

NATHAN
GLAZER

THE
LIMITS
OF
SOCIAL
POLICY

The Limits of Social Policy

Nathan Glazer

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The Limits of Social Policy

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Toward the end of the 1960s, during a period of vigorous expansion of social programs, an insight came to me that was to dominate my response to social policy from that time onward. I had participated in the Kennedy administration as an urban sociologist in the Housing and Home Finance Agency in 1962–63, had taught about social policy in the years following at the University of California at Berkeley, and had written about social policy. I thought of myself as liberal, as we in America understand that term; I participated as a writer, and occasionally as an official or consultant, in the remarkable burst of social reform that accompanied the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and that was to continue, scarcely abated, through the Nixon administration.

We believed in those years, despite the Vietnam War, that our rich country had both the material resources and the intelligence to eliminate poverty, eradicate slums, overcome the differences between the educational achievement and health of the rich and of the poor. Social scientists—economists, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists—were pulled into the design and administration of new government programs aiming at these results.

A new discipline of policy sciences or policy studies expanded, and new schools were founded to teach it. *The Public Interest*, for which I wrote and which I was later to edit, was founded in 1964 by Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol and reflected this new mood: it heralded a new age in which we would rationally and pragmatically attack our domestic social problems. We could relegate the ideological conflicts between conservatives and liberals and radicals to the past because we now knew more and because we had the tools, or were developing them, to do better.

By the end of the 1960s I was not alone in thinking that something had

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gone wrong, that we had been somewhat too optimistic. My insight, probably not original, derived entirely from my experiences with social policy and not at all from reading any theorist or social philosopher, was that we seemed to be creating as many problems as we were solving and that the reasons were inherent in the way we—liberals, but also the moderate conservatives of the day (recall that they were such people as Richard Nixon and Nelson Rockefeller)—thought about social problems and social policy.

Let me characterize the dominant view of the day (still the dominant view, I would say, among liberals). We believed the advanced industrial world in which we lived had undergone progressive, if jerky, improvement since the days of early industrialism. In the unimproved world of early and high capitalism, market forces prevailed unobstructed, or nearly so. The enormous inequalities they created in wealth, power, and status were added to the still largely unreduced inequalities of the preindustrial world. In this situation most people lived in squalor, while a few, profiting from the labor of many, could live in great luxury and acquire huge fortunes. Our developing social conscience saw this as evil and dangerous: evil because of the huge inequalities and the failure to ensure a decent minimum for all, dangerous because it encouraged the destitute to rebel against industry and order. And so in Bismarck's Germany and Disraeli's England conservative statesmen became worried about rebellion and revolution and joined with liberals to protect workingmen against complete destitution brought about by industrial accident or age. We moved on to develop programs for help with unemployment and medical care and housing. The countries of northwestern Europe were in the lead and competed with each other for more effective and complete provision of social services. We in the United States were far behind, but we had made a good start in the first two terms of Franklin D. Roosevelt, were completing the job under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, had converted Richard Nixon, and indeed were beginning to show Europe a thing or two by plunging ahead with daring experiments in community participation and social planning to complete the attack on poverty.

In this prevailing view, then, we have a sea of misery, scarcely diminished by voluntary charitable efforts. Government then starts moving in, setting up dikes, pushing back the sea, and reclaiming the land, so to speak. In this view, although new issues may emerge, they are never really new—rather, they are only newly recognized as issues demanding public attention. This point of view is paradoxically calculated to make us feel

both guilty and complacent: guilty for not having recognized and acted on injustices and inequalities and deprivations earlier, because they were after all always there, but also complacently superior to our forebears, who didn't recognize or act on them at all.

This may be something of a caricature, but it gets, I think, to the essence of the liberal view of social problems. The typical stance in this view of social policy is blame—not of course of the unfortunates suffering from the social problem the social policy is designed to remove, but blame rather of our society and our political system. The liberal stance is: for every problem there is a policy, and even if the problem is new, the social system and polity must be indicted for failing to tackle it earlier.

