

THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL POLICY IN AMERICA

Peter Marris

Let me begin with a few excerpts from Los Angeles newspapers, which have caught my eye in the last few days. From the *Reader*, April 29th:

For almost half a century, General Motors' South Gate assembly plant has been a symbol of industrial America. Located five miles south of downtown Los Angeles, it was long considered one of the company's best plants, producing cars for one of the largest car markets in the world. It provided a decent living for thousands of auto workers and their families while stimulating the economy of South Gate and surrounding communities. The plant's workers, many of whom were GM's most senior workers, spent most of their adult lives making GM cars, believing all the while that America's industrial dominance throughout the world would guarantee them a job for life.

The dream was shattered last year, in March, when GM closed the plant for an indefinite period of time, laying off 4,300 workers. Last week, GM announced that the plant would be closed permanently. The decision wasn't much of a surprise to most workers, for the giant automaker has made it clear that car production on the West Coast is no longer part of its long-term strategy.

Further into the story, the report quotes Charlie Brown, one of the first Blacks employed at South Gate, who was hired fresh out of the army as a metal finisher in 1955. "I felt like my whole life that I had worked for twenty eight years was flushed down the drain. I felt I was worthless to my family and worthless to myself. I felt like I was lost in the wilderness. I'm just beginning to see that I may never have the same standard of living any more or be able to do what every American wants to do—keep his kids in college, put bread on the table, and keep a happy home."

A union shop steward comments that the unemployed "have so much time on their hands, they're drinking more, they can't pay their bills, they're losing their houses. What's going to happen when the benefits start running out this June? There are already 1,800 not getting anything." So far, the union has documented eight suicides related to the plant closing.

Two days after the *Reader* article, on May 1st, the *Los Angeles Times* carried two stories on homelessness and hunger. Speakers before a congressional subcommittee investigating the rising incidence of hunger in the United States reported that St. Joseph's

Center in Venice has fed 37,000 people since July 1982; a free kitchen in downtown Los Angeles has served 19,000 meals in five recent weeks, and the staff have seen people passing out from hunger; the Catholic Workers' downtown kitchen is providing 1,000 meals a day, twice as many as last year; voluntary agencies report that requests for emergency food have doubled in the past six to eight months.

Valerie Harper, founder of a group known as LIFE (Love is Feeding Everyone), spoke of a growing number of the "new poor," working people who have recently lost their jobs and exhausted their savings.

Among them, she said, her group had encountered one person who was forced to give up a kosher diet when cat food became the only affordable source of meat.

And she spoke of a man named Lowell, a 70 year old retired handyman whose savings had run out and who was found living in a shack unaware of the free services that are available. "He didn't know about Social Security or welfare," Harper said.

Several other speakers testified that most of the people requiring food were receiving food stamps or other assistance, but not in sufficient quantities to take care of their needs.

One hundred and eighty thousand people in Los Angeles County recently lost their eligibility for food stamps.

At the same time, homelessness is a new and growing problem. The Ocean Park Community Center provides food and counseling for 60 to 100 homeless people a day; a year ago, the number was 10 to 15. Mollie Lowery of the Westside Shelter Coalition estimates 5,000 homeless in West Los Angeles. They include, for example, a 50 year old laid-off automobile worker and an unemployed school-teacher and his family. There are perhaps 30,000 homeless people in Los Angeles County altogether. "I think that people in this city are caring," says Mollie Lowery, "but I also think we are ignorant. We just don't see things. The other part of it is that the situation is overwhelming . . . The life of the homeless is the pits. You have to go around all day waiting for things, afraid, depressed, lonely, always a little dirty and disheveled and never very rested or secure. It's not a picnic for the people we see. These are the walking wounded."

Evidently, people in Los Angeles care about the hardships of the hungry and homeless: voluntary organizations and churches have improvised kitchens, food supplies, shelter, advice as best they can with the resources they can scrape together. But how does government react? Here is Daryl Gates, Los Angeles Police Chief, on the homeless:

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One partial solution, according to Gates, would involve the “strengthening” of local trespass laws and jail terms and mandatory work programs for those found guilty of violating them.

“I see no reason why we shouldn’t be able to harness some of the person power and put them to work,” he said. “I’m talking about 30-, 60- and 90-day and six-month sentences, during which time they would be put to work in cleaning up our city, our parks, our public buildings, maybe even our schools. It’s been done in the past and I think it can be done in the future.

“If they’re going to plop on our soil, we ought to give them an opportunity to work,” Gates added. “If we start putting up some ‘Do Not Trespass’ signs and enforce some of that, you’ll find that a lot of it is going to go away.”

And here is the Mayor:

Mayor Tom Bradley, announcing plans a few days ago to convene a city-sponsored conference of groups concerned with the homeless issue, said he believes no city money is needed.

“The government has the responsibility to call people together and determine what needs to be done,” Bradley said. “It appears the number of homeless and those in need of food have intensified, and quite a number of groups independent of each other have taken on this problem.

“What I have found that is encouraging is that nobody has suggested extra funds,” he added. “I would like to see the private sector do it, and we should try to identify the nature of the problem and which agencies can do the most.”

