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# Agency, Modernity and Social Policy

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*ABSTRACT*

The focus of this article is upon the recent revival of interest in human agency within both sociological and social policy debates. There is a striking resonance between the increasing attention paid to individual behaviour within normative debates about welfare and the concern of some sociologists with the moral and ethical dilemmas that confront the individual in contemporary society. These two sets of arguments are not compatible. Indeed the analyses they present are contradictory. Moralists such as Etzioni, Field and Mead share a belief in the need to restructure welfare in ways that encourage and reward responsible behaviour. In contrast, sociologists such as Bauman, Beck and Giddens suggest that such endeavours could prove to be both futile and dangerous.

Attempts to address issues of agency face formidable obstacles and arouse genuine fears that they will serve to endorse a punitive and atavistic individualism. It is these fears, however, which have constrained and confined the debate about welfare in the post-war years. The revival of agency creates opportunities for a social science which is more sensitive to the activities of poor people whilst reflecting more fully the difference and diversity which characterises contemporary British society.

## INTRODUCTION

The focus of this article is upon the recent revival of interest in human agency within both sociological and social policy debates. By agency we mean actions, activities, decisions and behaviours, that represent some measure of meaningful choice. That does not mean that such choices are free floating of any structural restraints, but rather that some other option existed, albeit also restrained.

Specifically, it argues that there is a striking resonance between the increasing attention paid to individual behaviour and personal character

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within normative debates about welfare and the concern of some sociologists with the ways in which individuals can retain the capacity to exercise choice and behave responsibly when confronted with the risks and uncertainties of contemporary social life.

The central point, however, is that although there are remarkable parallels between these two sets of arguments they are not compatible. Indeed the analyses they present are contradictory. Moralists such as Etzioni, Field, Mead and Murray put forward conflicting prescriptions for the future direction of welfare policy but they share a belief in the need to restructure welfare in ways which encourage and reward responsible behaviour. Similarly, they are all highly critical of the non-judgementalism of intellectuals who refuse to identify and condemn behaviour which does not promote the common good. In contrast, sociologists such as Bauman, Beck and Giddens regard such endeavours as both futile and dangerous. They are futile because many of the alleged ills of welfare are in reality the inevitable consequences of modernity. They are dangerous because they represent attempts to impose a fundamental morality upon diverse and fragmented societies.

The article goes on to acknowledge that attempts to address issues of agency face formidable obstacles and arouse genuine fears that they will serve to endorse a punitive and atavistic individualism. It is these fears, however, which have constrained and confined the debate about welfare in the post-war years, and especially that on the centre and left of British politics. Further, the denial of agency created a vacuum which was filled by conservative writers. More broadly, it is argued that the revival of agency creates opportunities for a social science which is more sensitive to the activities of poor people whilst reflecting more fully the difference and diversity which characterises contemporary British society.

## THE DENIAL OF AGENCY

As van Krieken (1997, p. 456) has noted, sociology has frequently been concerned with the constraints upon individual action, whereas much of economics has made the assumption that the individual is a rational and free actor. Consequently, sociologists have focused only rarely upon the behaviour of the poor. Rather they have highlighted the structural obstacles that confront them: labour market discrimination, educational disadvantage, spatial segregation, class location, economic restructuring, unemployment, benefit traps and, at a more abstract level, the requirements of a patriarchal capitalist economy. In part this simply reflects the legitimate terrain of social scientists. After all, the 'misbehaving' individual is more likely to be the concern of the psychologist. It also reflects,

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however, the dominance of two very different schools of thought within British social science: Marxism and empiricism.

*Marxism and empiricism*

A prominent feature of academic discussion of social policy in the late 1970s and early 1980s was the onslaught upon the then dominant Fabian tradition by the emerging group of so-called critical social policy commentators. Peter Taylor-Gooby, for example, castigated orthodox social administration for its 'uncritical empiricism' which led 'to a persistent tendency to analyse social problems and social needs in a way that takes the limitations of state intervention in a capitalist society for granted' (1981, p. 7). The central charge was that the atheoretical approach and reformist stance of Fabianism meant that it could neither explain the inequalities which it catalogued and counted with such care nor offer an effective political strategy for their removal. The most common riposte was to reassert the need for social policy to be concerned with the possible, and to point to the utopianism of much Marxist writing and its naiveté regarding the record of the centrally planned economies of Eastern Europe (Donnison and Chapman, 1965; Pinker, 1971; Klein, 1993).

The central point here is that agency was almost wholly neglected by both sides to this debate. The focus was upon the precise relationship between capitalism and the state, and more specifically upon the role and functions of state welfare. The poor featured in these debates in various ways: as victims of the system; as members or potential members of the reserve army of labour; or as social problem groups incapable of adapting to the rigours of capitalism. The poor rarely featured as active agents of change, capable of forming meaningful political or social movements. Rather they had to cling to the coat tails of the 'active army of labour' or passively wait for their situation to be ameliorated by 'top down' social reform.

Peter Townsend occupied a pivotal if somewhat ambiguous position in these debates. On the one hand he expressed many of the criticisms of orthodox social administration made by contributors to *Critical Social Policy*. Writing in the same issue as Taylor-Gooby, for example, he condemned the 'acquiescence' of many sociologists in the subordination of social policy goals to economic goals (1981, pp. 25–6). On the other hand, he was himself the target of those criticisms. Indeed, in the previous issue Hugh Kerr had cited Townsend as the exemplar of the inability of Fabian commentators to comprehend why successive Labour governments had failed to reduce inequalities; 'they have studied much and learned little' (1981, p. 16).

