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[Review of the book *British Unemployment, 1919-1939: A Study in Public Policy*]

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[Review of the book *British Unemployment, 1919-1939: A Study in Public Policy*]

**Abstract**

[Excerpt] Garside's book fills an important gap in the literature on interwar unemployment by providing a comprehensive account of the various types of public policy that government officials, politicians, businessmen, and union leaders advocated as means for reducing unemployment, and by emphasizing the effect of the changing nature of the unemployment problem on the debates on public policy. The book's one major shortcoming is that it contains very little analysis of the effects of government unemployment policies.

**Keywords**

Britain, unemployment, interwar period, labor, public policy

**Disciplines**

Economic History | Labor Economics | Labor History | Labor Relations | Regional Economics

**Comments**

**Suggested Citation**

Boyer, G. R. (1991). [Review of the book *British unemployment, 1919-1939: A study in public policy*] [Electronic version]. *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 45(1), 213-214.

**Required Publisher Statement**

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## Historical Studies

*British Unemployment, 1919-1939: A Study in Public Policy.* By W. R. Garside. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. xvi, 414 pp. \$69.50.

This book presents a detailed survey of unemployment policy in interwar Britain. Garside focuses on the debates over policy options for dealing with the persistent and large-scale unemployment that existed throughout the period rather than on the causes of unemployment or the effects of government unemployment policies.

The book is divided into four main parts. The first part describes the many changes during the interwar period in the generosity and funding of government benefits for the unemployed. Garside maintains that the policy

changes were driven largely by changes over time in the extent and nature of unemployment. The second part, which concerns the "international context" of public policy, describes the debates over the return to the gold standard, the adoption of protective tariffs, and the adoption of policies to stimulate the emigration of the unemployed to colonies or the Dominions. The third part concerns structural and regional unemployment, and government involvement in rationalization of industries, labor transference, and industrial (regional) diversification. The final section, on "macroeconomic policy options," describes the debates over the adoption of public works projects and deficit-financed fiscal policy.

Garside's book fills an important gap in the literature on interwar unemployment by providing a comprehensive account of the various types of public policy that government officials, politicians, businessmen, and union leaders advocated as means for reducing unemployment, and by emphasizing the effect of the changing nature of the unemployment problem on the debates on public policy. The book's one major shortcoming is that it contains very little analysis of the effects of government unemployment policies. For example, Garside devotes two chapters to describing proposed changes to the unemployment insurance system, but he quickly dismisses the hypothesis that the generosity of unemployment insurance affected the level and duration of unemployment, a topic that has been hotly debated in the recent literature on interwar unemployment. Similarly, he devotes only one paragraph each to discussing recent estimates of the effect on unemployment of "sticky" wages and the return to the gold standard.

Although Garside's failure to examine the possible effects of the various policy options is regrettable, the book nevertheless represents an important addition to the literature on unemployment policy in interwar Britain.

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