Lastly, here is a comment from an administrator of South Gate’s new Redevelopment Agency, discussing the city’s strategy in response to the closure of the General Motors plant:

“The thrust,” Spragg says, “is to go into high-tech . . . to gear our land use to the high-tech industries. The whole Delphi concept is to bring in corporate computer companies, to change the scope (of South Gate) from a blue-collar community (to) where you have a different kind of working class.” He acknowledges that workers previously employed in heavy industry may be displaced. “Obviously, it (Delphi) won’t create jobs if you’ve been an auto worker sticking lugs on wheels. We’re not going to retrain

everyone. But we are in the process, I hope, of creating thousands and thousands of new jobs.”

These newspaper clippings suggest some of the themes of the argument I want to present. The closure of the South Gate plant undermined the whole meaning of life for Charlie Brown. He and his workmates not only risked losing their homes, but alcoholism and suicide. And unemployed auto workers appear amongst the homeless and hungry, whose numbers have increased so markedly in Los Angeles in the past year. These events seem connected. But notice that while churches and voluntary agencies struggle to improvise food, shelter and advice, neither General Motors, nor the Mayor, nor the city of South Gate are willing to acknowledge responsibility for the plight of the dispossessed. The city of South Gate, plans to go after the fashionable high-tech industries, which will not help most of the unemployed auto workers, as the administrator I quoted admits. Tom Bradley wants the private sector to take care of the hungry and homeless. Daryl Gates wants to intimidate them into going elsewhere.

This repudiation of public responsibility is striking, and recent. Let me contrast it with another conception of public policy, which has, I think, predominated since the Second World War, at least as an ideal to aspire to, both in Britain and perhaps more equivocally in the United States—an ideal of progressive social justice, growing equality, and guarantees against want. It is eloquently expressed in one of the last writings of Richard Titmuss. Titmuss was a Professor of Social Administration at the London School of Economics, and the British Labor Party’s principal advisor and conscience on social issues, and his writings profoundly influenced my generation, both in Britain and the United States. Shortly before his death ten years ago, he wrote an informal account of his experiences in hospital. He tells of the people he met there, of the absolute equality with which everyone was treated, and the quality of medical care extended freely to every patient without regard for cost. In particular, he tells of Bill, a lifelong cripple with whom he had struck up a friendship, and lists all that had been done, at public expense, to make Bill’s life happy, as well as all the medical care he had been given—‘public housing, a constant attendance allowance, a daily home help and meals-on-wheels . . . an invalid chair, special ramps, an adapted lavatory and sinks, and raised garden beds (provided by the local parks department).’ “He was an example,” Richard Titmuss concludes, “of what a compassionate society can achieve when a philosophy of social justice and accountability is translated into one hundred and one detailed acts of kindness.”¹

I want to discuss what has become of that ideal; how it came to lose its influence; and what alternatives to it may now be open to us, if we cannot, or do not want to revive it. But first, I need to explain what I mean by ‘social policy’, since American governments do not characteristically declare a ‘social policy’—in the same sense

that they announce their policies for the economy, or defense, or foreign affairs—and it is not clear that the federal government, at least under conservative administrations, even accepts such a responsibility.

All the same, all societies, implicitly or explicitly, must have a social policy, in this sense:

In every society, roughly half the population is gainfully employed. That is, for instance, they earn a wage or have rights in land which they cultivate, or make something for sale. The other half of the population is too young, or too old, or too sick, or has no access to means of gainful employment. So there is, for every society, a crucial question: how are those who are not gainfully employed—the children, the old people, the sick—to be taken care of? According to what principles must those who have direct access to resources share them with those who do not? The answers to that question constitute the social policy of a society.

In the history of human societies, the answers have been four—kinship, charity, insurance and rights. Kinship has been everywhere the fundamental principle on which claims for support and the duty to provide it have been based. Even in advanced industrial societies we still require that parents support their children; and children, though they may not provide financially for their elderly parents, are still characteristically much concerned in their welfare. ‘Family policy’ in the United States (as put forward, for instance, by Walter Mondale) means, largely, policy for strengthening the family as a system of mutual support. But the crucial question for any national social policy is what happens when the family cannot or will not help, or when someone has no family?

The medieval world relied on charity, as a religious duty, and institutionalized it. I would guess that wherever charitable contributions are an integral and necessary part of a society’s system of care, the contributions become virtually obligatory, and resemble taxes. In contemporary America, charitable donations are an explicit alternative to paying taxes. The difference is that one acquires virtue by charity, and the amount is determined by the spiritual need of the giver, rather than the material need of the receiver. Beggars have no right to alms, but they offer something valuable: the opportunity to fulfill a religious obligation. I remember the dignity of the muslim beggars in Nigeria to whom I would distribute loose change from my pocket. They blessed me courteously, gravely, and authoritatively: I felt grateful to them. Without that sense of reciprocity of the holiness of the charitable relationship, it becomes demeaning.

Insurance redistributes across the life cycle, between working years and retirement, times of health and times of sickness. As a principle of social policy, it requires that the cost of such insurance is within the reach of everyone, not only the well-to-do; and to achieve this it is necessary to rig the system in favor of the poor.

Any all-including system of social insurance involves redistributive taxation—either through the way contributions are assessed and benefits provided, or through supplements from general taxation. So it becomes a system of rights—rights to welfare, by virtue of membership in society, independent of ability to contribute toward their cost.

The social policy of a society, I suggest, is constituted out of some combination of these four principles. But the emphasis given to each implies more than just a principle of redistribution. It implies ideas about what Titmuss called the unquantifiable ‘texture of human relationships’: the sense of what membership in a society means, what we owe to each other; and so, therefore, how political and economic relationships define and are defined by the impulses and obligations of compassion.

