

# Family breakdown at the heart of society sociology essay



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This paper will critically reflect on the ideologies of Margaret Thatcher's New Right and the New Labour Third way in relation to family and its perceived composition. During this period, the state developed a much broader focus of the welfare system by introducing policies in line with the functionalist thinking and attitudes of the day. The functionalists believed that social roles are culturally determined such as the difference in female and male roles - females more suited to caring, nurturing and providing emotional support and the male's main role was one of being the breadwinner and providing financial support. Embracing these roles led to the smooth running of society (Dunn- Toroosian, 2009, p. 76).

The welfare state can be defined as the process in which the Government takes the responsibility in paying for, and in some instances such as public healthcare, directly providing services for the people. Through measures such as unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, and other social-security processes, it further provides the social and economic security of its population (Jones et al, 2007, p. 680). In addition, the responsibility of the state is to help families, who need support in bringing up their children, through providing a choice of services which promotes the welfare of children and family members (VSS, 2003, p. 2).

The welfare state existed as far back as medieval times when the monasteries in particular looked after and supported the frail and elderly and educated the children. In the 16th century, parishes became legally responsible for looking after the poor and the people of the parish were expected to pay the cost (Bartholomew, 2004, p. 29). The Poor Laws (traced back to 1536) were passed by the UK government to provide housing to the

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poor, homeless or disabled and in the 1800's many workhouses' were built to provide shelter, work, food and clothing to the destitute. In 1914 a new code was established which encouraged 'more generous relief to be given to widows' but 'only to those of good habits who would bring up their families correctly' and that workhouses should be used as a threat to 'weaker' women' as it was already being argued that the welfare system was changing the morals of society (Walsh et al, 2000, p. 35; 36).

The birth of the modern welfare state began in 1911 when Lloyd George and Churchill introduced the first compulsory national insurance scheme against unemployment (Bartholomew, 2004, p. 51). In 1941 an enquiry was launched which put forward proposals on how to tidy up the state welfare and the Beveridge report was published in 1942. William Beveridge was disappointed in what the welfare state had become and his report focused on full employment continuing within a stable economy where both Conservative and Labour worked within similar ideologies at this time to keep this stability and growth (Harris, 2004, p. 289, Alcock et al, 2004, p. 246). He was a believer of the Keynes theory that suggested there was a need for Government intervention to manage the economy which would solve the problems of unemployment and this approach was adopted by the Labour party (Page, 1999, p. 24). His report further outlined defeating the 'five giants': want, ignorance, disease, squalor and idleness and his main proposal was that a national security should be universal and be compulsory - 'everyone would pay a flat-rate contributions to a national insurance scheme. Those who fell ill, became unemployable or reached retirement age would, in return, receive flat-rate payments' (Bartholomew, 2004, p. 57). His

report made no special provision for lone parents at all, arguing that the responsibility of supporting the unmarried mother would be her family's although the typical family (which was that of a working man, his wife and children) lived almost in an income tax free state. At the time there was a married-couples allowance and tax allowances paid for each child which made the two parent family more likely to succeed (Bartholomew, 2004, p. 255). Feminists saw his report as advocating that the women's place should be in the home serving her husband and children (VSS, 2003, p. 19) as Beveridge stated that 'married women's duties was the vital unpaid service which would ensure the adequate continuance of the British race and of the British ideals in the world' (cited in Lewis et al, 2000, p. 32).

The years following the Second World War radically influenced British society - the NHS was formed and various Acts such as the Education Act; Family Allowance Act and the National Assistance Act were introduced and National Insurance for the unemployed was developed (Walsh et al, 2000, p. 46). The Labour government helped to create a more state orientated Britain which took place with the purchase of industries by the state however this focus changed when the Conservative government came into power in 1979 and the concentration shifted to privatisation (Burton, 1987, p. 26). The Conservatives, led by Margaret Thatcher, faced the burdening situation of the government's finances, rise in unemployment and NHS budget, and an increase in welfare bills. She proposed major changes in the thinking about social welfare and how it should be administered. In order to considerably reduce the increasing demand on the welfare state, which she believed to be expensive and morally weakening, she shifted the responsibility of welfare

from the state to personal, private and voluntary organisations which would be more efficient and effective (Walsh et al, 2000, p. 52).

During her period in office, Thatcher was influenced by her belief that the traditional nuclear family was the central force of modern life that contributed to decency, manners, respect for property and law and self-reliance, and was the best atmosphere for raising children (Jones et al, 2007, p. 156). The norms and values of society began to break down in the 60's and 70's when a more tolerant society began to emerge. Changes to social policies such as divorce legislation (Divorce Reform Act, 1969) and generous welfare benefits were blamed for society and values deteriorating and this had caused an increase in irregular families and household types (Douglas, 1990, p. 412). Thatcher and the New Right believed that the only way social problems would end would be if the 'golden age' returned in which people lived in conventional family units, women stayed at home, divorce was not considered, benefits for lone parents were low and tax allowance for children were paid out (Douglas, 1999, p. 414). They further argued that the traditional values' of women's roles and the tradition of marriage was important to hold society together (Jones, 2007, p. 156). New Right thinking, although influential in the 80's during the Thatcher Government is not new and has been around since the 17th and 18th century. The belief was that the government should not intercede in people's lives and freedom, and that any intervention would cause social problems to become worse rather than improving them. The New Right also differentiated between people who were thought to be deserving of help and welfare services (poor through no fault

of their own) and those who were unemployed, lazy and wasted money who should not receive welfare and support (Page et al, 1999, p. 23; 78).