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The point to emphasise here is that Townsend shared the indifference towards agency which characterised both the Marxist and the orthodox approaches. This is reflected in his massively influential study of Poverty (1979). Townsend's discussion of relative poverty began with the contrasting situation of the poor and the rest of society. In essence the poor were delineated and defined by their lack of opportunity to behave in ways which were customary for the non-poor. This approach presented the poor as victims of circumstances beyond their control. The subsequent debate paid far more attention to the methods Townsend used to measure the extent of poverty than it did to the response of the poor themselves or to their aspirations and behaviour. The central issue was Townsend's use of an index of deprivation to identify a poverty line, and most discussion was focused upon whether not eating meat, not having a TV and carpets, or not going on holiday were appropriate indicators of poverty. For Townsend, of course, it was the lack of choice that someone had over their lifestyle, not the lifestyle *per se*, that made him or her poor. Again the focus was on restraints and on the circumstances that prevented the poorest from making meaningful choices.

Townsend's analysis was criticised for neglecting gender by feminist writers such as Claire Callender who argued that he failed 'to consider how experiences of unemployment and thus poverty are gender-blind' (1987 p. 150). Indeed it was within the feminist and anti-racist literature that doubts were first raised about the ability of either Marxist political economy or Fabianism to adequately account for agency. Rose (1981) posed the question 'Who cooks the dinner?' and in so doing raised issues about the behaviour of men that made women poor. Any discussion of the distribution of income within households inevitably raised questions about behaviour. Previously Rose had asked 'Who can de-label the claimant?' (1976) and suggested that analyses of social policy needed to reflect on how the poor were themselves capable of addressing the circumstances they confronted.

More generally, feminist and anti-racist critiques highlighted the way specific groups challenged male power and racist behaviour. If it was the case that some men spent a significant proportion of the household income in the betting shop, if some were violent, or if the experience of black and Asian households was one of racist attacks on their homes by their (equally poor) neighbours, then simply focusing on the distribution of income and wealth was scarcely an adequate response. Understanding poverty in this context meant a break with both the reductionism of Marxism, in which the poor were ultimately compelled to seek alliances with the broader working class, and a more orthodox social policy that

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also tended to play down divisions among the poor. If the experience of poverty depended upon gender or ethnicity, and if social divisions were reinforced by the behaviour of neighbours, work mates and members of one's own household, solutions might have to start with a recognition that agency was significant. Moreover, there were indications, from those affected, that they were not prepared to be victims; that they had ideas of how to address the specific problems they confronted. Thus Claimants Unions, Squatters Groups, anti-racist groups, Rape Crisis centres, Refuges for Battered Women and a number of professional/provider organisations such as the London–Edinburgh Weekend Return Group (LEWRG) (1980) all advocated more diverse responses to the welfare needs of the poorest (Williams 1989). What distinguished many of these organisations was their intense advocacy of a 'bottom up' approach to welfare and a rejection of the over-arching categories that a universal welfare system imposed upon them. The Left Libertarianism of these groups meant that they often stood outside the dominant approaches within social policy (Jordan 1973; Rose 1976). Although they shared with both Marxist political economy and Fabianism a determination not to 'blame the victim' there was also a desire to consider how victims might prefer to address their problems. By and large, however, it was the obstacles and structural restraints to 'making history', rather than the possibilities that the poor themselves articulated, that concerned radical commentators, Fabians and sociologists (Mann 1992).

*The Titmuss paradigm*

It is important to stress that the question of agency was not merely neglected in academic studies of social policy, but was consciously dismissed. For much of the post-war period it was not considered to be a proper subject for concern or enquiry. In part this can be understood as a response to the harsh individualism of the nineteenth-century poor law and the eagerness of the Charity Organisation Society to judge large sections of the poor to be 'undeserving' and 'unhelpable'. It was also a reaction against the absurd pretensions and 'lamentable arrogance' of social casework as it developed in the 1940s and 1950s, and as it was brilliantly and mercilessly lampooned by Barbara Wooton in *Social Science and Social Pathology* (1959).

Above all, however, the denial of agency was due to the prodigious influence of Richard Titmuss over the development British social administration in the post-war years. Both the extent and nature of Titmuss's influence have been widely discussed (Deacon, 1993; Le Grand, 1997; Page, 1996). Three points, however, need to be reiterated briefly.

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The first is the depth of Titmuss's commitment to unconditional, non-judgemental welfare. He believed that the social services had a unique capacity both to redistribute resources and to do so through institutions and processes which engendered a sense of mutual obligation and collective interest. To realise this potential, however, welfare had to be provided as of right and without stigma. The second point to emphasise is the importance which Titmuss attached to altruism rather than self-interest in understanding human behaviour and motivation. This underpinned his conviction that welfare could be reformed so as to provide a framework which fostered and channelled that altruism and thereby created a more egalitarian and more cohesive society.

The third point is Titmuss's extraordinary ability to enthuse and inspire those who shared his vision and his impatience with those who did not. He wrote always as an adversary, as a participant in a debate in which he represented social justice and the good society. Above all, he was resolutely opposed to anything that might appear to reopen the debate about personal responsibility for social pathology. Arguments about problem families or cycles of deprivation were an irrelevance or worse. Anyone who either could not or would not understand that was simply beyond the pale.