The conception of social policy which emerged in Western Europe and the United States after the Second World War emphasized universal social rights, though it incorporated traditional ideals of family responsibility, and especially in America, retained some of the prejudices of a demeaning public charity. These rights were often expressed, rather misleadingly, as obligatory membership in comprehensive, inclusive social insurance schemes, as if the right were a contractual one, by virtue of contribution, although in practice the relationship between contribution and benefit was determined by policy, not actuarial calculation. Conversely, other rights, which were not dependent on contributions, and often means-tested, were less readily seen as rights, although they were crucial to the relief of poverty. Yet, ambiguous as the principles sometimes were, and for all that they fell short of their ideal, the social policies of advanced capitalist societies all embodied three dominant assumptions:

- 1) That welfare was a right; and the state had an obligation to guarantee every member of society individually against absolute want of food, shelter, warmth, health care or education.
- 2) That poverty, as distinct from misfortune, could and should be eliminated from society by ending discrimination by race, sex or social class; by equalizing educational opportunities; and by remedying, with the help of social science, the cumulative disabilities of poor people and impoverished communities. For many reformers who understood poverty as a relative, not an absolute, condition, this implied the progressive equalization of real income through taxation, equal pay for women and minorities with white men, the nationalization of health care and (more radically) of urban land.
- 3) That social policy was separate from economic policy. The system of social welfare was a secondary, corrective form of distribution, intervening only after the market competition for resources had taken effect. So, for instance, the state taxed

earnings to make incomes more equal (in theory if not in practice); it did not attempt to legislate against the disparities between earnings, however grossly unfair or irrational these might seem. (Even left-leaning governments, like the British Labour government, when driven to wage controls as a remedy for inflation, were extremely reluctant, under pressure from the trade union movement, to challenge the principle of competitive wage bargaining.)

Under the influence of this ideal, the United States made important progress in the 1960's and 1970's in ending discrimination, defining welfare rights, tenants' and community rights, and extending educational opportunities. Government began to evaluate the extent and causes of poverty in America more systematically than ever before. Since the mid 1960's, virtually all the reduction of poverty in the United States has come about through the expansion of social insurance and income transfer programs.²

This conception of social policy has been explicitly repudiated by Reagan's administration. In place of comprehensive welfare rights, the President proposes a 'safety net' to take care of the destitute under traditionally punitive conditions of eligibility. In place of public responsibility for the welfare of every citizen, he has disparaged the role of government and recommended the unfortunate to the charity of business. In place of progressive equalization, he has instituted blatantly inegalitarian cuts in both welfare and taxes. And all this is justified by an explicit reintegration of social and economic policy. In the view of this administration, social policy has failed, especially because it has sought to counteract rather than facilitate the workings of capitalism, and this misguided intervention has only succeeded in stultifying growth, impoverishing everyone. In some ways, the application of these principles has been more ruthless than the rhetoric, since the cuts have not always left even a safety net: there are more and more Americans without heat, without shelter, without enough to eat or adequate medical care.

Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in Britain shares many of these beliefs, and the ideological revolution is even more dramatic there. The welfare state grew out of an ideal of a cooperative and egalitarian society forged in the war: 'the idea of the welfare state came to be identified with the war aims of a nation fighting for its life . . . it wore a halo which is not to be found in other countries.'³ Its repudiation by the present government is all the more shocking, though the damage to the welfare structure may, in practice, be less.

What accounts for this reaction and why has it been accompanied by such muted and incoherent protest? In the United States, even liberal Democrats have been equivocal; in Britain, the Labour Party has split and become increasingly fragmented. Neither the managers of the welfare state, nor the reformers who constantly

sought to edge it forward, nor its constituents have defended it with passion or conviction. Why not?

Although its scope and resources grew constantly in Western Europe and North America under both conservative and liberal governments, this conception of social policy has never been supported unambiguously, even by the kinds of people it was intended to help most. It is inherently bureaucratic and impersonal. It deals with generalizable, material needs, rather than the quality of relationships, as I want to discuss more fully later. The constant preoccupation with balancing social need against productive incentives often set the scale of benefits too low, pushing applicants back into the more demeaning systems of mean-tested assistance. In the United States, especially, conditions of eligibility were sometimes punitive and questionably constitutional. As an expression of society's compassion for those in need, and their right to welfare, the system everywhere had great difficulty in institutionalizing relationships with its clients that could reconcile courtesy, helpfulness, and adaptability with strict accounting, the policing of fraud, and reducing benefits in proportion to earned income.

As a system of social insurance, the policy assumed a family wage, where a man entered the system at the outset of his career and worked continuously until retirement, if all went well, providing for his wife and children. It is much less well adapted to a society where, increasingly, mothers alone, who may not be in a position to earn very much or regularly, support children with little or no help from the father.⁴ At the same time, as households headed by women come to constitute a larger and larger proportion of those in poverty, men—and especially white men—become less inclined to support a system of redistributive justice. White men have the lowest rates of unemployment, they are less likely to be supporting children, and if they are manual workers, they are not likely to benefit from the professional and academic opportunities welfare services provide. Hence, the constituency for progressive welfare policies has, I believe, become weaker amongst a group in society, the white male workers, who are also amongst the most likely to vote.

If the welfare system has, for these reasons, alienated many who depend on it, as well as many who help to pay for it, it has also been flawed by a fundamental ideological ambivalence amongst its intellectual constituency.

