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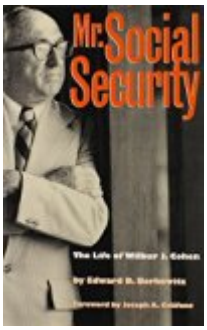

Edward D. Berkowitz. *Mr. Social Security: The Life of Wilbur J. Cohen.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995. xx + 396 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-0707-5.

Reviewed by Edward Lorenz

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Edward Berkowitz has written frequently on Social Security history and current policy, the welfare state, policy toward the disabled, and health policy. In this book, he turns to biography, describing the life of one of the policy makers present at the birth of social security. However, the book is more than the story of Wilbur Cohen; rather, his life is the vehicle for clarifying social policy choices and the recent history of the social policy process.

Wilbur Cohen was a fascinating figure, one whom Berkowitz rightly appreciates. Not a household name, he probably had far more impact on popular public policies between the New Deal and the 1960's than did the politicians known by the press and the public. Yet, this is not only the story of a rise to influence and ownership of a public policy; it is also the story of a loss of influence and decline into apparent irrelevance.

Cohen, who was born of Jewish, immigrant, store-keeper parents in Milwaukee, moved away from his origins as a result of study at the University of Wisconsin from 1930-1934, specifically at Alexander Meiklejohn's "Experimental College" [this is an important story in itself]. At Wisconsin, Cohen studied economics under the leaders of institutional economics: Edwin Witte, Selig Perlman, and John R. Commons. This was at the close of the era when Wisconsin was the preeminent state university and the "Wisconsin idea" linked the university's experts to state government. This provided a fertile ground for undergraduates such as Cohen. They observed and wrote about the enhancement of Wisconsin state capacity and the use of that capacity to protect economic security, especially through the first U.S. unemployment insurance scheme. [Chap. 1]

Graduating in the midst of the Depression, Cohen secured employment in Washington as an assistant to Witte, who had been invited to plan national "Economic Security." [Chap. 2] He remained in Washington for the next twenty years rising from an assistant to an expert to become the expert on social insurance, or colloquially, "Mr. Social Security." By the mid-1950's, serving as legislative liaison for the Social Security Administration (SSA), he already had helped make Social Security a sacred compact between American generations

and "more than any other single individual, brought together the sides of the [social security] 'iron triangle' . . ." (p. 69). [Chaps. 3-4] Finding the Eisenhower administration not fully congenial, he accepted a professorship in social welfare policy at the University of Michigan in 1956. [Chap. 5]

He returned to Washington in 1961, as a political appointee of the Kennedy Administration [Chaps. 6-7] and remained under LBJ, becoming Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) in 1968. [Chaps. 8-12] After Nixon's victory, Cohen returned to Michigan as Dean of the School of Education. He "retired" to the LBJ School of Public Affairs in 1980, and died in 1987, age 74. [Chap. 13 and Postscript]

Berkowitz describes Cohen's long and varied career well, concluding with the dedication of the Cohen Building at HHS Headquarters in Washington. Most of the text deals with the details of Cohen's life, especially the complexity of the policy battles in which he engaged during the 1960's. Berkowitz spares the reader analysis of interpretations of other historians. Even his notes primarily guide us to the primary sources Berkowitz used: documents in the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and LBJ Libraries, the National Archives, and the various depositories of Cohen's personal papers (such as Wisconsin). While some might criticize the absence of non-elite sources, Cohen clearly was a person who worked through national political institutions and national political leaders. If there is a two channel welfare state, as Barbara Nelson has said [in Louise Tilly and Patricia Gurin, ed., *Women, Change, and Politics* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1989), then Cohen is a perfect example of channel one. He was an economist who worried far more about Old Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI) and Unemployment Insurance (UI) than welfare [Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)]. Berkowitz uses the right sources to find out about a person from this group.

This biography is much more than a story of the life and achievements of one more dead, white, male important person. Cohen comes out of this book as a brilliant man, able to nurture or manipulate the political system to bring reform that benefitted large numbers of Americans. He gave credit to others, yet knew how to manipulate them to get his way. Words like pragmatic, incremental, persistent describe his style. In fact, his critics once accused him of "relentless incrementalism." (p. 143) But it is important to recall he seemed to not lose his vision of economic justice, while making "Cohen compromises." While he wrote or edited more than a dozen books, all were practical policy works. As he said to a *New York Post* reporter in 1968, when asked about his religious beliefs, "I have a strong belief that deeds are more important than words" [*Current Biography*, 1968, p. 98].

Berkowitz gives a clear account of Cohen's incremental reform quests, his endless bargaining and deal-making with political leaders, especially [the other Wilbur] Wilbur Mills, who chaired the House Ways and Means Committee in the '60's. The criticism I have of these accounts is that they often hide the real importance of Cohen. Perhaps because I teach undergraduates who still have problems seeing forests for trees, Berkowitz's often brilliant interpretations of Cohen's significance are so interspersed throughout the book that they well may be missed by all but the most attentive reader.

What is Cohen's significance? Berkowitz finds it in both his goals and methods. Perhaps most of all it was Cohen's ability to temper his goals with the reality of what the U.S. system was likely to produce. For example, Cohen was interested in national health insurance as early as the 1940's but did not pursue that goal to the exclusion of incremental expansion of Social Security. He defended the contributory, intergenerational character of Social Security, knowing that "insurance" could be sold to Americans. Berkowitz's explana-

tion of Cohen's position is an important contribution of this study, one that should be read carefully by those who find Social Security inadequate or biased in favor of employed, male, "heads of households" or based on a regressive tax.