## OBSERVING AGENTS: POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND POSTMODERNITY

Questions of agency, behaviour and choice have been similarly demoted within sociological accounts. By the late 1980s, for example, poststructuralism had developed a critique that rejected both the reductionism of Marxism and the power/knowledge/discourse implicit in Fabianism (Hillyard and Watson, 1996). The mode of production was replaced by the mode of information as the key structure restraining the human subject (Poster, 1984). New social movements, particularly those that had been quick to articulate the views of the poor, were increasingly cited as evidence of alternative discourses. Such accounts might appear to allow the active human subject to take centre stage. In fact the poor were usually depicted as the subjects of a (social) scientific gaze that was structured by a language set by experts. Hartley Dean, for example, argued that the categories and social constructions that surround the poor, from 'pauper class' to 'underclass' serve as 'a symbolic manifestation of socially constituted definitions of failure' (1991: 39).

For poststructuralists such categories may have evidence to support them and may touch on real features but they nevertheless serve to marginalise and exclude. Drawing on Foucault's ideas, they argue that the central issue is the construction of knowledge, and what constitutes a

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rational debate over it. What counts as knowledge is not given by some higher authority, but is largely established in the way some ideas come to count and others do not. Defining what counts and what does not is a social process established by those whose position enables them to map the boundaries of discursive formations. The possibility of mapping the boundaries is not open to all and implicit in this account is a structure, or system, of power. As Bauman, who is critical of such claims, makes plain:

> Position implies structure, structure implies system, system implies boundaries: that is, the possibility of saying what belongs and what does not belong to the system; what does, and does not is relevant to the determination of the position. Since it is not the personality and the will of the author of the statement, but the possibility of authoring a statement belonging to the discursive formation, that counts – the point of gravity of any description ... lies in the mapping of its boundaries: a mapping that presupposes the reality of boundaries, that is the capacity of discursive formation to effectively draw and protect its boundaries – its only claim, as it were, to 'factual', objective existence. (Bauman, 1992: 71)

Poststructuralist analyses lay great stress on the role of those who author statements; by and large intellectuals, professionals and experts. It is this elite which constructs the discursive frame, which sets the tone of the debate and which demands that it conforms to a particular scientific context. It is this elite, therefore, which is responsible for a misplaced universalism incapable of meeting the diverse and different needs of people. Poststructuralism, then, did raise the possibility of acknowledging alternative discourses promoted by the poor. Thus the poor had a voice, albeit one that was off stage heckling. Nevertheless, once the hecklers' voices were heard they encouraged a more ambiguous, less coherent and more fragmented view of the world. Such a world is one in which diverse subject identities, articulating different themes, are likely to emerge. It is at this point that poststructuralism merges into post-modernism.

It has been a tenet of postmodernism for some time that diverse and different meanings exist for a variety of quite specific groups. However, the postmodernist critique of universalism and the stress on difference and diversity has not been unequivocally endorsed by all social policy commentators. The fear is that acknowledging diversity – and by implication different responses, needs and choices – will lead to the fragmentation of social policy. Thus Taylor-Gooby (1994) is concerned that postmodernism's stress on difference may cloak general trends, such as growing inequality, and that it ignores the universal impact of a persistent economic liberalism. The fear that diversity and difference may promote an agenda that loses sight of any moral or ethical standpoint capable of defending the poor is one that is shared by Bauman, 'Postmodernity ... does not seek

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to substitute one truth for another ... It braces itself for a life without truths, standards and ideals ...' (1992: ix).

This comment is particularly significant because Bauman himself is seen by some as having placed postmodernity on the sociological agenda (Smart, B. 1990:412). This is not the place to explore the nuances and ambiguities of postmodernism but it should be noted that British sociologists have tried to reconcile their commitment to certain ethical and moral standpoints with postmodernism's oft-cited rejection of any truths or ideals. In part it is because leading commentators such as Giddens (1990, 1994) and Bauman (1988, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1997) retain their commitments to certain ethical, social and political concerns that they are not, almost as a consequence, 'real' post-modernists. For them it is still possible to engage with the traditional concerns of British sociology – social justice, inequality and social divisions – but not to do so in the traditional, modernist manner. They also make it plain that it is not possible to do so without recognising the importance of agency.

## THE REVIVAL OF AGENCY

### *Sociology – lost traditions and finding agents*

Arguably one of the driving forces behind the more recent interest in agency has been the fragmentation of traditional social constituencies. Contemporary employment and consumption patterns are significantly different to those of fifty years ago (Edgell *et al.*, 1996) and in combination with a much more diverse ethnic mix and changes in women's expectations they have led to dramatic changes in the social composition of Britain. These changes have had effects that could not have been anticipated and which have led Giddens (1994), Beck (1992) and Bauman (1993, 1997) to write of post-traditional societies, although Bauman prefers the term postmodernism.

A post-traditional society is one which they see as an inevitable consequence of the success of modernity. In many ways postmodernity simply represents that stage when tradition is finally swept aside by the rationalism of modernity. However, rather than suggesting that postmodernity marks the end of politics, ethics and the aim of a 'good society', it is the manner in which these are to be conducted that is seen to have changed. Appeals to tradition from both Left and Right will, it is argued, have little success. Tradition can be utilised but as fewer people subscribe to tradition, the appeal to tradition cannot anticipate a traditional response. For Giddens (1994) the welfare issues that will need to be addressed in the future are ones which will have to engage directly with how people live their lives. In place of the universal welfare state Giddens wants to

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promote forms of welfare that enable individuals to respond to the challenges contemporary society throws at them.