Even for Richard Titmuss, the welfare state represented a tension between redistributive justice and personal freedom. "Society has to make choices—that is to say, we all have to make choices—between more government or more markets; more freedom for some at the expense of other people's freedom; more social justice for some and less freedom for others; and so on," Titmuss told his students in his introductory lectures on social policy. "At the heart of many of these choices concerning the politics of the good

society—the question of obedience or coercion— lies the conflict between individual equity and social equity . . . a conflict often presenting itself in the dilemmas of altruism and egoism.”⁵ Formulated in these terms, altruism is represented by the institutionalized structure of social welfare—and so becomes identified with the paternalistic ideology of a governing class.

Titmuss accepted this element of coercion. But Joseph Califano, reflecting on his years as President Carter’s Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, identifies the legalism inherent in central government regulation as a source of his own bitter disappointment:

“I felt the frustration, sometimes anger, of failure: in welfare reform, national health, and the difficulty of erasing racial discrimination . . . intricate federal regulations in turn encourage even lengthier and more specific rules as state, local and private institutions scramble to comply . . . people trying to help each other feel suffocated, frustrated . . . as their freedom to act on matters they face each day is increasingly circumscribed. The ability of our institutions and our nation to change, the key to so much of our human and economic progress, is dangerously inhibited.”⁶

Yet, without those federal regulations, the anti-poverty programs Califano himself had done much to fashion would not have had the power to influence the state and local allocation of resources even as little as they did. None of the experiments in participatory, innovative planning overcame the underlying tension between formal, nationally regulated principles of social justice and local adaptability.

But the ideal of the welfare state embodied an even more fundamental and pervasive tension. Government was seen to have two essential purposes—to maximize the amount of welfare, and to distribute it fairly. Equity without prosperity was a poor trade, and capitalism was believed to be far superior to socialism as a system of productive relationships. Even if it was inferior as a model of just distribution, everyone in the end, would be impoverished by abandoning it. Yet, the needs of a capitalist economy exact compromises in the ideal of welfare, postponing the realization of social justice or the eradication of poverty which, as Jurgen Habermas has argued,⁷ make the legitimacy of the state constantly vulnerable. From a radical point of view, the ideals of welfare are, in the end, a hypocritical gloss on a system of social control, designed to pre-empt any challenge to capitalist strategies for maintaining and restoring profitability. From a conservative point of view, welfare interferes with market incentives, inhibiting economic growth, and so frustrates the chances of prosperity for poor people.

The paternalism, the bureaucratic cumbersomeness, the vulnerability to economic pressures, all compromised the ideal and disillusioned constituents, politicians and reformers alike. Many of the

policies of the past ten years, such as community action, community development, more participation in planning or social experimentation, have tried to compensate for these inherent obstacles. But as each endeavor has been marginalized or abandoned, it has served to confirm how intractable these obstacles are.

I suggest, then, that when the recession began to strain local and national budgets, the welfare system was vulnerable to a radically reactionary challenge to its essential principles. At the same time, the challenge might not have gained authority without the more immediate fiscal problems.

Any system of social rights, where the implied commitment is not self-limiting, runs the risk of becoming too costly. This is most obvious in health care, where demographic changes and advances in medical techniques have increased costs very greatly. But in general, the better a system of welfare is, the more needs it is likely to uncover, the more intelligent and useful acts of compassion it is likely to invent; and in doing so, of course, it constantly enlarges the profession of doctors or helpers whose self interest is bound up with expanding and improving it. Even without expansion, the costs of such services tend to increase disproportionately, because salaries—which make up a large part of their cost—tend to keep pace with the salary levels prevailing in society as a whole while, unlike other sectors, the productiveness of workers is unchanged. In a recession, these pressures for increased expenditures are all the stronger, as unemployment causes more need for help, while revenues are declining, and taxes more burdensome to pay. The ensuing fiscal crisis opens the way to the more fundamental ideological reaction.⁸

Even if the present recession ends and the recovery of economic growth were to be much stronger than we presently expect, I do not believe we can revive this liberal ideal of the welfare state. Once discredited, the ideologies which justify policies, unlike the policies themselves, rarely return. Once experience has taught us to see the world differently, to question assumptions we took for granted and confront anomalies we thought were trivial, we are driven to organize our understanding according to new concerns, in a new language that can no longer accommodate earlier ideologies without transforming their meaning. Richard Titmuss' moving account of his stay in the hospital begins to seem innocent, not for any lack of sophistication, but because he had not lived through what we have experienced in the past ten years or thought our thoughts. We have to reconstruct the meaning of social policy, to restate its ideals and its practicality, in the context of an extraordinarily concentrated international economic order undergoing a major crisis of restructuring.

What new conceptions of social policy, then, seem to be emerging?

The corporate leaders of the international economic order have a model. It is represented, for instance, in the executive world views reported by Richard Burnett and Roger Miller in *Global Reach*.⁹ Its logic is compelling and often chilling. There is a world market where national boundaries are obsolete. Each social entity—city, state, region, nation—competes with every other as a location for economic activity. And, therefore, it is not realistic for any society to aspire to a higher level of welfare, wages, or equality than its attractiveness in the global market warrants. Social policy must be reintegrated with economic policy so that benefits and services can be regulated according to ability to pay. In practice, this is likely to mean the retrenchment of social rights to more realistic levels.

