

# Ideological disagreement over the welfare state

Sociology



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Since its emergence in the late 19th century, the notion of welfare state has largely been evolving (especially from the second part of the 20th century) and has been an object of conceptual and ideological disagreement in the field of political thought.

As a system of government where the state within its social protection remit, a set of social policies, aims to guarantee a minimum level of economic and social well-being to its citizens, the contemporary welfare state is based on the principles of equality of opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, and public responsibility for those unable to avail themselves of the minimal provisions for a good life. Its main concern is to provide a minimum of income security and essential services to the entire population.

According to Asa Briggs in *The Welfare State in Historical Perspective* (1969), a welfare state is a state in which organized power is used deliberately to alter the play of market forces in three directions ; first, by ensuring a minimum income for people and families regardless of the value of their work or property ; second, by reducing insecurity by enabling individuals and families to cope with some difficult circumstances (such as disease, old age, unemployment) ; and third, by ensuring that all citizens, whatever their class or social status, receive a number of quality social services.

Thus, here, we comprehend the welfare state as a state in which the power is deliberately used to modify the free play of economic and political forces in order to effect a redistribution of income. and not according to Fine's conception of a " positive government", i. e. , a government whose prerogatives are extended further than its alleged natural role of

maintenance of civil order and national defense. In this meaning, the welfare state seems to benefit essentially to the lower middle class and the working class (even though it is theoretically designed for everybody as it is institutional).

Synonym of progress and cure for social insecurity or freedom-inhibiting factor, the concept of welfare state is very debated and comes up against tensions between ideological perspectives and an ever greater theoretical questioning. Most policies have a number of differing justifying rationales and supporting arguments in their favour. Policies can be regarded as embodying ideas about society, the economy, the state, citizens and relations between these. They embody views about justice, equality and individual responsibility.

As far as ideologies describe, explain and justify, they provide a more or less coherent understanding or interpretation of some aspect of social reality. Ideologies tend to be action-guiding, they influence people's behaviour. With respect to the topic of welfare, one can identify a number of broad traditions of political and social thought, there is a range of competing ideologies. The main, the most extreme disagreement is between liberalism and socialism. We will analyze the perspective of these two ideologies on the concept of welfare and the contemporary welfare state to identify their main points of disagreement.

Advocacy of extensive "welfare state" programs was at first associated mainly with leftist socialist movements in particular because of the traditional socialist motto : " from each according to his abilities, to each

according to his needs". To Pinker, " socialism is inevitably associated with collectivist welfare policies. " Let us consider more precisely the relation of socialism to the welfare state. Socialism is associated with the development of a kind of economic system and society based on capitalist industrialism.

The key socialist values are collectivism, empowerment and egalitarianism - the 'liberty, equality, and fraternity' of the French revolution, interpreted in collective and social terms. Key social democratic ideas include those of " public goods" and " collective consumption". Social democratic thought was sympathetic to the treatment of a wide range of goods as public goods to be provided collectively by public agencies, hence the idea of " collective" as opposed to individual consumption. For socialists people have to be understood in social context, rather than as individuals.

Socialism is often represented in Europe in terms of 'solidarity', which means not just only standing shoulder-to-shoulder but the creation of systems of mutual aid. Socialists are supposed to have developed the ideal of fraternity. Socialism calls for people to be enabled to do things through collective action, a principle variously referred to as 'freedom' and (in recent years) as 'empowerment'. This principle has been central to " guild socialism" and trades unionism. The key socialist value, arguably, is that of equality, which was implemented in terms of the concepts of social rights and the ' social minimum'.

Indeed, socialism is egalitarian in the sense that socialists are committed to the reduction or removal of disadvantages which arise in society. In the " socialist" approach, the distribution of resources on the basis of need and in

the form of state social services is considered normal, a part of the dominant value system of society. In our contemporary western societies, inequalities are very strong with the current distribution of resources and socialists advocates to reduce them throughout the reallocation of wealth.

