

Introduction

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IN 1996, UNDER increasing pressure from a Republican Congress, President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) into law, bringing a dramatic shift in welfare policy toward the indigent. The previous policy, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), had supported poor families largely on the basis of entitlement, meaning that eligibility was based almost exclusively on financial need. Few questions were asked about whether the parents could support themselves. And, for poor mothers without spouses, AFDC had seemed to many to foster the dissolution of low-income families and communities. Accordingly, PRWORA replaced AFDC with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Under TANF, needy families could receive aid only if the parents met far more demanding work and child support requirements. And, in any event, that support was limited to five years.

In 1997 and 1998, soon after the passage of PRWORA, Tony Blair's New Labour government in Great Britain introduced its New Deal.¹ This was a key element in Blair's effort to develop a so-called Third Way between Conservatism and traditional Labour policies. The New Deal moved away from the concept of social welfare, associated with T. H. Marshall, in which aid was given as a right of citizenship with few questions asked (Marshall 1964).² As in the United States, critics had argued that income given in this spirit—the dole—had become a way of life that immured recipients in poverty. Building on earlier Conservative reforms, the new policy required youth and the unemployed, after a short period on aid, to look for work or undertake other activities as a condition of further support. The requirements were less drastic than PRWORA, and largely exempted welfare mothers, but the motivations behind them were similar (see Lødemel and Trickey 2001).³

This broad shift in the late 1990s from an entitlement to a work-based support system for the indigent is what we mean in this volume by welfare reform.⁴ Yet the term reform fails to anticipate the strong disagreement that followed. As many rejoiced at the death of traditional welfare, others

damned welfare reform as a moral and political disaster, bound to force thousands of poor families into the streets. Several years later, it is clear that neither the best nor the worst predictions have come to pass. American and British welfare caseloads have sharply declined, and many former recipients are working. However, poverty levels have changed much less, the ability of the new workers to improve their lot over time appears limited, and the long-term implications for families and children are unclear.

These social and economic effects of reform have provoked an ocean of research and commentary. Nevertheless, we believe the assessment of welfare reform is incomplete. More is at stake than the concrete effects of the law. Welfare reform also shifted the foundations of our democracy and, by implication, democratic political theory. By eliminating entitlement and setting behavioral conditions on aid, welfare reform challenges our understanding of citizenship, political equality, and the role and moral cognizance of the state.

Does welfare reform mean that to be a citizen in full standing one must function in certain minimal ways? Is political equality now conditional on making some effort toward economic self-sufficiency? Has the liberal state given up on moral neutrality as even the goal of policy, so that it now explicitly affirms some ways of life and deprecates others? What are now the limits of government intervention in intimate areas of family life, such as marriage and reproduction? These questions have not been answered. In addressing them, this book offers a more complete accounting of the effects of welfare reform.

Policy Analysis and Political Theory

We have a broader agenda, as well—and to further it we use welfare reform as an example of how political theory can contribute to the appraisal of public policy. Currently, political theory has little to do with policy analysis, and vice versa. That reflects the way both fields have recently evolved. We think that by reconnecting theoretical reflection more closely to policy, both will be served.

Especially in the United States, research and analysis about most policy issues is relentlessly technical. The appraisal of policy is dominated by quantitative research aimed at concrete, measurable effects. In policy discourse, pride of place goes to those with hard evidence regarding what sort of policies have worked or not worked in the past, and what might work in future. That tendency is especially strong in social policy, where program evaluations and statistical models dominate. Welfare reform could hardly have occurred in America without a series of experimental studies showing that mandatory welfare work programs were effective.⁵

Everyone recognizes that political values strongly affect what programs get enacted, especially in an area, such as welfare, where feelings

run strong. And whether and how programs are implemented shapes what they mean on the ground. But values and implementation are seldom part of systematic policy argument. Experts relegate them to the government process that politicians and bureaucrats are supposed to manage. Policymaking and administration are also studied, but seldom as part of policy argument. Scholars of these subjects know about government, but they are usually not experts on the policies involved, and they rarely take stands on the issues. Policy studies are thus typically bifurcated, with one group examining best policies and another studying policymaking, but with little communication between them. In this way, the stakes that a major issue such as welfare reform might involve for politics or democracy escape systematic attention.