> Schemes of positive welfare, oriented to manufactured rather than external risk, would be directed to fostering the *autotelic self*. The autotelic self is one with an inner confidence which comes from self respect, and one where a sense of ontological security, originating in basic trust, allows for the positive appreciation of social difference. It refers to a person able to translate potential threats into rewarding challenges, someone who is able to turn entropy into a consistent flow of experience. The autotelic self does not seek to neutralise risk or suppose that 'someone else will take care of the problem'; risk is confronted as the active challenge which generates self-actualisation. (1994: 192)

Likewise Ulrich Beck suggests in *Risk Society* (1992) that global developments mainly, but not exclusively, associated with the environment, have implications for us all in the longer term. The risks we confront are very different from those that the welfare state was designed to meet. On the one hand, there are the risks such as global warming, BSE, Chernobyl and, on the other hand, risks associated with family, gender relations, work, living a full life span and caring. For Beck it is necessary for us all to be able to develop a critical reflexivity. Like Giddens he advocates a break with productivism – the idea that economic growth dictates government policy whilst work is the focus for personal security – and proposes a model in which risk is confronted both individually and socially in a reflexive process. Thus unemployment and divorce, to take two examples, are no longer abnormal events but common components of many people's biographies. The Keynesian welfare state was not designed to address these social phenomena (risks) and so it is hardly surprising that it fails to do so. Instead, individuals must learn to confront risks, challenge the scientific community and the political institutions and simultaneously anticipate that their own lives will be less secure, less taken for granted.

The arguments of both Giddens and Beck are strikingly redolent of Victorian ideas about character, which as Collini has emphasised, was 'an expression of a very deeply ingrained perception of the qualities needed to cope with life' (1985, p. 48). Whatever their longevity, however, it will be extremely difficult to translate such ideas into workable social policies. Giddens for one acknowledges that his account of how to go 'Beyond Left and Right' has a utopian strand running through it. Nor is it easy to see politicians promoting the sort of no growth economy, advocated by Beck, in the interests of the environment and of lowering irresponsible expectations. Moreover, promoting responsibility, the critically reflexive individual and the autotelic self, may have consequences that further undermine traditional responsibilities. Giddens's argument that the autotelic self is one which does not expect others to take care of the problem can all too

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easily be translated into compelling individuals to be responsible, irrespective of their ability to address the problem. Bauman is particularly alert to this:

> The dismantling of the Welfare State is essentially a process of 'putting moral responsibility where it belongs' – that is, among the private concerns of individuals. It spells a hard time for moral responsibility; not only in its immediate effects on the poor and unfortunate who need a society of responsible people most, but also (and perhaps, in the long run, primarily) in its lasting effects on the (potentially) moral selves. It recasts 'being for Others', that cornerstone of all morality, as a matter of accounts and calculation, of value for money, of gains and costs ... The process ... leads inevitably to relentless deterioration of collective services ... which prompts those who can to buy themselves out from collective provisions – an act which turns out to mean, sooner or later, buying themselves out of collective responsibility. (1993: 244)

Bauman is here addressing directly the fears which Taylor Gooby (1994) had expressed about the impact of postmodernism. For Bauman (1997) the individuating effects of consumerism and the pursuit of ever more exhilarating experiences comes to dominate the individual's search for meaning. Rather than promoting social values postmodernism demands that individuals choose their own values. Indeed, it is through consumption, by testing the boundaries of experiences that are purchased – that individuals develop their own meanings and values. Unfortunately, individual acts of discovery tend to be hedonistic, pleasurable for the individual of course, but lacking any depth or breadth in the wider social world. Thus ethics are a matter of choice and consumption and these in turn are the hallmarks of the freedom that everyone is encouraged to pursue. For the poor such choices are restricted by their lack of purchasing power and their marginal economic status.

Trying to resolve the paradox of postmodern societies may be possible if solidarity can be located alongside the freedoms and choices that contemporary society offers. Thus Bauman points to: 'Liberty, Difference and Solidarity; solidarity being the necessary condition, and the essential collective contribution, to the well being of liberty and difference' (Bauman, 1997: 207). He identifies a variety of constituencies that already utilise the discourse of liberty and difference whilst solidarity still needs to be developed. Solidarity can not be achieved by compulsion or on demand. Rather it requires people to subscribe in recognition of the fact that contemporary global capitalism makes everyone vulnerable. The down side of flexibility and the consumer culture is retrenchment, redundancy and debt. The fear of failing and the fear of the poor, therefore, serve to restrain liberty/freedom. Solidarity, manifest in welfare measures, would provide a safety net that would enable all, even the poorest, to make choices, to be

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free of the worst fears. As he acknowledges there are similarities here with the older tradition within social policy of seeing welfare as a form of social insurance, although the implication is that it would have to be much more flexible than anything envisaged by Beveridge (Bauman 1997).

Extending meaningful choices to the poor can only occur if welfare provisions exist to cushion the effects of the wrong choices. Nor can the poor be expected to make meaningful choices so long as their failures are stigmatised and their behaviour singled out for criticism. The fear is that talk of choice, moral responsibility and confronting risk, is likely to lead to a mischievous obsession with the poor. These fears have been increased by the growing preoccupation with behaviour and character within contemporary debates about welfare.

*The return of the agent within welfare debates.*

The future direction of welfare policy is now at the centre of academic and political debates in Britain. This new debate about welfare, however, is not being conducted within the traditions of social policy analysis as that has been understood since 1945. Some of the most influential contributors are from the United States, others are active politicians or are working within the plethora of think tanks and new research groups which have emerged in recent years. They bring to the debate a range of perspectives which differ sharply from that which is still retained by the majority of academic analysts in Britain. Their focus is upon dependency rather than upon poverty or inequality, upon changing people's behaviour rather than upon changing the distribution of resources. In short, the focus is upon agency rather than structure.