With the core concepts of socialism being constitutive human relationships, human welfare, active human nature, equality, history and positive change, and the adjacent concepts being democracy as major adjacent concept, power, nationalization, e. g. state ownership of productive property and class, it is clear that socialist ideology has a positive attitude toward the welfare state and state action in general. To socialists, whose ideology offers a critique of capitalism, the government should play a key role in regulating but also in controlling, directing and planning the economy, to maximize growth, justice and welfare.

Universalism and equity are at the core of socialism and so the state has to guarantee a decent standard of living to all as a citizen's right. This involves three basic principles. First, people should be entitled to a decent standard of living independent of market considerations. Second, the welfare state should operate on the principle of distributive justice, which corrects the inequalities caused by the market. Third, in the true welfare state, there is a collective responsibility for each individual.

Let us now consider the liberal (or anti-collectivist according to George and Wilding) point of view, the one from the Right. The liberal capitalist value system stresses on freedom, individualism, natural rights, competition, self-help, achievement, property, “ laissez-faire” and the minimal state.

Liberalism starts with the premise that everyone is an individual, and that individuals have rights. The most important value for liberals is freedom, and one way of defining liberalism is as the ideology of freedom.

Another fundamental liberal idea is that of individualism. The advantages of a free-market economic system stem from its individualism; the blindly self-interested behaviour of a myriad of individuals interacting as buyers and sellers in a variety of markets – for labour, capital and goods – results in beneficial “unintended consequences” for all. Individual action is deemed to be superior to collective action (at least in the form of government action). Individualism is expressed morally through the typical liberal belief in individual natural human rights. As a political position, one of liberalism's main purpose and topic has been to defend people from abuse by authority.

From this is derived the ideas about economic organization : the superiority of free markets over state planning or regulation. Liberals mistrust the state and argue that society is likely to regulate itself if state interference is removed. Hayek argues that all state activity, whatever its intentions, is liable to undermine the freedom of the individual; that society is too complex to be tampered with; and that the activities of the free market, which is nothing more than the sum total of activities of many individuals, constitute the best protection of the rights of each individual.

Thus classical liberals held that the role of the state should be minimized – reduced so as to intervene and regulate as little as possible and to concern itself with the smallest possible area of social life. The state is a coercive force and as we said coercion is the main topic of struggle to liberals. The

state is not necessary to provide welfare, it just has to defend life and property. Beyond a basic minimum, general and individual welfare is best promoted by allowing individuals to associate and contract and exchange freely with one another through markets or other forms of voluntary action.

Most social and welfare goods are more effectively provided by encouraging individual self-help and self-reliance, commercially via markets, and by various forms of voluntary action and association for charity and mutual aid purposes. Thus, liberals are anti-collectivists defenders of freedom and individualism. They regard the pursuit of equality as incompatible with the preservation of freedom and the right of property. To them, welfare is a theft of property or forced labor (i. e. slavery).

This criticism is based upon the classical liberal human right to obtain and own property, wherein every human being owns his body, and owns the product of his body's labor (i. e. goods, services, land, or money). It follows that the removal of money by any state or government mechanism from one person to another is argued to be theft of the former person's property or a requirement to perform forced labor for the benefit of others, and thus is a violation of his property rights or his liberty, even if the mechanism was legally established by a democratically elected assembly.

According to Belloc, the welfare state may leads to a kind of serfdom where one group works to support another group that does not work. Liberals support "laissez-faire" policies such as free-trade, opposition to business regulations. They are strictly opposed to economic intervention of the state seen as interference. To them, the welfare state is a major burden on

economic performance. The interference of the state is undesirable and economically damaging.

They maintain that capitalist markets are in general the most efficient means of allocating scarce resources and should not be regulated or supplanted.

The Right has charged that the welfare state is paternalistic and antilibertarian. Liberals argue that the welfare state is based on a misplaced faith in "social engineering" which consists of targeting money to deal with a complex social problem in specified ways. To them social engineering is ideologically wrong because it leans too far toward centralized planning. Eventually, the liberals have consistently challenged the welfare state.