Despite a ruthlessness which echoes nineteenth century poor law philosophy, this is not a laissez-faire doctrine, but a conception of corporate management. Each social entity has to manage its assets in competition with every other to secure the best balance of economic attractiveness and welfare. Government, therefore, has a central part to play in securing the social and physical infrastructure—the transportation, environmental quality, cultural amenity, the skills of workers and political stability—which will attract investment, and price them right. As with any competition, the weaker players must make sacrifices—accepting more pollution, or lower wages, less welfare, even perhaps, fewer political rights. Singapore, enterprise zones, the development strategies of many American cities all exemplify this conception of policy. Its consequences confront any traveler to New York, where new skyscrapers are going up at every street corner, while the subway system finds its own level of squalor and danger, and the unwanted periphery of this corporate Mecca disintegrate into rubble.

Notice how this conception explicitly repudiates the assumptions of the welfare state. By reintegrating social with economic policy and subordinating it to the competition for economic activity, it undermines the notion of social rights which now become contingent and variable, not only from time to time, but from place to place, even within the same nation. In return, it promises sustained, world-wide economic growth, unconstrained by self-stultifying protectionism.

Is there any real alternative to this corporate model of social policy?

I believe that there is; that many distinct and growing movements in the western world are converging upon a fundamentally different ideology. But to challenge the corporate vision convincingly, we have to repudiate, at the outset, three crucial assumptions upon which it rests.

Firstly, the idea that welfare is dependent upon constant economic growth (which acquires its central importance from capitalist accumulation) with an idea of balance, or equilibrium. This is a fundamental principle of ecology and underlies the environmental

movement, in its concern to protect the air we breath, the water we drink, the earth we stand on and the energy we live by, represents a more profound and pervasive challenge to the assumptions of capitalist economies than seemed at first. But the principle of equilibrium is also, I believe, fundamental to the way all life functions. Our physical and mental constitution, as human beings, can be represented as a complex set of inter-related, self-regulating organizations at every level, from our metabolism to our most abstract thoughts, whose purpose is to sustain its equilibrium in its ever changing environment.¹⁰ I believe this to be true also of social organization, and that our art, our science, our philosophy is all a search for equilibrium or harmony; and our contemporary culture is unusual in not recognizing that.

Secondly, people's well-being rests fundamentally not in goods but unique attachments—to the people we love, to the particular communities, places, vocations in which the meaning of our lives has become invested. We have absorbed from our economic ideology a peculiarly distorted view of human nature as competitive, aggressive, and self-seeking—as if acquisition was the natural pursuit of happiness. But as the feminist critique has pointed out, this one-sided, partial view of human nature is a masculine stereotype, which has, as its counterpart, an equally one-sided stereotype of female nature as pliant, nurturing and self-sacrificing. I believe that men and women alike find their happiness in a context of attachments to a mate, to children, parents, intimate friends, to a home and its community of interests, to the work that validates their social worth.¹¹ We all have gifts—to love, to work—and we need those gifts to be received. That has more to do with the meaning of life, I think, than the need to acquire, which is often an anxious substitute for the assurance of being loved.

Social insurance can protect us only against the generalizable economic consequences of loss. It restores part of the income lost through unemployment; it does not restore the job, the familiar companionship of fellow workers, the sense of being needed and skilled. It may guarantee enough to rent adequate shelter; it does not ensure that someone can hold on to the home or neighborhood where the relationships which give their lives meaning are centered. The preoccupation with generalizable, aggregate needs, when it ignores the unique setting in which these needs are expressed, becomes dangerously insensitive to what constitutes well being. The neat, modern home, built to meet every standard of space and convenience, is still a destructive prison if it isolates its mistress from the friends and family she cares about, the work that engages her interest and her skills. When we lose someone to whom we are deeply attached, we do not grieve simply for the companionship, the loving and caring we no longer enjoy; we grieve for that one, unique, irreplaceable being on whom so many of the concerns, purposes, feelings, anxieties, irritations, pleasures of our lives came to

be centered. The meaning of our lives, the pattern of our relationships, becomes organized around the central figures on which our impulse for attachment rests. So, when we lose any one of them, it seems as if nothing means anything anymore, that life has lost its purpose, and for awhile the possibility of any new attachment seems unreal.¹²

Our well being depends on the resilience of the organization of meaning by which we interpret what happens to us and invest it with our purposes; and that meaning arises most fundamentally from our attachments, from our ability to bind our feelings and purposes to reciprocal, enduring relationships. Social security, if it means only some guarantee of income, health care or housing cannot, therefore, in itself, make us even more secure in our well being. We need, even more, the confidence that the meaning of our lives is secure, and that the relationships to which we have entrusted ourselves will not disintegrate; that we have enough control over the future to risk becoming attached. In this light, unemployment, for instance, is not just a loss of income but a potentially tragic disruption of the whole sense of a person's life. A middle-aged craftsman, who may never find paid employment again, has to retrieve a sense of social worth and value to his family, without the quality with which, above all, he has been taught to identify, of being a provider. No wonder that unemployment is associated with alcoholism, impotence, divorce and deaths from stress-related causes.¹³

We cannot, therefore, protect ourselves against the crucial uncertainties of life only by the principle of insurance. The risks we can aggregate are not those which threaten us most intimately and most deeply. Yet, the risks of losing a job that meant a great deal to us, of being forced to leave a community in which we felt at home, of a marriage breaking up, are still profoundly affected by acts of policy. The management of uncertainty in society is as competitive and as crucial an aspect of power as the distribution of goods. So, the third assumption of the corporate ideal of social policy I wish to challenge is this: that the way the burden of uncertainty is distributed in society is a necessary and inescapable consequence of economic laws. Economies generate uncertainties, but the institutions which mitigate uncertainties are the outcome of an unequal competition for self-protection, which characteristically displaces the burden of adjustment onto those who are the weakest.