Although Thatcher was keen to encourage and maintain the roles and responsibilities of the traditional family unit for personal security, emotional satisfaction and care for family members, it became difficult due to changes in society and law, which allowed women more freedom. Abortions were legalised and the contraceptive pill became available for free. In addition several Acts were introduced which gave women the opportunity to be more equal to men such as the Sex Discrimination Act (1975), Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Equal Opportunities Act (1995). Furthermore the marketization of the economy; deregulation and privatisation of labour markets and spreading owner occupation in an unstable housing market all played their part in the family breakdown and women's access to, and need for, jobs (Chadwick et al, 2003, p. 8). As women's lives began to change, they moved away from their natural role of housewife and mother as divorce rates climbed and more lone-parent families became the norm. The idea of family responsibility and informal care by the existing family was formally made public but in reality, it became more difficult for family members to support each other. The belief was that the normal nuclear family should be a family of two heterosexual adults, who were married and in a sexual relationship, producing children and instilling traditional moral values in them. Therefore the breakdown of the family and specifically the increase in lone parent families and illegitimacy were recognized as the cause of the increase in crime, unemployment, delinquency, educational underachievement and child poverty (Douglas, 1999, p. 412; 413). Charles

Murray whose New Right ideas greatly influenced Thatcher and Conservative thinking believed that society in the 1960's had done nothing to improve the life of the poor but instead had caused it to be worse by creating an 'underclass'. Despite any evidence, he further argued that the welfare programmes had produced a rise in unemployment, crime and illegitimacy in the American 'underclass' and defiantly stated that 'people were not owed a decent standard of living, it was something they had to work for' (Page et al, 1999, p. 79). Murray particularly blamed the children of lone parent families for social problems as he argued that the lack of both role models would increase their chance of living in poverty, becoming dependent on drugs, alcohol and benefits and therefore would increase the chance of them resorting to crime. He further stated that the welfare state encouraged dependency and a break from traditional values and argued that large benefits led to families not working, but remaining dependant on state benefits (Page et al, 1999, p. 304; 78). Thatcher therefore believed that the only way to reduce poverty was by ending the benefit culture, removing this dependency and encouraging self-reliance. She would have preferred mothers not to work, as their responsibility was to be at home to care for and protect their children. More over it would have been desirable if there were no single mothers claiming income support. Dunn - Toroosian (2009, p. 74) argues that the terms 'legitimate and illegitimate referring to children born in or out of wedlock are old fashioned, value laden terms that reflect societies attitude to marriage and childbearing which reinforce the New Right view and the Conservative pro-family movement, derived from Christian morality'.

Thatcher addressed the increase in welfare costs by cutting social expenditure, withdrawing services and introducing a new form of means tested support, which she believed targeted those in real need. She reduced the level of benefits and replaced certain benefits with others, which meant some people lost all or some of their benefits. Furthermore child benefit was not increased in line with inflation. Discretionary payments for people in deprivation were completely removed and the Social Fund introduced to help struggling people was mostly given out in the form of loans and not grants. The effect of these changes left many people and families who were receiving benefits a lot poorer.

It is however argued (Pascall, 2002) that these changes to social policy left women in a stronger position by the end of the Conservative era due to improved access to work and enabled lone mothers to do paid work which made women less dependant within families. Although many of the changes happened more because of the women's movement than to Thatcherism, Thatcherite policies played a part in the process. However regardless of the woman's new position, the New Right's ideology of the nuclear family is not all it is made out to be. Functionalist in particular ignored the potential harmful effects of family life and inequalities of domestic life. Nuclear families are very stereotypical and discriminatory (other family types are not families and therefore inadequate), patriarchal (there is an unequal distribution of power and status as it is male dominant and women are exploited) and not inclusive (gay relationships, reconstituted families, unmarried parents and especially lone parents are all ignored). There was no discussion or argument about whether the nuclear family was the only one



that could carry out the vital functions of the family or whether the role of nurturing children could possibly be carried out by other family types such as lone parents or two women/ men. In addition nuclear families, as with all other types of families, can be equally unfavourable especially if there is domestic abuse and violence or child and drug abuse. Women may have gained more rights to be considered equal to men but in most circumstances the man has remained the breadwinner and women were still considered to undertake the emotional role of the domestics, housewife, mother and carer. Women often work part time or flexible hours in order to allow them to continue to fulfil their childcare and household responsibilities (Dunn-Toroosin, 2009, p. 63). In addition, because of the changes in the economic, demographic, political and cultural trends in the industrialised world, people's work and home lives had changed. Although great change had taken place, it seemed that other areas of society such as government, religion and business had not yet caught up with the new reality.