What follows is a preliminary attempt to categorise these new perspectives. Specifically it is argued that they have given rise to three distinct formulations of the role and purpose of welfare. All reflect the rediscovery of agency, but the inferences for policy which they draw from that rediscovery are different. The first assumes that the overwhelming majority of people will act rationally in pursuit of their self interest, and emphasises the role of incentives in channelling that pursuit in ways that promote the common good. The second challenges the assumption of rationality and focuses instead upon the use of compulsion to require people to behave in ways which promote social well being. The third looks to moral argument to change values and beliefs and thereby to persuade people to act in ways conducive to the common good.

*Welfare as a channel for the pursuit of self-interest*

The argument that welfare generates perverse incentives which increase rather than diminish dependency is associated most closely with Charles

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Murray whose work will be familiar to readers of this Journal. 'Poor and not-poor alike', Murray writes, 'use the same general calculus in arriving at decisions' (1984, p. 155). Neither are 'inherently hard working or moral' and this 'Hobbesian state of affairs' means that everybody responds to incentives – 'sticks and carrots work' (p. 146). Murray's central claim was, of course, that the expansion of welfare in the United States ignored these basic truths and as a result they produced more not less poverty. 'We tried to remove the barriers to escape from poverty and inadvertently built a trap' (p. 9). More recently Frank Field has used similar language in criticising the effects of welfare in Britain.

Frank Field's position derives from his 'Christian understanding' of human beings as 'less than perfect creatures'. Unconditional altruism may be the ideal but 'such selfless action' is not a 'realistic proposition for public as opposed to private conduct' (1996, p. 107). The Titmuss paradigm, then, was 'built on sand' because 'the fallen side of mankind was written out of the ... script' (Field 1997, p. 30). Indeed Field has claimed that the Titmuss legacy was 'as dangerous as it was futile'. It 'lingered about the political debate with such force that I, for one, felt that it covered me with a form of intellectual treacle which made movement difficult' (p. 31).

Divested of their own treacle, policy-makers must accept that individuals will pursue their own interests. More importantly, Field argues, they must recognise that 'the shaping of certain types of character traits ... [is] ... a proper goal for public policy'. The distribution of welfare is 'one of the great teaching forces open to advanced societies'. It has a crucial role 'in affirming right and wrong conduct' (1996 p. 110).

It was this belief which lead Field to mount his now familiar assault upon the ways in which means-tested benefits erode incentives to work and save and thereby 'actively undermine the moral fibre of our characters' (1995, p. 129). Like Murray, Field does not 'blame the poor for responding rationally to the welfare framework which politicians impose upon them' (1997, p. 28), and also like Murray he assumes that they will change their behaviour if that framework is reformed.

> Set the right framework, i.e. a welfare system which accepts as its starting point that individuals wish to better themselves and their families, and allow them to do so, and the 'moral improvement' (I would prefer to describe this change as an increase in social well being) will take place. (p. 20)

This assumption, however, has not gone unchallenged. Writing in 1985, for example, James Q. Wilson argued that Murray shared with economists the 'central assumption' that "tastes" (which include what

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non-economists would call values and beliefs, as well as interests) can be taken as given and are not problematic'. The experience of the United States since the 1960s, however, was that there were some problems 'which did not seem to respond, or respond enough, to changes in incentives'. This was because 'the people whose behaviour we wish to change do not have the right "tastes" or discount the future too heavily. To put it plainly, they lack character' (1985, pp. 4–5). More recently David Green has criticised Frank Field on the same grounds. 'The defect in ... [Field's] ... argument is that not everyone reacts in the same way to similar incentives. That is, human values or virtues are "variables" independent of the benefits system' (1996, p. 77).

The implication of Wilson and Green's arguments is that an incentives-based approach will have to be augmented – or replaced – by one which seeks to compel those who lack character to change their behaviour by threatening to withdraw their benefits if they fail to do. The best-known and most influential advocate of the latter approach is Lawrence Mead.

*Welfare as the exercise of authority*

Mead starts with the proposition that the 'entire tradition of explaining poverty or dependency in terms of incentives or disincentives is bankrupt' (1992, p. 136). It is bankrupt because it rests upon what Mead calls the 'competence assumption'; a 'goal-orientated view of human nature' which assumes that individuals are able and willing to pursue their own economic interests and that there is 'no need to spur people into seeking their own advantage' (p. 19). The problem with this is that many of the long-term jobless poor do indeed need a spur. They are 'dutiful but defeated', unable to hold down a job even when it pays them to do so.

> 'Making work pay' is popular because it suggests that the poor respond to the same incentives as the middle class. But the people who respond to incentives are mainly those who are already functional. No incentive has shown a power to pull many people across the line from nonwork to work. For that stronger medicine is required. Incentives assume competence; the need is to create it. (p. 162)

It is this argument which underpins Mead's advocacy of workfare (1997). For Mead, much of the debate about work and welfare is simply dishonest. Too often debate turns to the barriers that the poor have to getting jobs, such as childcare, local labour markets, or the sufficiency of the financial incentives offered. The real issue, however, is what can be expected of the poor. 'Every view of barriers rests on a view of competence, usually unspoken' (1992, p. 22).