The social management of uncertainty needs a much fuller treatment than I yet know how to develop, but let me try to explain briefly why I believe it is inherently competitive and will tend, unchecked, to reinforce inequalities.

If you cannot predict which of a range of possible events will happen, how would you best ensure that whatever happened you would still be able to realize your essential purposes? It is on this ability that the security of your well-being depends. You need to

plan a range of responses, matching the range of possibilities, from which you can choose as events unfold. But, the chances of choosing a successful response depend, in turn, on how well you can foresee its consequences. If each of your options is itself largely unpredictable, you are dangerously vulnerable. In most situations, the critical uncertainties involve the behavior of other people. So, the more you can rely on others to make a predictable response to actions you may choose to take, the more secure you are, provided you can protect your own freedom of action. The logic of the management of uncertainty is asymmetrical. The more you can require commitments from others without being bound yourself by reciprocal commitments, the greater the range of responses open to you, and the better you will be able to predict the consequences of each. Your control over relationships, though it cannot eliminate uncertainty altogether, ensures you the greatest possible adaptability, and so the best chance of surviving intact. Correspondingly, however, you have increased uncertainty for everyone else about you: their adaptability is constrained by the commitment to be ready to respond to actions you may or may not choose to take. To the unpredictability of events is added, for them, the unpredictability of your choice of response to those events. If the same logic is followed at each descending level in a hierarchy, the uncertainties become cumulative, as more and more options are pre-empted, until those at the bottom are left with scarcely any control over their circumstances, and these circumstances are vulnerable to a far more complex set of uncertainties.

In reaction against this burden, the lower levels of a hierarchy will organize to protect themselves. Characteristically, they will try both to control the information which reaches their superiors and to insist—by strike, threats, or other pressure—on reciprocal commitments. Mutually binding principles are established for the handling of uncertainties—as, for instance, who is to be laid off first if there is a downturn, or who is to be promoted to a vacancy.¹⁴ But this makes the hierarchy, as a whole, less adaptable and leads to a second aspect of the management of uncertainty: organizations insulate themselves by interposing other dependent sets of relationships between themselves and the uncertainties of their environment. Large corporations, for instance, sub-contract work to smaller firms, adjusting their orders to the market, so that these smaller firms bear the brunt of fluctuations in demand. Higher orders of government characteristically displace the consequences of fiscal uncertainty onto lower ones. Organized labor is protected by more marginal workers, who suffer first when unemployment rises. Thus, anyone who is at the bottom of some hierarchy of control and in a marginal position is exposed to a very high degree of uncertainty, and the relative security of others is at his or her expense.¹⁵

I do not suppose that this logic of control always works in so simple and unqualified a fashion. But I believe it has profound implications for the motives and consequences of power: and I think once we are aware of it, we can see how, in our own behavior, we readily impose on people weaker than ourselves the same asymmetry. We expect our secretaries to type our always urgent drafts when we are done with them, resisting any reciprocal obligation to provide a timetable in advance. "Don't call us, we'll call you," says the interviewer to the anxious candidate, whose life is now chained to the telephone while the employer is free to consider his choice. So the busy, self-important executive treats his wife. The injustice of the way the burden of uncertainty is distributed can be more crippling than poverty alone; it robs the unfortunate of a future, bounding their lives by the little they can rely on in a precarious present, straining their attachments by constant anxiety, cramping and impoverishing the meanings they can hope to sustain.¹⁶

But just as uncertainty is compounded by competition for control, so I believe it can be reduced by co-operation: when the exercise of power is constrained by reciprocal obligations, the power holder has less freedom of action but does not necessarily face more uncertainty if the collective strategy for managing uncertainty is intelligent and comprehensive. Everyone may be able to predict their future with more confidence and a greater sense of control in the context of a set of mutually agreed, contingent responses. This is what the ideal of planning in the public interest represents. However hard it may be to realize, it is still, I believe, a crucial part of any conception of social justice.

What kind of social policy might these concerns for balance, attachment, and the equitable distribution of the burden of uncertainty define?

As much as for the corporate ideal, they imply the reintegration of social and economic policy. It makes no sense to treat unemployment insurance and the maintenance of employment as separate issues, belonging to different sectors of policy, once you are concerned not only with income but the meaning of a job in someone's life. It makes no sense, either, to support community development while economic policy is systematically undermining a community's viability; or to treat health care as if it had nothing to do with the pathological consequences of chronic unemployment. But now, unlike the corporate ideal, social needs, rather than economic accumulation for its own sake, set the context of policy. Otherwise the logic of accumulative strategies must, I believe, generate social uncertainty on a larger and larger scale, as the concentrated power of very large corporations is deployed, as I described earlier, to make their own control over uncertainty as great as possible.