The liberal view further sees vested interests as the chief obstacle to the institution of new social policies. One such interest is simply those who are better off—those who are not in need of the social policy in question and who would have to pay for it in increased taxes. But there are other, more specific vested interests in each area of social policy: landlords and real-estate interests in the field of housing, doctors in the field of health, employers subject to payroll taxes in the field of social security, and so on.

But as I worked on our policies in housing, health, social welfare, quite a different point of view impressed itself upon me, and I can summarize it in two propositions:

1. In our social policies we are trying to deal with the breakdown of traditional ways of handling distress. These traditional ways are located in the family primarily, but also in the ethnic group, the neighborhood, the church.

2. In our efforts to deal with the breakdown of these traditional structures, our social policies are weakening them further and making matters in some important respects worse. We are making no steady headway against a sea of misery. Our efforts to deal with distress are themselves increasing distress.

Despite the pleasing symmetry of this view, I did not believe in any automatic law. The basic problem was the breakdown of traditional structures. But other problems continually frustrated our efforts to complete the structure of social policy so that we could be satisfied improvement was occurring and that we were not making things worse than before.

Whatever our actual success by some measure in dealing with a social problem, it seemed that discontent steadily increased among the beneficiaries of these programs, those who carried them out, and those who paid

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for them, particularly in the 1960s when we were doing so many things to improve matters. We were enmeshed in a revolution of rising expectations, a revolution itself fed by the proposals for new social policies. Their promise, inadequately realized, left behind a higher level of expectation, which a new round of social policy had to attempt to meet, and with the same consequences. In any case, by the nature of democratic (and perhaps not only democratic) politics, again and again more must be promised than can be delivered. These promises are the chief mechanisms in educating people to higher expectations. But they are, of course, reinforced by the enormous impact of mass literacy, the mass media, and expanding levels of education. Rising expectations continually enlarge the sea of felt and perceived misery, whatever happens to it in actuality.

Alongside rising expectations, and adding similarly to the increasing difficulties of social policy, was the revolution of equality. This is the most powerful social force in the modern world. Perhaps only Tocqueville saw its full awesome potency. It first expresses itself in a demand for equality in political rights and in political power; it moves on to demand equality in economic power, in social status, in authority in every sphere. And just as there is no point at which the sea of misery is finally drained, so, too, there is no point at which the equality revolution comes to an end, if only because as it proceeds we become ever more sensitive to smaller and smaller degrees of inequality. More important, different types and forms of equality inevitably emerge to contradict each other as we move away from a society of fixed social orders. "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his need": so goes one of the greatest of the slogans invoked as a test of equality. But the slogan itself already incorporates two terms—"abilities" and "needs"—that open the way for conflict between conceptions of equality and a justification of some inequality. We live daily with the consequences of the fact that "equal" treatment of individuals does not necessarily lead to "equality" for groups. And we can point to a host of other contradictions which virtually guarantee that the slogan of "equality" in any society will continue to arouse passions, lead to discontent, and never be realized. Possibly claims for equality do not dominate, to the exclusion of other values, the American people, or even American workers and low-income groups (see Chapter 9). But some claim of unequal treatment was the easiest basis on which advocates for any group could claim more: such claims steadily drove the expansion of social policy, only to create new inequalities that other advocates could seize on to demonstrate mistreatment (welfare clients versus the working

Preface

This book appears at a time when the media regularly assail us with reports of devastating social problems—homelessness, drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, educational failure, crime—but when, paradoxically, political discourse has almost nothing to propose for dealing with them. Even the inevitable “Spend more” is not often heard; it would sound hollow at a time when federal budget deficits are enormous and when no candidate for office will advocate tax increases. The heady days of high hopes and grand proposals are now far in the past, even though the problems that afflict the poor are more salient than ever. At the root of this paradox, clearly, is a deep distrust of large-scale national schemes. Some of those that have been initiated have not done much good, and a good deal of harm has been mixed in with the good.