Their ideological objections make them tend to regard the welfare state as a form of creeping socialism which in its attempts to combine elements of socialism and capitalism is less efficient than either of them. At this point we have two opposite points of a continuum that differ of opinion on ideological grounds. Each side promotes a set of social values that are the antithesis of the other. On the one hand are socialists who are in favour of a collectivization of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the abolition, the replacement of the capitalist market economy with public ownership and social planning.

On the other hand are liberals who are supporters of the private enterprise and the free market. Of course between these extreme positions, the continuum shows the existence of advocates of a mixed economy with varying amounts of state intervention from minimal regulation to a considerable amount of state economic and social planning (such as social



democracy policy, social liberalism or political liberalism policy, etc. ). The Right dwells on philosophical objections to the welfare state because that system represents an intrusion of government into economic and social life.

The Left focuses on the universal right to a decent life and equality and sees in the state the most legitimate institution to ensure these. The Right espouses the values of " self-control, self-help, self-reliance, and self-discipline as the Left promotes the values of distributive justice, substantive equality and collective responsibility. Even if this dimension of analysis of ideological and conceptual disagreement over the welfare state seems to be dominant, an other dimension is very important and interesting to consider : the notion of fraternity, solidarity, i. . . , the dimension of the community.

According to Pinker, " the history of social policy represents an ongoing endeavor to renew and also restore the social reality of community in the context of advanced industrial societies". There is an appeal of " fraternity" that encourages the establishment of social policies and the development of theories and ideologies around the idea of welfare. We have already seen that liberalism is an individualistic ideology whereas socialism is based on solidarity between people, on collectivism, the idea of general interest.

On the one hand, socialism regards people as social beings whose interdependence is a fact of their basic nature. In these conditions, the welfare state as a production, a practical application of this idea of solidarity is a logic extension of socialism. On the other hand, liberalism denies any principle of collectivism and thus postulates that everyone is free to work for themselves and for their own personal condition and welfare. Anti-

collectivists maintain that state intervention interferes with individual freedom and they look to the family and the local community to provide traditional support roles.

Their anti-collectivist sentiments are clearly of the kind that contest whole society solutions to poverty, but they approve of more micro collectivities, like families. The society in its whole is not supposed to adjust the conditions of people to create " more equality". To liberalism there are no so-called natural social relations among citizens. Equality is not interpreted as in socialism. According to liberals, the welfare state increases inequalities rather than reducing them.

Welfare assistance is not desirable because it wastes human and capital resources and create administrative inefficiency, and undermines a work ethos. Indeed, it favors some individuals at the expense of others. It entails the contempt of the human rights and especially of the notion of liberty and equality. It is a negative perspective on equality : everyone has an equal right not to be attacked in their liberty or in their property. Everyone is free and equal in their rights means everyone deserves the same treatment, no favoritism.

The socialist approach on equality, the " distributive justice" is perceived as totalitarian to liberals and it may trigger more dependence toward the state, no autonomy and no will to work among citizens that would live at the expense of others. To conclude, we have on the one hand socialism and collectivism that place equality as a primary value and its pursuit as one of the main mission of the state for a good society, and, on the other hand, we

have “ laissez-faire” individualistic liberalism which expresses a distrust of the state and its interfering authority as a threat to good economic development.

Welfare ideology covers two dimensions : first, the question of the role of the state, the perception of the state and the market, and second, the question of collectivism, general interest and solidarity. These two dimensions allow us to draw a conceptual and ideological framework on the topic of the welfare state. Ideological disagreements on the development and implementation of social policy remain, and are further enjoined by postmodernists.

Alcock says on postmodern theory that “ as societies have become even larger - and thus more complex, diverse and fragmented - the broad political movements and wide ranging ideological perspectives (... ) have been replaced by a much more extensive range of more diffuse perspectives representing smaller social groups and narrower social interests”. The issue of welfare and social policy is more diverse and complex than implementing or annihilating the welfare state. It cannot simply be resolved by reducing or extending it.