Berkowitz provides a detailed account of Cohen's determined pursuit of basic economic insurance for American workers. However, the explanation could be more persuasive if Berkowitz provided readers with an explicit summary of the literature on incrementalism in the American policy process. Cohen is a personification or an "ideal type" of the public manager who, in Charles Lindblom's phrase, practices incrementalism as a way of "'smuggling' changes into the political system." ["Still Muddling Not Yet Through," ***Public Administration Review***, Nov./Dec. 1979] Only by reviewing the literature on incrementalism can Cohen's caution and frequent compromises be seen as a step on the way to major reform. Berkowitz would do well to pause and explain the incrementalist argument. If readers were warned to consider it, then they might see Cohen's work as a persistent and largely successful effort to expand economic security for all Americans not a failure to pursue ideals.

Related to this oversight, Berkowitz also could clarify the concept of an iron triangle. He mentions an "iron triangle" on page 69 but does not discuss its meaning. This omission is all the more regrettable since a minor character throughout the latter chapters is Douglas Cater, a LBJ White House staffer. It is Cater who helped clarify the concept of these triangles when he wrote POWER IN WASHINGTON: A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE STRUGGLE TO GOVERN THE NATION'S CAPITAL (1964). Such triangles can seem especially sinister to outside observers and Cohen's leadership of one can appear as subverting the democratic process. Yet, the triangles can be defended, especially the creation of one to promote economic security for all. But the defense should be explicit, at least in a footnote.

Berkowitz is good at summarizing the ironic shift in Cohen's position on the political spectrum in the 1960's. In 1961, when being confirmed by the Senate, Cohen was labeled (by the AMA, etc.) as a radical -- a proponent of "socialized medicine." He just barely was confirmed. Berkowitz does a good job of summarizing Cohen's role in supporting Medicare and federal aid to education, but being a critic of the War on Poverty. This account may serve as a healthy antidote to the "impression of the 1960s . . . one receives from most historians. . ." (p. xvi) For Cohen the 1960's was the era of the major incremental reform of social insurance and education policy with the adoption of Medicare and Medicaid and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Despite these monumental achievements, by 1968 Cohen was seen by the "'young turks'" at HEW as "'out of date and out of touch . . . isolated by years of Washington service and sullied by the compromises that politics requires.'". They called him "'a politician, not an idealist.'" (p. 276) Berkowitz provides the details needed to understand how the old New Deal liberal (or to his conservative critics, radical) could be seen as a symbol of the old order. However, I feel he misses an opportunity here to critique Cohen's critics, especially those on the left.

Cohen was a proponent of a theory of fighting poverty and exploitation in America that was not tried beyond programs for the elderly. He believed that special programs targeted on the poor, minorities, or other stigmatized groups would not receive the support either politically or administratively to succeed in the long term. Rather, he sought to help the powerless to achieve independence, opportunity, and equality through a system providing economic security to all. He saw the danger of multi- tiered programs, that is programs where the state primarily helps those at lower income levels and the more secure rely on private systems. Multi-tiered programs tempt the elite [, current political demogogues,] and even the mid-

dle class to abandon support for the public policies that help the bottom tiers. The solution is to keep everyone in the same income security system.

Of course, Cohen's views were rejected by those on the right; the people who want to privatize social security for recipients in the top tiers and thus weaken its universal character. The problem for Cohen in the 1960's and beyond, however, was that many liberals and those to the left criticized his approach as harshly as did the right. Fixated by past exclusions of categories of individuals (i.e. blacks, women, etc.), and by less than ideal policy outcomes, many American liberals saw social insurance as someone else's policy concern. As a result, Cohen personified the fate Theodore Lowi described for New Deal liberals in the late 1960's. He had become "an anachronism." [***The End of Liberalism*** (1969), p. xiv]. Modern liberals could not understand how Cohen could see social insurance and, it must be added, federal aid to quality public education, as the most vital policies in the war for economic opportunity.

Berkowitz defends well Cohen's great contribution to the development of Social Security and even his relevance to current debates about Social Security reform. I was disappointed with Berkowitz's failure to give more attention or clear defense to the relevance of Cohen's general methods and goals. As we see the dismantling or distortion of more and more programs for specially targeted groups, Cohen's critique of the War on Poverty and his writings on poverty and welfare are extremely important. The decline in the real incomes of most American families since the early 1970's began at the time Cohen's social policy objectives were abandoned. Perhaps Cohen was right to resist policies targeted on special groups and to remain focused on general economic security. Berkowitz might have given more attention to Cohen's focus by analyzing his published writings on poverty.

I also regret that Berkowitz finds Cohen to be an example of a generational style of public official (p. xvii). While certainly a product of his generation's experiences, his family, and his educational background, Cohen's application of that education to a public career, and his confidence in public protection of economic opportunity and social justice are characteristics which might better be presented as relevant models not unique to an era. I think Cohen's success might be presented as a timeless example of official behavior in the American system.

But, I am quibbling over matters of emphasis. MR. SOCIAL SECURITY provides much material for the careful reader that should stimulate thought and discussion about the history of the American social policy process. Berkowitz has done us a real service in bringing together the details of this productive life.

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