Meanwhile, trends among political theorists keep them from studying policy closely. Historically, the main impetus to theoretical reflection about politics was often controversies in the real world. In recent decades, however, political theory has largely become an academic subject, written by and for academics. Within the university, theory has evolved into a field that is largely detached from concrete government and even from the rest of political science (Gunnell 1983, 1993; Galston 1993). In the postwar era, as the discipline sought to live up to scientific standards, political theory became suspect and its practitioners were marginalized. The most important theorists of that era, including Sheldon Wolin, Eric Voegelin, and Leo Strauss, maintained the standing of political theory. But perhaps because of these disciplinary concerns, they had little to say about public policy. Political theorists, like other political scientists, also became more specialized, with many focusing just on particular writers or historical developments within the corpus.

This development was strongly promoted by the enormous interest aroused by John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, published in 1971. Rawls meant to free philosophy from logical positivism, a skeptical tradition that had prevented philosophers from speaking forcefully about political issues in earlier decades. But his system was so influential that an army of other theorists reacted to it, then to each other, eventually spawning a new scholasticism. Such Rawlsian topics as the difference principle and public reason became entire fields unto themselves. Also, Rawls wrote in a language of economics and rational choice that proved elusive to all but the cognoscenti, and all too susceptible to over-refinement. Thus, even as Rawls helped to revive political theory, his success left it increasingly self-referential, with theorists reacting to each other and to the literature more than to government's actual problems.

This estrangement, of course, is a matter of degree. We do not suggest that theorists have ceased to pass judgment on questions of political import. Many works in feminist theory, identity politics, discourse ethics, and deconstruction try to tease out the practical implications of their theoretical

apparatus, as indeed did thousands of articles that referenced Rawls's work. Theorists have used Rawlsian principles to address issues of domestic and international justice, as did Rawls himself (see, for example, Beitz 2001; Rawls 1999). To mention just two, Norman Daniels used Rawlsian categories to explore issues surrounding health care (Daniels 1985), and Philippe Van Parijs—in an argument that several of our authors mention—argues that Rawls's ideal of public impartiality toward citizens' plans of life requires government to pay a minimum income to all adults (Parijs 1995).

Nevertheless, it is fair to say that all too often political theory today spurns close engagement with public policy. Those theorists who render judgments on public issues are a minority in the field, and even they usually remain at some distance from live political or policy issues. Judging government from a distance—talking about third-world development or environmental policy, say—is not the same thing as arguing for or against specific policies.

Indeed, theorists are sometimes so far removed from policy that they misapprehend the issues. A number of thinkers have attacked the recent welfare reform as a betrayal of progressive or feminist ideals. But some write as if the 1996 law totally abolished the aid once given by AFDC; actually, cash aid for families continues, albeit in a new, work-conditioned form (Mink 1998; Schram 2000). Some also construe welfare reform as a generalized attack on the welfare state, when in fact programs outside AFDC were little affected.⁶ Without a sober focus on the facts of policy, political theory cannot contribute to policy assessment alongside the technicians who now dominate.

As theory has largely lost its public voice, so too has it lost its ability to address the political arena in which policy is made. Policy argument is thus compromised and incomplete. As they confront tough choices, policy-makers could use hard-nosed analysis of what values are served by this or that option. But to help them, political theorists must have a taste for confronting real problems, and they must know something about the actual issues. Rising scholasticism makes both things less likely.

Just as significant, the abandonment of politics has undermined political theory's ability to achieve its own ends. To state abiding truths about politics, theorists must appreciate the world as it is. Much of the power of the canonical theorists of the past stemmed from their unblinking scrutiny of the political dilemmas of their day. Reality forced them to break with older ways of understanding politics. Political change generates theoretical change.⁷ When theory loses contact with government, however, established categories can become stale and irrelevant. Thinking can live on in the academy even after actual politics has moved on to new issues, at which point theory becomes merely historical, detached from the choices politicians must face.

The welfare issue illustrates this. When it first arose in the early 1960s, politics was preoccupied largely with issues of class and race. The union movement was near its apogee as the civil rights movement gathered strength in the South. In that setting, a focus on justice—that is, on the distribution of relative rewards within the society—was natural and desirable. This was the context that produced Rawls and his critics. After the 1960s, however, movement politics declined. The challenge of urban poverty and its associated social problems, including welfare, became more prominent. That concern largely superseded the early focus on justice (Mead 1992). As a result, the traditional Rawlsian discourse became less relevant to practical politics.

