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The poverty wars

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The Poverty Wars

Peter Saunders (University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2005, ISBN 0868408107, 158pp)

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The Poverty Wars should play a role in laying foundations for future of research into poverty in Australia. Peter Saunders has impeccable credentials: he has been director of the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales for 18 years, and is a leading authority in the field of poverty research.¹ Saunders objective is formidable: to reassert the validity, the viability and the urgency of researching poverty in Australia.

The origins of the 'poverty wars' dates to the 2001 controversy between The Smith Family, the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) and the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS). The Smith Family/NATSEM found that no matter how it was measured, Australian poverty had increased in the 1990s. In response, the CIS – the leading neo-liberal think-tank in Australia, and a close ally of the Howard Government – attacked the Smith Family and NATSEM for 'deliberately exaggerating the poverty trend', questioned the methodology of poverty researchers more generally, and challenged the reliability of any estimates of poverty in Australia (p.7).

Saunders argues that this debate had serious consequences for academic research into poverty. As a result of the 'poverty wars' 'the Smith Family ... abandoned ... its involvement in mainstream poverty research.' (p.8) NATSEM's agenda was similarly diverted and NATSEM has been reluctant to further engage in debate on poverty. A recent NATSEM report on this issue 'avoids using the term poverty, focusing instead on changes in the incomes and circumstances of families in the bottom quintile (lowest fifth) of the income distribution' (p.8). Saunders argues that there is a real risk that poverty research will remain discredited, and that the consequent paradigm shift in public policy will remain permanent. His objective is to ensure that this does not happen.

The Poverty Wars is a very readable introduction to the most advanced methods and recent theoretical developments in international poverty research. At a theoretical level, Saunders provides an introduction to an array of competing conceptual frameworks for understanding poverty, from Amartya Sen's notion of capability, to the ideas of social exclusion and deprivation. At the level of methodology and measurement, Saunders provides an overview of the current debate in Australia, masterfully illustrating the logic behind existing measures and outlining their limitations. He then introduces the reader to the most advanced international developments in poverty measurement, particularly from the United Kingdom, France and Ireland.

Saunders' work is not for the lay person interested in poverty. Those readers who are impatient for a comprehensive overview of poverty in Australia, and a set of neat policy recommendations will find little satisfaction in this book. The target audience is the upper echelons of Australian NGOs and churches who service the poor, a future Labor Government, and, most particularly, academic researchers (one guesses chiefly the researchers at NATSEM). For this audience *The Poverty Wars* provides armour in the face of serious assault from the right, addresses the theoretical and methodological limitations of current research, and lays solid foundations for future poverty research in Australia.

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¹ Note that this is the Peter Saunders from the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales (the 'left-wing' Peter Saunders), as against the Peter Saunders from the Centre for Independent Studies. As the author explains in the inside cover of *The Poverty Wars*, this has been the source of considerable annoyance and confusion.