The Labour Party led by Tony Blair came into power after a landslide victory in 1997 and one of his main agendas was welfare reform. Although he continued with many of the Conservatives themes and stated 'that the welfare state must offer a hand-up rather than a hand-out'(Page, 1999, p. 306), he wanted people on benefits to pull their weight with his 'rights and responsibilities' approach. However, in his attempt to break away from Thatcherism, the new government adopted the 'Third Way' which was about promoting opportunity instead of dependance, with a welfare state providing for the mass of the people, but in new ways to fit the modern world (DSS, 1998b, p. 19). Although New Labour accepted that the government had a

duty to provide appropriate training and education, Blair wanted certain people receiving benefits (including single parents) to be encouraged into work and training rather than continuing to receive benefits (Page, 1999, p. 309). Blair stressed the importance of individuals being socially independent, however he also emphasised the importance and morals of families arguing that 'the breakup of community in turn is consequent on the breakdown in family life' (Lavalette et al, 1999, online). Blair promised that his policies would modernise and renew Britain however the ideas that they were based upon were hardly new. He frequently discussed his Christian beliefs and values and how they influenced his policies - New Labour very much wanted to return to 'family values' (Lavalette et al, 1999, online). Frank Field (Labour minister for welfare reform, 1998) adopted many of the views of Charles Murray and he again highlighted the role of divorce, family breakdown and illegitimacy as the main contributors of the 'underclass' and that welfare should 'openly reward good behaviour and enhance those roles which the country values' (cited in Lavalette, 1999, online). Labour used social welfare policy to assert a new moral agenda and similarly to the policies of the New Right focused on the problem of teenage pregnancy, single mothers and the one parent family which resulted in benefits being cut (Page, 1999, p. 129). The New Deal (introduced in 1998) was concerned with moving people off benefits into work through better access to training and subsidies being offered to employers who employ young people who had been out of work for six months. Furthermore the New Deal for Lone Parents did not apply to lone parents with younger children and it did not consider how difficult it was for them in actually taking up paid work (Hills, 1998, p. 26). The poor

working class families were told that they would be held responsible for any  
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crimes their children committed as New Labour focussed on strengthening families and communities and also shaping the 'institution in which children are brought up, on the basis of enduring values - justice for all, responsibility from all' (Chadwick, 2003, p. 32). Benefit recipients were told that work is their 'salvation', even if it meant working for benefits, and being unemployed was not an option. Another strategy on his agenda was to tackle 'social exclusion' - groups of the poor who lacked the income and the opportunities to access social establishments which again included young single mothers. New Labour saw paid work as the best way to improve the position of the socially excluded rather than creating dependency on welfare payments and services (Page, 1999, p. 307). Ironically his agenda led to increasing levels of unemployment and a greater divide between rich and poor. It is a continuation of a number of themes that have been central to British Government policy for the last 30 years and is based on a deeply conservative moral agenda where the poor working class is increasingly identified as a problem that must be forced to accept the values of modern capitalism.

Both New Right and New Labour attitudes and personal belief in how the family does work and should work has significantly impacted and influenced the Government's decision on social policy. However Page (1999, p. 15) argues that social policy has always been shaped and influenced by social factors such as gender, class and age. This has in turn had consequences for women in family and public life. The effect of encouraging traditional family structures and the 'labelling' of single parents has had both psychological and physical effects on families and such stigma often shapes and

overshadows life. There was no evidence that proved the nuclear family was better than other family units or that lone parents were unsuitable yet this influenced policies. Furthermore, it was seen as a life style choice for single parents to be on benefits but benefits offer little chance for lone parents (and/or their children) to get out of the poverty cycle and it needs to be recognised that poverty strips dignity and makes a person powerless.

Although the solution was to blame individuals and therefore change and introduce new policies and benefits, it would have been better to deal with the inequality and the lack of choices faced by some women. Providing more jobs and opportunities with better pay would have enabled women and their families to claw their way out of poverty and their reliance on welfare.

Although the increase in capitalism meant progress for women as it enabled them to enter the workforce, they still remained unequal as they continued to bear the burden of the family role. Childcare facilities which could have allowed women to go back to work were scarce due to the lack of Thatcher's commitment to spend public money on expanding childcare facilities (Douglas, 1999, p. 413). Whilst much has been achieved, women are still at a definite disadvantage compared to men and therefore remain economically dependant. The aim of state welfare was to remove divisions in society, political and class inequality however because of the attitudes of the changing political powers which influenced the welfare state, the effect has been to make those divisions more visible: lone parents and the 'underclass' who have little choice than to live in impoverished environments where there is overcrowding and crime

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