Mead has gone on to argue that the competence issue extends beyond the jobs question. It has given rise to a new politics of welfare which is

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concerned less with the distribution of resources than with problems of social disorder; crime, welfare dependency and the disintegration of the family. This new 'politics of conduct', he claims, is 'simply more salient than the politics of class' (1991, p. 4).

At the heart of this new politics is the rejection of 'sociologism' – a 'diffuse determinist style of analysis ... [which] ... construes the personality as essentially passive'.

> The poor are seen as inert, not active. They are spoken of in the passive voice. They are people who *are* or *have been* disadvantaged in multiple ways. They do not *do* things but rather have them things *done* to them. They are the objects, not the subjects of action. They are not to blame for conditions such as dropping out of school, AIDS, or drug addiction, but rather 'at risk' for them. They 'experience' behaviours such as crime or illegitimacy rather than commit them. (1992, p. 129–130)

Neither Murray nor Field would dissent from Mead's waspish dismissal of the 'exceptive voice' of welfare liberalism. Indeed it captures quite brilliantly their common perception of the failings of determinism and of the neglect of agency by those responsible for post-war welfare policy on both sides of the Atlantic. The difference between them is over the effectiveness of incentives or compulsion in ending the passivity of the poor. The third possibility is that of persuasion.

*Welfare as a mechanism for moral regeneration*

The new theorists of welfare do not lack ambition. While Mead proclaims a new politics of conduct, Amitai Etzioni 'reluctantly suggests a redrawing of the intellectual-political map'. Instead of the old polarity between public and private and between individual and state, the new 'axis is the relationship between the individual and the community, and between freedom and order' (1997, p. 7).

The relevance of Etzioni's new 'map' to the concerns of this article lies in the role which welfare can play in the regeneration of the moral infrastructure of contemporary Western societies. This regeneration is in turn a precondition of the achievement of a proper balance of autonomy and order, of individual rights and communal obligations. This is, of course, the central theme of communitarianism, and it is communitarian writers who are the prime focus here. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise both that there is a considerable diversity within the communitarian literature and that there is a significant commonality between it and the Christian socialism of Field and the civic conservatism of David Green. Moreover, Etzioni has himself sought to engage with what were described earlier as post-traditionalist ideas. Indeed he describes the 'communitarian quest' as the search for 'a way to blend elements of tradition (order

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based on virtues) with elements of modernity (well protected autonomy)' (p. xviii).

Above all else, Etzioni's 'quest' is for ways of identifying, achieving and ultimately sustaining an equilibrium between individual rights and the common good: an equilibrium encapsulated in his 'new golden rule': 'Respect and uphold society's moral order as you would have society respect and uphold your autonomy' (p. xviii).

The acceptance and observance of such a 'golden rule' must entail a lessening of the tension between 'one's preferences and one's social commitments ... by increasing the realm of duties one affirms as moral responsibilities' (p. 12). In effect this is to seek a social order which is based more upon 'normative means (appeals to values, moral education)' and less upon economic incentives or coercion. In contrast to the post-traditionalists who stress uncertainty and diversity in contemporary society, Etzioni is confident that he can identify the preconditions for a social order that has a shared sense of moral integrity.

> For a social order to be able to rely heavily upon normative means requires that most members of the society, most of the time, share a commitment to a set of core values, and that most members, most of the time, will abide by the behavioural implications of those values because they believe in them, rather than being forced to comply with them. (p. 13)

These core values have to be both internalised by individuals and embodied in the social formations which shape their behaviour: the family, the school, the community and the wider community of communities. It is these four institutions which constitute the moral infrastructure whose regeneration is Etzioni's prime concern.

Central to his vision of how that regeneration may be achieved is Etzioni's notion of the 'moral voice'. By this he means a 'peculiar form of motivation' which 'encourages people to adhere to values to which they subscribe'.

> The term 'moral voice' is particularly appropriate because people 'hear' it. Thus, when a person who affirms a value is tempted to ignore it...he or she hears a voice that urges him or her to do what is right. (p. 120)

Much of Etzioni's subsequent discussion is about the source of these core values. This moral voice can come from within – the inner or personal voice – or from without – the external or communal voice. Although Etzioni is careful to employ secular language, his description of this 'inner voice' is close to religious notions of a personal conscience, and, more specifically, to the conservative Christian view of liberty as something which 'arises from specific internally derived constraints and standards' (Novak, 1990, p. 18). The crucial point here, however, is the way in

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which non-judgementalism stifles the moral voice of the community, and so threatens the voluntary moral order.

> While social system factors are always important, and sometimes dominate the situation, when they are used to imply that victims have no choice in the matter, which exempts the actors from moral responsibility for their acts, the notion becomes highly damaging to the moral voice. (p. 137)

Similarly it is 'a mark of a human being that he or she is a moral agent, capable of making moral choices and commitments', and to deny this to deny the basic virtue of bounded autonomy (p. 138).

Jonathan Sacks similarly believes that the power of the communitarian vision is that it 'locates the source of action within ourselves. It restores the dignity of agency and responsibility (1997, p. 15). Like Etzioni, he seeks a way to counter the demoralisation of Western societies by strengthening the institutions which sustain 'our moral voice' and the language which gives it expression. Sack's formulation of the argument, however, is more polemical and focuses more sharply upon changes in the family and in welfare.