The chapters in this book describe the evolution of this national mood of caution and skepticism. But they also suggest what course social policy should take in the future. I explore the steady pressure to break up the large programs and to introduce important roles for states and cities, for nongovernmental communities and institutions, and for beneficiaries and clients. This is the course now being taken in welfare reform, in the expansion of medical insurance to those not covered, and in the provision of housing for the poor and shelter for the homeless. Finally, I consider why the pursuit of a uniform and fully developed welfare state, which has been carried so far in other economically advanced societies, has found so much less favor in American eyes. America is different, I argue, and in this difference Americans find value.

and much higher taxes, social demands will continue to press on public resources. And we may suspect that needs will be felt then as urgently as they are now.

Another source of discontent flowed from the professionalization of services. Professionalization means that a certain point of view is developed about the nature of needs and how they are to be met. It tends to handle a problem by increasing the number of people trained to deal with that problem. When we expand a program, we first run out of people who are defined as "qualified" (social workers, counselors, teachers, and so on). This naturally creates dissatisfaction over the fact that many services are being handled by the "unqualified." Further, questions arise from outside the profession about the ability of the "qualified" themselves to perform a particular service properly. We no longer—and often with some good reason—trust social workers to handle welfare, teachers and principals to handle education, doctors and hospital administrators to handle health care, managers to handle housing projects, and so on. And yet there is no one else in whose hands we can entrust these services. Experience tells us that if we set up new programs and agencies it will be only a very few years before a new professionalism emerges which will be found limited and untrustworthy in its own turn. So, in the poverty program we encouraged the rise of community-action agencies as a way of overcoming the bad effects of professionalism, and we soon found that the community organizers had become another professional group, another interest group, with claims of their own which had no necessary relation to the needs of the clients they served.

But perhaps the most significant limitation on the effectiveness of social policy is simply lack of knowledge. We are in the surprising position of knowing much more than we did at earlier stages in the development of social policy—more about income distribution, employment patterns, family structure, health and medical care, housing and its impact—and simultaneously becoming more uncertain about what measures will be most effective, if effective at all, in ameliorating pressing problems in each of these areas. In the past there was a clear field for action. The situation demanded that something be done, whatever was done was clear gain, and little as yet was expected. Little was known, and administrators approached their tasks with anticipation and self-confidence. Good administrators could be chosen because the task was new and exciting. At later stages, however, we began dealing with problems which were in some absolute sense less serious, but which were nevertheless irksome and pro-

ductive of conflict. We had already become committed to old lines of policy; agencies with their special interests had been created; and new courses of action had to be taken in a situation in which there was already more conflict at the start, less assurance of success, and less attention from the leaders and the best minds of the country.

Thus, if we look at the history of housing policy, for example, we will see that in the earlier stages—the 1920s and 1930s—there was a good deal of enthusiasm for this subject, with the housing issue attracting some of the best and most vigorous minds in the country. Since little or nothing had been done, there was a wide choice of alternatives and a supply of good men and women to act as administrators. In time, as housing programs expanded, the issue tended to fade from the agenda of top government officials. Earlier programs limited the possibilities for new departures, and as we learned more about housing and its effects on people, we grew more uncertain as to what policies, even theoretically, would be best. Housing, like so many other areas of social policy, became, after an initial surge of interest, a field for experts, with the incursions of general public opinion becoming less and less informed and less and less useful. This process is almost inevitable: there is always so much to know.

Perhaps my explanation of the paradox of knowledge leading to less confident action is defective. More knowledge should permit us to take more confident and effective action. Certainly we do need more knowledge about social policy. But it also appears that whatever great actions we undertake today involve such an increase in complexity that we act generally with less knowledge than we would like to have, even if with more than we once had. This is true, for example, of the reforms in welfare policy, which I shall discuss below, that have dominated discussions of social policy for two decades.

But aside from all these problems of expectations, cost, competency, limitations of knowledge, there is the simple reality that every piece of social policy substitutes for some traditional arrangement, whether good or bad, a new arrangement in which public authorities take over, at least in part, the role of the family, of the ethnic and neighborhood group, of voluntary associations. In doing so, social policy weakens the position of these traditional agents and further encourages needy people to depend on the government for help rather than on the traditional structures. This is the basic force behind the ever growing demand for more social programs and their frequent failure to satisfy our hopes.