Debate about justice tends to be impersonal and ideological, about the relative power or reward of different elements in the society. Debate about welfare and other social problems is more personal and moralistic—about why some groups seem to function poorly, and who or what is to blame for this. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls said little about deservingness, which he viewed as an improper basis for justice. But, later, behavioral issues such as whether welfare recipients should work became unavoidable.⁸ Accordingly, all our authors address the question of deservingness directly—even those who also have strong views about equality or justice. In so doing, they develop a discourse more aligned with actual politics—and more useful to it—than much of contemporary political theory.

To sum up, conventional policy analysis is limited by its concreteness and its devotion to quantitative methodology, and political theory is limited by its frequent abstraction, its separation from the specifics of politics and policy. Theoretical reflection that focuses initially on policy is an improvement on both counts. It can be a contribution to policy assessment, but at the same time a policy connection can restore realism to theory. A dilemma such as welfare illustrates the potential. By speaking to it, theorists can help address a major issue of our own time while speaking to timeless questions about the meaning of citizenship and democracy.

Contributors

To meet these objectives, we have assembled an accomplished set of contributors. Each was asked to address the question: “How does welfare reform affect the Anglo-American political order and core concepts of political theory such as citizenship and democracy?” Note that this question ties together the specifics of reform with general reflections about the regime.

We deliberately sought out authors with diverse views. Our contributors include those who, politically, stand well to the left and right, and at several positions in between. All are established authors who combine knowledge of welfare policy with sensitivity to the theoretical stakes involved in reform.

Carole Pateman is a democratic political theorist and a critic of welfare reform. She argues that welfare reform has compromised democracy itself: the idea of citizenship now centers on participation in the marketplace. In her view, conditionality, which is the heart of the reform, is contrary to the rights that democratic citizens should enjoy. She would return to entitlement and, indeed, institute a broader form of guaranteed income covering all adults.

Desmond King is a scholar of social policy development who also criticizes reform. He argues that work requirements tend to draw invidious distinctions among citizens. Setting conditions for some citizens and not others destroys any notion of political equality. It leaves welfare recipients less able to participate in democratic politics. Like Pateman, King would reject reform in its current shape and return to entitlement.

Stuart White is a liberal political theorist who begins with a roughly Rawlsian construction of justice. He believes that justice requires a much more egalitarian society than we have. But where Rawls rejected desert as a basis for justice, White contends that conditionality is wholly in keeping with a liberal point of view. He accepts welfare reform as preferable to entitlement, but subject to certain conditions. He doubts that these conditions are met by the current New Deal, which is his main focus.

William Galston is another liberal theorist who supports work requirements. But whereas White grounds that position on fairness to others, Galston sees it as implied by the moral values that he says a liberal society must assume, among them individual responsibility and self-reliance. Galston's chapter argues that American citizenship is already conditioned on good behavior in several respects; welfare conditionality is simply another example.

Alan Deacon is a theorist of social policy who, like White, thinks that justice requires a more egalitarian society than we have. He too accepts conditionality, but finds that appeals to reciprocity or paternalism alone are not enough to justify it. Human relationships involve responsibilities and commitments that can be far-reaching, and which are independent of the state. This implies that liberal theory alone cannot justify morals in social policy. Deacon develops a mutualist, or communitarian, rationale for behavioral requirements. These could extend far beyond work tests, and even into private life. Deacon, like White, focuses mainly on the New Deal.

Christopher Beem is a political theorist who develops the argument, found also in Pateman, that entitlement welfare serves a social function. The original rationale for AFDC was that a single mother should receive social support to provide maternal care outside the market. Beem argues that welfare reform lauds work to the point of denigrating the social value of care. He discusses two experimental state programs that have supported low-income single mothers who leave the workforce to care for their infants.

Lawrence M. Mead is a social policy expert who was an early proponent of work requirements. He argues that work enforcement has occurred at several levels, not all of them focused on welfare recipients or the poor. The new welfare policy seeks to integrate the poor through work, although it also narrows the poor who can be publicly supported. In politics, reform discouraged a politics of complaint, in which the poor appear only as victims. But it also permits a more radical and efficacious politics, because a working poor population has stronger claims to public support.