Sacks traces the problems to the middle of the twentieth century when he claims that 'the state entered the welfare arena and exited the domain of the enforcement of morality '(p. 115). The 'nationalisation of responsibility' all but 'eliminated moral concepts' from social policy. It ushered in the procedural state which granted welfare irrespective of dessert, and which broke the link between character and entitlement. At the same time the 'privatisation of morality' removed moral arguments from the public arena. 'Morality, relativised, was seen as the private choices of individuals'. The state was to remain neutral between such choices and concern at the weakening of the moral fabric was dismissed as moral panic. Sacks goes on to locate this 'abdication of moral agency' in public and private life within a broader 'libertarian revolution' which he defines as 'liberalism applied to the moral and civil domain' (p. 112). The central error of libertarianism, he argues, is to take the two great achievements of the Enlightenment – tolerance and emancipation – and apply them not to the political domain where they belong but to the sphere of morality where they result in sexual licence, the corrosion of the family and the 'new barbarism of postmodernity' (p. 146).

Libertarianism, then, destroys the very institutions upon which liberty depends. The significance of this argument for social policy is that Sacks is claiming that libertarianism can only be confronted by a new 'politics of responsibility' which 'would establish, through both law and social policy, clearer connections between rights and responsibilities, effort and reward' (p. 233).

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It was emphasised earlier that there is considerable diversity within communitarianism, and two aspects of that diversity should be highlighted at this point. The first is that it is by no means clear whether or not moral regeneration requires a return to traditional family structures. Etzioni insists that it does not. Indeed he distinguishes between 'religious social conservative groups' who seek to 'return to the traditional ways' and communitarians who are 'suggesting new ways' (p. 177). Any attempt to 'rerun history', he claims, would be 'normatively unacceptable even if it were sociologically possible' (p. 59). Sacks, however, would seem to belong to the former group since he is bitter in his denunciation of the 'scepticism' and 'the "not worsening only changing" rhetoric that so mark and diminish our time' (p. 248).

The second area of diversity is the balance between the responsibilities of individuals and those of corporate bodies and the wider community. Philip Selznick, for example, has written of 'a selective concern for personal responsibility, personal virtues, personal morality' which is 'music to the ears of conservative writers and politicians' but which pays 'little attention to the responsibilities of the affluent, or of business leaders' (1996, p. 14). He has 'no problem with the idea that self-preservation and self-enhancement are reliable if limited sources of moral ordering', but stresses that 'Personal responsibility is most likely to flourish when there is genuine opportunity to participate in communal life. These conditions require substantial investment by the community and its institutions' (p. 19).

Selznick's reminder that Communitarianism must focus upon the collective as much as the personal serves to highlight the similarities between it and Christian Socialism. At the core of the Christian Socialist tradition is a tension between an incarnational theology which holds that all should enjoy equal respect by virtue of their common relationship with the Creator, and an insistence that all remain responsible moral agents whatever their social and economic circumstances. The resonance between this and New Labour's emphasis upon the responsibilities and duties of welfare claimants is obvious (Deacon, 1998).

A further area of commonality between Communitarianism and Christian Socialism is their focus upon the 'cultural circumstances' under which individuals act. Norman Dennis, for example, argues that the young men who are now trapped in unemployment and poverty by their lack of both skills and motivation are 'the products of a cultural environment within which the messages of responsibility, striving, self-help and self-improvement have been progressively weakened'. The 'progressive emancipation of the boy from socialisation, and the youth and man from

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social control' is part of a 'general movement from cultural control to individual licence' which has undermined the family and corroded the culture of respectability within working class communities. Worst of all, is the fact that this corrosion is not the unforeseen outcome of unavoidable social change, but results from the relentless assault of liberal elites who have purposively sought to undermine notions of responsibility and duty and replace them with the 'freely-chosen lifestyles of self-regarding individuals' (1997, pp. 89, 90, 154,171).

Dennis's somewhat purple prose provides a valuable illustration of the ways in which the different formulations of welfare interweave at various points. He would certainly agree with Mead that many of the young unemployed lack competences, and with Etzioni that this is primarily due to the decline of the moral voice – both internal and external. Similarly, David Green has written both in support of Mead's position, and to argue that 'we must look to a sense of freely accepted duty, taught and fostered by the fundamental institutions of a free society, including the family and the voluntary associations' (1996, p. 75). In effect, he has argued that compelling people to accept responsibility for themselves is the first step towards moral regeneration. More generally, Field and the Communitarians share an enthusiasm for voluntary collective action: indeed the 'politics of conduct' may well spawn a 'politics of mutuality'.

## CONCLUSION

The differences between the two groups of writers discussed in this article correspond to the well-recognised distinction between theories, which are seen as essentially analytical and explanatory, and ideologies, which are seen as essentially normative and prescriptive (Alcock, 1996, p. 121). The important point for our purposes, however, is that the second group are all moralists. They share a rejection of non-judgementalism and a belief in the need for moral leadership. This, of course, is precisely what distinguishes them from the post-traditionalists discussed in the first half of the article. For the former, social pathology can be blamed in large part upon a liberal elite that refuses to make moral judgements. For the latter the danger comes precisely from those that seek to enforce their particular morality.