I believe this also implies a greater decentralization of control. I have in mind a diffused capacity for social planning, rather than the shifting of responsibility from higher to lower levels of government, which may do nothing to change the hierarchy of control, or even change it for the worse (as when block grants devolve on local government the responsibility for meeting needs, while central government still determines the level of funding, insulating the center from the political consequences of its budgetary manoeuvres), but a diffused capacity for social planning. All over the United States, social movements and organizations are involved in trying to protect themselves against the hazards which beset everyday life—the closing of a long-established plant, the sickening of a suburban street from the seepage of long-buried poisons, the abrupt destruction of a neighborhood to provide General Motors with an option on land it does not even take¹⁷, the closing of a school district because it cannot pay its teachers, eviction for development, the violence of the streets . . . Neighborhood and tenant associations, trade unions, environmental activists, groups representing particular needs, public interest lobbies, interact with government and business at every level in a determined struggle to restore a balance of control. But the question is whether we can empower and articulate all that energy so that it evolves into planning. I mean by social planning the working out of a set of reciprocal undertakings, which together constitute mutually compatible strategies for achieving a future which makes good sense to each of us (and if this seems a rather complex, subtle and wordy definition, it describes a complex, subtle and wordy process). It constitutes a fifth strategy of social policy beside kinship, charity, insurance and rights, and the one of which historically we have the least experience. But it grows in urgency with the scale, the extreme social differentiation and interdependence of modern industrial societies.

There are, I think, essentially three inter-related contexts in which the provisions of social policy have to be articulated. Firstly, there has to be a structure of social rights, guaranteed in law, which provides protection against material hardship. On an international scale, though United Nations conferences have begun to define what these provisions should be, we have little or no means of enforcing them. But in the United States, experience suggests that legal rights are powerful, and courts will uphold them on behalf of unprivileged people, provided they have good counsel. This is the aspect of social policy—with its concomitant development of legal aid, class actions, constitutional reinterpretations, and rights-defining judgements—which has made the most progress since the Second World War; and despite all the limitations of such a policy, that structure of rights is still crucial.

But it does no more, for each of us, than to regulate the claims we can make on society in need. We still have to *know* what we can claim, and how, and somehow fit it to the unique circumstances

of our own affairs. As Laura Balbo has discussed¹⁸, the burden of humanizing the bureaucratic structure of welfare falls mostly on women, who are far more likely than men to be struggling with the problems of raising a family with an unreliable and inadequate income. They do not have nearly enough help, either in understanding their rights or presenting their claims. A social policy has to enable people to take charge of their circumstances, both individually and cooperatively; to find, create, and manage the facilities they need—whether it is child care or raised garden beds so that a handicapped man can still tend his flowers. We need similar opportunities to adapt the paid work we do to the particular circumstances of our lives. The rigidity of hierarchical control, which imposes a uniform and invariable timetable upon working hours, is seldom necessary and I suspect often inefficient, and creates endless difficulties for women with children to bring up—and for men who would find more meaning in their lives if they could be more present fathers. If we had more control over when we work, who we share our work with, and where we do it—and for that matter, over what we are doing—we would likely be more productive as well as happier.

I suggest then, that to manage uncertainty we need not only rights but the widest possible choices about how we organize our lives. Only then can we be confident that, whatever happens, there is a good chance we can sustain our essential purposes and attachments without unbearable anxiety. Not only more choices about how we organize our work, but in how we exercise our right to help in need, or pay our contributions. The well-to-do already enjoy these advantages—they can manipulate their taxes and use their credit to borrow in a great variety of ways. Why should not claims on public support have something of the same flexibility—as, for instance, elderly homeowners in California can choose to defer property taxes until the house is sold?

The third context in which social policy has to be articulated is the collective management of uncertainty—at every level from a neighborhood threatened by real estate development, a city threatened by the decline of its industries, a nation threatened by economic collapse or indeed the whole world, threatened by environmental dangers we cannot tackle effectively on any smaller scale. The successful management of uncertainty depends upon having choices and on being able to rely on the behavior of others. A social policy which distributes the burden of uncertainty fairly must also distribute choice and the power to exact reciprocal commitments fairly. So, for instance, the United States is less fair than other advanced industrial nations in allowing companies freedom of choice in when or how or whether they close a plant, without any reciprocal commitments to compensate their employees, or even to give warning of their intentions. Neither the employees nor the surrounding community then have the advance notice, the

information, or any power to impose sanctions, that would enable them to explore other choices than the closure of the plant. But often better management, a change of ownership or product, or a more imaginative variety of uses can rescue a crucial source of employment and spare much grief. So with real estate development, environmental hazards, or any threatening changes, the more choices of action, responsive to the range of everyone's concerns, which have to be considered, and the more reciprocity in the strategies which evolve, the more manageable the uncertainties will become from every point of view.

Such diffuse social planning will only happen if there are laws which require it to happen, by limiting the freedom to act without consultation, warning, considering the consequences or providing adequate information—in the United States, such laws exist to protect the environment, not yet to protect people's livelihood. But the quality of the planning will depend on how widely information and understanding are spread, and on how well people are organized to assert their interests and present alternatives, as much as on the guarantees of rights and due process.

If we try to confine this diffuse social planning by institutionalizing its processes, we will end up by subsuming it within the structure of governmental hierarchies, as happened to community action agencies, or trivializing it as a routine exercise in legitimation, like many public hearings or citizens advisory councils. It is not a function of government, but a function of society as a whole, in so far as society is able to articulate all the communities of interest it contains. Government can only facilitate or repress or try to co-opt it. But though I do not know how to describe it more clearly, I believe that planning in this sense is a crucial instrument of social justice, because without it the powerful will be free to displace a far greater share of the burden of uncertainty onto the rest of us.