To sum up: against the view that to every problem there is a solution, I

came to believe that we can have only partial and less than wholly satisfying answers to the social problems in question. Whereas the prevailing wisdom was that social policies would make steady progress in nibbling away at the agenda of problems set by the forces of industrialization and urbanization, I came to believe that although social policy had ameliorated some of the problems we had inherited, it had also given rise to other problems no less grave in their effect on human happiness than those we had addressed with modest success.

Did I have a solution? I began by saying that the breakdown of traditional modes of behavior is the chief cause of our social problems. I am increasingly convinced that some important part of the solution to our social problems lies in traditional practices and traditional restraints. Since the past is not recoverable, what guidance can this possibly give? It gives two forms of guidance: first, it counsels hesitation in the development of social policies that sanction the abandonment of traditional practices, and second, and perhaps more helpful, it suggests that the creation and building of new traditions, or new versions of old traditions, must be taken more seriously as a requirement of social policy itself.

These views are sharpened by the debate over welfare reform that began in the late 1960s and dominated the 1970s. A nation's welfare system provides perhaps the clearest and severest test of the adequacy of its social policy system in general. Welfare, which exists in all advanced nations, is the attempt to deal with the distress that is left over after all the more specific forms of social policy have done their work. After we have instituted what in America is called social security (and what may generally be called old-age pensions); after we have expanded it to cover widows, dependent children, and the disabled; after we have set up a system of unemployment insurance; after we have enabled people to manage the exceptional costs of housing; after we have instituted a system to handle the costs of medical care and to maintain income in times of illness—after all this (and we have not yet done all this) there will remain, in any modern society, people who still require special supports, either temporarily or for longer periods of time.

But as we expanded our system of social security, in theory the number of those needing to resort to welfare should have declined; instead, welfare grew, to the confusion of policy analysts and to the unhappiness of taxpayers. Some welfare experts and policy analysts assured us that there was nothing much to worry about, except that our welfare benefit levels

were too low, and our policies in determining eligibility too intrusive and stigmatizing. Nevertheless, the view prevailed that extensive reform was necessary: welfare became the central issue on which our emerging discipline of social policy cut its teeth, it became the issue on which we employed our most sophisticated models to develop and test policies. Welfare was a burning domestic policy issue of the late 1960s and early 1970s, continued to be a significant issue through the 1970s, was for a while pushed off the public agenda in the 1980s, but is returning with vigor to the agenda of public discussion as the Reagan administration comes to an end.

Despite the fact that welfare was far from the biggest of our social programs, it was seen, and with good reason, I would argue, as being closer to the heart of our social problems than larger programs such as social security, or aid to the disabled, or Medicare, or Medicaid. It was forcefully imposed on our attention during the 1960s, when it grew mightily—at a time when unemployment was low. In 1955, 30 out of every 1,000 American families received welfare. By 1969 this had doubled to 60. In 1960 there were, for example, 250,000 persons in the family categories (parents and their children) on welfare in New York City; in 1969, about 800,000. Yet during the same period there had been a substantial drop in unemployment in New York City.

Why welfare grew was a subject of intense argument. It had been designed primarily for families headed by women with children, living without the support of a working husband and father, because of death or divorce or desertion. In the 1950s and 1960s the number of widows on welfare was declining to a small fraction. Welfare families were increasingly composed of mothers who were not receiving support from the fathers of their children; the men had left them, whether or not they had been married to them. That with expanding systems of social security and unemployment insurance there should be a rising number of such families meant something was amiss with our social arrangements.