Giddens, for example, has pointed to 'a damaging contradiction' in the thinking of those who decry the 'changes affecting the family, and other areas of social life' which 'are stimulated by the very influences which' the same writers promote

> On the one hand, in encouraging the free play of market forces, neoliberal political philosophy unleashes detraditionalizing influences of a quite far reaching kind. On the other hand,

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the very traditional symbols which these influences help to dissolve are held to be essential to social solidarity. It is not surprising that New Right doctrines mix liberal freedoms and authoritarianism – even fundamentalism – in an uneasy and unstable fashion. (1994: 40)

We have argued elsewhere that there is also a paradox at the heart of much New Labour rhetoric on welfare. Tony Blair in particular has talked of family, duty and responsibility in the language of the new moralists, but also of diversity and the irreversibility of the changes wrought by modernity (Deacon and Mann, 1997). Our final point here, however, is to welcome the more open and forthright debate about agency which is beginning to emerge within the social policy literature, and which has been stimulated by the influence of both the post-traditionalists and the moralist discussed here.

In broad terms, a greater recognition of agency is essential if social policy is to address adequately the disaggregation of traditional welfare constituencies. Simultaneously observers of postmodernity may exaggerate difference and diversity but they have identified an important weakness in the post-war universalist model of social welfare (Williams 1992). Work, family and the fixed identities of class, gender and community are more fluid, more subject to the forces of change, and it is therefore less likely that over-arching policies that attempt to impose unitary solutions will succeed. The diverse constituencies that make up the poor will require more reflexive policies that attempt to support those who try to address their specific needs, rather than telling them to conform to inappropriate models. Likewise a recognition that the development of welfare has itself been 'made', at least in part, by active human subjects, ought to ensure we pay some attention to how 'People make history' (Mann, 1992).

More specifically we would claim that the denial of agency has proved counter-productive for those on the left and centre left of British politics and has diminished the debate about the reform of welfare. The impact of writers such as Murray and Mead owes much to the fact that they were articulating concerns about human behaviour and motivation which 'common sense' perceptions of the world and lived experience told journalists, voters and politicians were central to that debate. For writers within the Titmuss tradition, however, Murray and Mead were attempting to resurrect a discredited individualism and to respond in detail to such arguments would be to give them a legitimacy they did not deserve. For poststructuralists, this debate was simply reviving an older discourse, refocusing the interrogator's lamp upon the failures. Others dismissed a concern with behaviour as ideology, moral panic or 'backlash' (Dean, 1991; Bagguley and Mann, 1992; Mann and Roseneil, 1994).

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The polarised nature of much of the welfare debate in the post-war period was unnecessary as well as damaging. The American sociologist, Christopher Jencks, has recently argued that ' we need to replace our instinctive either-or approach to blame with a both-and approach' (1994 p. 48) and the current sociological literature contains a number of examples of the value of such a 'both-and' approach. They include; William Julius Wilson's theory of the American inner city (1987, 1991), Bea Campbell's (1993) account of the Meadowell riots in Newcastle in 1991 and the debates between Titterton, Williams and others about the differential nature of human vulnerability and the capacity of individuals to respond to threats to their well being (Titterton, 1992; Williams, 1996). More recently, Eithne McLaughlin has explored the contribution that theories of risk and decision-making can make to the understanding of the behavioural effects of social welfare systems (1996, 1997), while Williams, Popay and their colleagues have developed a new and less dichotomised framework for welfare research (Williams *et al.* 1999). Finally, the growing use of longitudinal data to formulate more 'dynamic' analyses of social change has demonstrated how approaches which emphasise 'the determination of social process' and those which emphasise 'individual agency, change, choice and dynamics' are not mutually exclusive but 'focus on different aspects of social reality and rely on different levels of analysis' (Leisering and Walker, 1998, p. 274).

The common feature of these accounts is that they begin with the need to develop 'a complex understanding of the landscapes of risk and opportunity that individuals inhabit in relation to poverty and social exclusion, as well as the possibilities of flexible and diverse policy initiatives to respond to these' (Williams with Pillinger, 1996). Perhaps the greatest contemporary challenge is that posed by the increase in the number of young never married mothers. The extent of this increase and the reasons for it have been examined elsewhere (McKay, 1998). There is no question, however, that if we are to take seriously the need to view these young women as 'creative reflexive agents, both constrained by and enabled by, as well as creating, the social conditions in which they exist' (Williams with Pillinger, 1996, p. 3), then we must start by recognising that a proportion have chosen to be dependent upon the state rather than upon a man. As Mann and Roseneil note, 'These young women are not necessarily "abandoned" by the fathers, nor should their pregnancies be assumed to be "accidents"; in this respect, they are not victims (1994, p. 321).

If we are to take seriously the arguments of the post-traditionalists, then the debate should be about how to enable these young women to

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take responsibility for their lives and those of their children within a framework which promotes a morally responsible agenda but which does not try to rerun history. If we are to take seriously Etzioni's argument that moral codes have to be internalised and embodied rather than imposed, then social policy has to engage with those who are seeking to reformulate their moral codes rather than to be concerned solely with issues of costs and compulsion. In this context it is worth noting how the debate over lone mothers has largely neglected the role and perceptions of young non-residential fathers, who Speake and her colleagues found to be as diverse in their parenting practices as any other group of fathers (Speak *et al.*, 1997). Similarly, a new study by Smart and Neale has noted how 'ordinary people' going through divorce undertook complex negotiations over parenting. They were 'good enough' moral actors 'fully conscious of the competing needs and obligations they were balancing' who deserve to be recognised as moral actors rather than being dismissed as moral defectives' (1997, p. 24).

Welfare policy is either about enabling people to make responsible choices or it is a form of social engineering. If it is the former, then it must engage with behaviour and the moral decisions that people make. If it is the latter, then the debate is about what sort of society it wants to engineer and which set of moral codes it wishes to impose. The tension between these options can not be resolved; policy will either treat the poor as moral defectives or as moral agents.

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