Amy L. Wax is a law professor who focuses on social policy. Whereas Mead treats behavioral requirements as a political issue, Wax sees them as having deep anthropological roots. Society insists on work in order to enforce social cooperation and deter free-riding. Thus, the work test is really not new. At the same time, Wax argues that society is flexible in enforcing the test, and that the passion for reciprocity may be archaic, even outmoded, in society today.

Joel Schwartz is a historian of social policy who finds today's conditionality reminiscent of the Victorian era. Now as then, welfare policy seeks to inculcate certain virtues such as work effort and prudence. That makes social policy more effective, he argues, but the values are also believed to be true and good in themselves. However, he notes that society is much more willing to enforce work than marriage. That represents a significant limitation to the new moralism.

A Look Ahead

Following this introduction, we begin with Lawrence Mead's assessment of the meaning and effects of welfare reform, which all the contributors have seen, and which simply lays out the facts to which theoretical analyses should respond. He avoids making an argument, outlining only those points that that well-informed experts would agree on, whatever their politics. The discussion centers on PRWORA and its aftermath; more briefly it summarizes the British New Deal.

Chapters 2 through 10 are the individual essays, in the same order as the authors are listed. The sequence is meant to run from the most liberal argument to the most conservative. Of course, our ordering is only rough, and the politics presented in these chapters sometimes confound typical partisan categories. Still, as one proceeds from Pateman to Schwartz, one moves from the defense of entitlement to the defense of conditionality, from the defense of moral neutrality to its rejection, and from an individualist to a communitarian idea of citizenship, among other changes.

In chapter 11, the conclusion, we as editors try to identify the most important themes, or issues, that the essays raise. These we think lie at the bottom of the welfare controversy, in the political arena as well as among commentators. The most profound single difference seems to be over the

nature of citizenship. At bottom, liberal critics of welfare reform think the recipients should be seen as rights-bearing claimants of social support, and conservative defenders think they should be seen as accountable for good behavior. That difference suggests profoundly different conceptions of democracy and the good society.

Taken together, these essays illuminate the deep political shifts associated with welfare reform, just as they demonstrate the value of a political theory that is, at once, sophisticated and concrete. A full assessment of policy should consider the political world, not just immediate social impacts. And political theory should not be afraid to address theoretical issues through the lens of specific policy change. The same approach might well be applied to any number of contemporary policy debates—for example, school reform, privacy laws, or criminal justice reform. In each area, different options imply differing economic effects, but also effects on important political values that should be specified.

Whenever policy is made, the background institutions are affected. Politics is the source of policymaking, and the place where its deepest effects are felt. Thus politics can improve the society and, hopefully, be improved in turn. Introducing theoretical concerns into a policy debate is one path by which policy science might return to its ancient tradition as the master science.

Notes

1. Technically, there are several New Deals for different groups of recipients. We use New Deal singular to refer generically to all these.
2. Marshall is usually read to endorse a rights-oriented view of social citizenship, but Stuart White argues below and in other work that he actually accepted conditionality.
3. Moves roughly parallel to those of Great Britain have occurred in Australia and New Zealand. The trend is less advanced in Continental Europe, but it is worth noting that France has created Revenue Minimum d'Insertion (RMI), an aid program where support may also be conditioned on the recipients taking steps to reenter the workforce.
4. Some other need-based benefits—Food Stamps, Medicaid, and Supplemental Social Security—have not seen similar change, and are therefore largely ignored here. For our purposes, welfare means AFDC/TANF or the New Deal in Britain.
5. The most influential of these studies were conducted in the 1980s and early 1990s by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC).
6. PRWORA did include sharp cuts in eligibility for several programs for aliens, but most of these were later reversed.
7. Consider, for example, the end of the medieval period, when Thomistic political categories failed to anticipate the more ruthless politics of the emerging modern era. Machiavelli and Hobbes abandoned the scholastic tradition in favor of a new realism about conflict and power.

8. In writings after *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls revised his theory so that voluntary nonworkers would no longer have claims on primary goods. In their chapters, Stuart White finds this change sufficient but William Galston does not, a difference that reflects their different approaches to justice in a liberal society.

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