Welfare, we were assured by some experts, was working. More of the poor were taking advantage of it because the stigma of taking welfare was being reduced, because they were being organized to do so, because low-income jobs were disappearing or could not provide enough to support a family, and it was right that welfare should grow. Indeed, the chief problem, some authorities assured us, was that welfare did not pay enough—even while others demonstrated that in some places, such as New York, it provided more than a low-wage job could, and the program might encour-

age men to leave their wives and children so they could be supported by a more ample welfare check.¹

These reassuring efforts to explain welfare did not reduce public dissatisfaction with its expansion. Although one could argue that welfare was no great drain on our financial resources—which was true, compared with other large social programs—it did have an unsettling way of increasing when it should be declining, and, further, it was connected with a nexus of other, rising problems. Was it not likely that it was the children raised on welfare without resident fathers who did worse at school, were most subject to dropping out, most susceptible to juvenile delinquency, to drugs, and to crime? These connections could only rarely be demonstrated (in time some were) but the feeling was widespread that the dependence on welfare of increasing numbers of mothers and their children was a problem of more than simply providing the public funds to support them. The connection of welfare with other social problems was plausible. Welfare reform became an urgent issue, and the economists and sociologists who were working on social programs obliged with a program that represented the best thinking on social policy of the time.

The program was the Family Assistance Plan (FAP) of the Nixon administration, which drew on much social research and analysis. Its chief mover was Daniel P. Moynihan, who played a unique role in linking the researchers on these issues with the political actors who could implement their findings and expectations. The FAP had four major features, and all its variants for the next few years were to contain these features in one or another mix.

First, it created a national welfare benefit floor. The setting of welfare benefit levels was in the hands of the states (with federal participation in funding and a substantial and important federal role in setting the rules). Welfare varied enormously in what it provided from state to state: the northern and western states were more generous, the southern states much less so, and the differences from the most generous state to the least were on the order of magnitude of four or five to one. The national welfare floor expressed the belief among policy analysts that these state differences were irrational, based on prejudice and suspicion—more apparent in some parts of the country than others—and encouraged migration to high-welfare states by people who were most likely to become welfare beneficiaries. (Whether this kind of migration was actually occurring was unclear, but it seemed reasonable that it was if people responded, as we assumed they did, to economic incentives.)

But the second and third features were the heart of the program. The

second was an *incentive* for adults on welfare to enter the labor market and become self-supporting workers. Many on welfare did work, with welfare supplementing their earnings. But if the welfare grant was cut dollar for dollar on the basis of earnings, there was no economic incentive to work. The FAP would reduce payments in accordance with earned income, but not to the full extent of earnings: a dollar earned would mean a reduction of less than a dollar in the grant. Those on welfare would thus be encouraged to become productive workers.

But this required a third crucial feature: the program could no longer be just for mothers and children, that is, primarily broken families, but would also have to include unbroken families with children. Otherwise the income of the welfare family, with its combination of welfare and earned income, would exceed that of families of low-income workers. The fact that welfare would not be reduced dollar for dollar for earned income meant that families could continue to receive welfare while their total income moved considerably higher than the definition of need on the basis of which they had first become eligible for welfare, and higher than that of many families dependent on low-wage jobs, and not on welfare. This would encourage working heads of families with low-wage jobs to redefine themselves as incapable of work, or at least full-time work, in order to get the higher income of welfare plus work, which was not desirable. It was also politically impossible to have a system in which many of those on welfare had more income than those in unbroken families dependent on low-wage jobs. Thus working and nonworking family heads, complete families and broken families, would be included in the same system. This was *family* assistance, regardless of the composition of the family or the number of hours the adult mother or father worked.

An additional reason for including all families, those headed by man and wife as well as those headed only by a woman, in the new Family Assistance Plan, was that if welfare was available only to female-headed families (as it was in many states), it encouraged families to break up to get the benefits of welfare. This incentive might operate on the father, who by departing could ensure welfare for the mother and children, or on the mother, who by separating from the father could also ensure her children's support from welfare.

With these new economic incentives, welfare would become a "machine that would go of itself" and thus could be divorced from remedial social services and intrusive investigation. The stigma of welfare would be reduced. Many of those who had proposed and supported the FAP called it, after one of its theoretical fathers, Milton Friedman, "a negative