spp.), and agaves, are not dealt with. The book is arranged for those who understand botanical nomenclature, and others may find it somewhat disconcerting that a book about tropical crops is so tied to botanical classification that some of the most important crop plants are not included. Similarly, the range of the tropics and the designation "tropical crops" are so interpreted that many plants which are familiar in temperate or subtropical habitats (for example, cotton, tomato, potato, tobacco, and certain squashes) are included. Nevertheless, certain tree crops (for example, the macadamia nut from tropical Australia now cultivated intensively in Hawaii, and sandalwood from India) are not included, and some drug plants, for example, *Rauwolfia*, *Atropa*, and *Datura* spp., receive scant mention although they are indexed under the drugs they contain.

The style of the work is that of a manual with notes on the botanical classification of the plant in question, numerous original habit sketches of foliage and flowers, and short notes on cultural practices and propagation, on the useful products yielded, and on diseases and pests, pollination, seed germination, and chemical composition. However, the space devoted to each plant is often short and the information is of necessity very general. For example, the data on chemical composition relate mainly to very broad classes of "food and fibre" constituents. An appendix furnishes a useful glossary of scientific and common names of the plants referred to and also designates the origin and use of the plant in question. The book is attractively produced, and its limitations are inherent in its avowed objectives. While it tells a little about