

Book Review

Almgren, G. (2012). *Health care, politics, policy, & services: A social justice analysis, 2nd edition*. NY: Springer.

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In the second edition of *Health Care, Politics, Policy, & Services: A Social Justice Analysis*, author Gunnar Almgren provides a comprehensive analysis of the organization and historical background of the United States health care system. Analyzing this system under a social justice framework, this text reviews the multi-faceted debate over health care in the U.S., focusing on the mutual responsibilities that flow between individuals and society. With this framework in mind, Almgren discusses the disparities that exist in the current American health care system in terms of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and geography. Featuring an up-to-date examination of President Barack Obama's Patient Protection & Affordable Care Act (PPACA), this book reflects on the implementation barriers and political perspectives that surround this legislation.

The text begins with a discussion of the social justice aspects of health care, including a review of relevant theories of human rights and political philosophy. In keeping with philosopher William Talbott's view that each theory of social justice is a "moral improvement" of the theory presented before it (Talbott, 2010), this text examines the US health care system under a chronology of theories. The sequential review of theories takes the reader from the basic Libertarian perspective of monarchical times to the recent, still-developing Capabilities Approach to social justice. While any of the theoretical frameworks presented could have been used to examine this topic, John Rawls' "Justice as Fairness" approach was selected as the

central social justice perspective of the text (Rawls 1971, 1985, 1996, 1999, 2001). Under Rawlsian Liberalism, medical care is equivalent to a primary good, and is one of many political, social, and material benefits that are essential in a just society. This theory also posits that individuals have a duty of justice that morally obligates them to be advocates for change, which is a vast departure from other "typical" analyses of health and health care policy.

After establishing the basic theoretical framework for this text, Almgren takes the reader through the historical development of the American health care system. This includes developments both in the medical and health care industry as well as the involvement of the federal government in the health care system. The text also offers an assessment of health care finances in the U.S. A 2010 review of health care spending revealed that the US is spending close to \$2.6 trillion dollars per year on health care, which represents 18% of the gross domestic product (OECD, 2012). While health care finance in the U.S. is a relatively even balance of public and private funds, the massive amount of money being spent leaves questions as to the sustainability of current health care initiatives. In discussing the Medicare/Medicaid program, the author asserts that an "impending" funding crisis surrounding these programs is no longer approaching, but rather has arrived. Almgren brings to light the seemingly futile debate over incremental versus fundamental health care reform

and concludes that fundamental health care reform is not only essential, it is imminent.

The text also provides a general overview of the organizational structure of the current U.S. health care system. It is discovered that the American federal government is spending less money per dollar on health care when compared to the average government spending ratio of other countries: 48 cents versus 72 cents per dollar respectively (OECD, 2011). Despite the massive amount of resources going into the health care system, the U.S. has failed to achieve the health outcomes of other nations that spend less overall. Almgren credits this disjuncture to conditions such as poverty, racism, social isolation, & income inequality. A closer examination of both between- and within-population disparities in health care is undertaken. This includes traditional measures of disparity such as overall health and disease/death distributions, as well as measures of outcomes, access, quality and equity of health care. The populations were compared in terms of variables such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, and socio-economic status. While there was assorted direct and indirect evidence for the variables, Almgren concludes that "...disparities in the US health care system exist on the basis of a wide variety of social characteristics" (p. 277). The author further suggests these findings may be indicative of institutional racism at the wider level.

The concepts presented throughout the text are brought together in the concluding chapter of this book. The main focus of this section surrounds the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA), signed into law by President Barack Obama on March 23, 2010. The PPACA is a multi-faceted piece of legislation that aims to expand overall health insurance coverage, control rising health care costs, and improve the current health care delivery system in the U.S. Citing the PPACA as a "middle ground approach to health care reform" (p. 343), Almgren discusses both the potential strengths and limitations of this legislation. Despite the potential limitations, he argues that the provisions of universal minimum standards

availability, quality, and costs of health care presented in the PPACA would be entirely consistent with Rawls's theory of justice. It is important to note that while the PPACA is more compatible with the demands of justice, a Rawlsian approach would limit the scope of universal benefits to only those benefits most essential for basic medical and social functioning. Fundamental political and scientific challenges make it difficult to predict the precise outcome of the PPACA. While the exact future of this legislation is still unknown, overall it represents a vast departure from the previous politics surrounding health care reform. If Almgren's assertions regarding the sustainability of the current health care system are true, this departure may be the only viable future solution.

Gunnar Almgren's *Health Care, Politics, Policy, and Services* offers a comprehensive account of the American health care system including an in-depth discussion of the various social justice frameworks from which this system can be viewed. This up-to-date book gives a timely and detailed overview of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act by analyzing the provisions, implementation, and barriers to implementation of this legislation. This book is appropriate for academicians, students, and policy makers interested in learning more about social justice in the health care system. It may also be of particular interest to experts in these fields as it provides detailed information about a wide array of issues and theories. The theoretical framework chosen for this text does support many of the provisions of the PPACA, which is similar to the views held by liberal politicians. However, the book is well balanced in that it offers both critiques and support for the social justice theories and policies presented. It is only after a careful, multi-faceted examination of the U.S. health care system that Almgren draws his conclusions. Overall, this book is an excellent tool for those interested in U.S. health care and social justice. This book may be of particular interest to educators, as the critical analysis of health care policy is both comprehensive and reader-friendly.

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