I have argued that every society, self-consciously or not, has a social policy; and that the conception of a welfare state, which chiefly guided the social policies of Britain and America since the Second World War, has been discredited, partly by a fiscal crisis, and partly by the underlying flaws which alienated the people it served and disillusioned reformers. I have tried to set out some of the conditions a better social policy would have to meet; and especially to trace a connection between attachment, uncertainty and planning which relates the security of personal happiness to the balance of social control. The purposes which organize the meaning of our lives are invested in the people we love, our particular gifts, the places we call home; and our sense of security rests on the confidence that we can sustain this unique structure of relationship. Without that confidence, we will risk few commitments and lead empty lives, impoverished in meaning; or our sense of fulfillment in these attachments will be eaten up by constant anxiety. We are confident enough, I think, when we enjoy the conditions which

make uncertainty manageable—good information, a choice of actions and the ability to exact commitments from others— and I have tried to show how, by the workings of hierarchy and marginalization, these conditions tend to become very unequally distributed, so that the burden of uncertainty comes to rest disproportionately on the least privileged. An equitable system of social security requires the collective management of uncertainty to redress this inherent bias and insist upon reciprocity of commitments, sharing information, and the enlargement of choices, especially for the least powerful. This is what I mean by social planning. Though it is still an unfamiliar concept, people all over America are struggling to realize it. At the same time, it needs a framework of individual and collective rights to sanction its legitimacy and empower its claims: and to exercise rights, to adapt them to the circumstances of each family or community, people must have ready access to good, understandable information and experienced, trained advisors who are on their side.

The elements of such a social policy are all present in the United States in laws which have been proposed, in models of legislation already enacted, in the activities of community organizations and the ideals of social movements. Its rival is a conception which seems to me needlessly ruthless, illusory in its promises and arbitrarily economistic in its premises: and all the elements of that policy are present too. It demands very little of us beyond our acquiescence: and the discussion of social policy in the media and in political campaigns is so preoccupied with immediate budget deficits, so incurious about the social consequences of cuts, and so superficial in its analysis, we are scarcely made aware that there is any alternative but to acquiesce. So I think the most immediate task is to make clear that there is an alternative, that it has very deep and widespread roots in American experience, and to represent it coherently in the mainstream of American politics.

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NOTES

- ¹ Richard M. Titmuss, *Social Policy: An Introduction*, New York, Pantheon, 1974, p. 150.
- ² "Virtually all the reduction in poverty since the mid-1960's has come about through the expansion of social insurance and income transfer programs." *National Advisory Council on Economic Opportunity Report, 1980*, pp. 11-12.
- ³ T.H. Marshall, *Social Policy in the Twentieth Century*, London, Hutchinson University Library, 3rd edition, 1970, p. 75.
- ⁴ Probably only about a quarter of divorced and separated women with a child or children under eighteen actually received any child support in 1976, according to a special study of the Census Bureau. Over 40% of those who received support received less than 1,000 dollars and only 2% received more than 5,000 dollars. *Divorce, Child Custody and Child Support*, Current Population Reports, Special Studies No. 84, 1979, U.S. Census Bureau.
- ⁵ Titmuss, op. cit., p. 131.
- ⁶ Joseph A. Califano, *Governing America: An Insider's Report from the White House and the Cabinet*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1982.
- ⁷ Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1975. Translated by Thomas McCarthy.
- ⁸ This argument is developed more fully in Peter Marris *Community Planning and Conceptions of Change*, London and Boston, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982, Ch. 4, "Employment, Inflation and Taxes".
- ⁹ Richard Barnett and Roger Miller, *Global Reach: The Power of Multinational Corporations*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1974.
- ¹⁰ See especially Jean Piaget, *Biology and Knowledge*.
- ¹¹ See Colin Murray Parkes and Joan Stevenson-Hinde (eds.), *The Place of Attachment in Human Behavior*, London and New York, Tavistock, 1982, and John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, New York, Basic Books, Vol. 1, 1969, Vol. 2, 1973, Vol. 3, 1980.
- ¹² See Peter Marris, *Loss and Change*, New York, Pantheon, 1974, and Colin Murray Parkes, *Bereavement*, London, Tavistock, 1972.
- ¹³ See M. Harvey Brenner, *Mental Illness and the Economy*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1973, and Louis A. Ferman and Jeanne Gordus (eds.), *Mental Health and the Economy*, Kalamazoo, Upjohn Institute of Employment Research, 1979.
- ¹⁴ The classic study of this mutual control is Michel Crozier's *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*.
- ¹⁵ For an example of the effects of this marginalization in a neighborhood of Coventry, England, see Peter Marris' *Community Planning and Conceptions of Change*, pp. 27-30, and the final report of the Coventry Community Development Project.
- ¹⁶ For example, disruptive events combine with situations of weak control over uncertainties to cause severe depression amongst working class women in London. See George Brown and Tyril Harris, *The Social Origins of Depression*, London, Tavistock, 1978.
- ¹⁷ "Poletown" in Detroit, a well established working class neighborhood of over 1,000 homes and buildings, was cleared under special powers of compulsory purchase by the city, despite vehement protests, to provide General Motors with a four hundred acre site for a new factory and future expansion.
- ¹⁸ Laura Balbo discussed this in a lecture at UCLA.