

# **Review of *Economics as Religion: from Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond***

Review by  
**Karl Widerquist**  
Staff Economist, the Educational Priorities Panel

This is an early version of a book review later published as  
Karl Widerquist, 2001. "Review of *The Political Economy of Inequality*, Ackerman, Goodwin, Dougherty, and  
Gallagher (eds.)," *the Journal of Economic Issues* 35 (4): 1054-1056  
Please refer to the published version

*The Politics of Economic Inequality*, 2000. Edited by Frank Ackerman, Neva Goodwin, Laurie  
Dougherty, and Kevin Gallagher. Washington, DC: Island Press

This book is the fifth the Island Press series, *Frontier Issues in Economic Thought*. For those unfamiliar with the series, the editors summarize recent research in areas that have been largely ignored or mistreated by mainstream economists. Past books in the series have covered environmental issues, consumerism, social welfare, and the nature of work. Each book summarizes a large volume of research in fairly dense three- to four-page summaries. For those of us who believe that a good economist should have broad knowledge of the field, not just of her narrow area of specialty a book like this is a great asset. It's a good idea for a series of books and perhaps a better idea for a quarterly journal or even weekly magazine. Some readers may choose to read these books in their entirety to help keep up their broad-based knowledge of the discipline outside of their own field. Others may want to use them to scan selected topics to see which merit a deeper look. In either case, a references like this is a great resources, I only wish there was something like this on every social science topic that might interest me.

*The Politics of Economic Inequality* summarizes sixty-seven articles grouped into ten parts each on one specific topic within the broad category of inequality: "Unequal Earnings: Theory versus Reality;" "The Distribution of Wealth and Power;" "New Paths to the Top: CEO and Celebrity compensation;" "Corporate Power: Why Does it Matter?;" "Poverty, Inequality, and Power;" "Intrahousehold dynamics and Changing Household Composition;" "Technology, Skills, and Education;" "Categorical Inequality;" "World Income Inequality and the Poverty of Nations;" and "Responses to Inequality: The Welfare State."

Each section begins with an overview essay written by one of the four editors of the book. The overviews apparently have two functions—first, to put the work in larger perspective and, second, to provide an even briefer summary of the articles for those who aren't sure they want to expend the effort to read the more lengthy summaries in the main section. Frankly, the overview essays would be better without the second these functions. For someone reading the book from cover to cover it gets quite tedious to read two very similar summaries of the same article within a few pages of each other. All too often one asks oneself, "Didn't I already read this?" Neva

Goodwin does the best job avoiding tedious repetition of summaries and keeping her overview essay brief and to the point, but unfortunately she only writes one of the ten overviews. The other editors seem to be unanimous in their desire to give lengthy coverage in both places to every article they summarize. A typical example of this appears in section six, “Intrahousehold Dynamics and Changing Household Composition.” The editor takes nine lines to explain Becker’s “Rotten Kid Theorem” in the overview essay on pages 172-173 and then expands that to 14 lines in the article summary on pages 183-184, repeating some sentences word for word. A nine- and a fourteen-line explanation of the same idea simply cannot be different enough to justify having both of them so close to each other. I expect many of the readers of this book will end up skipping the overview essays or reading just the overview essays to avoid the tedium of repetition.

The book is designed to cover nonmainstream ideas. With this goal in mind, the editors choose to summarize only nonmainstream authors even when summarizing topics in which mainstream and nonmainstream authors are both writing. This strategy leads to the problem that if there is a prominent mainstream author who is widely cited by the nonmainstream authors—if only to be refuted—the editors are forced to include at least a brief summary of the mainstream author somewhere. But the mainstream summaries are usually included within other summaries and therefore they are usually quite brief and distract attention from the main article being summarized. It might be better to include one full summary of a mainstream author in sections in which such authors feature prominently and let the work stand or fall on its own. If this was done, the book would still focus on nonmainstream topics and ideas and it would give a more complete summary of the current state of research in topics covered by nonmainstream economists.

Quibbling about the small things aside, this book is an excellent resource and I look forward to reading the other books in the series.