

# The welfare state: a communitarian perspective

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*Communitarianism is not, as some critics imagine, an argument for the dominance of the community over the individual. It begins from the view that our rights, responsibilities and moral understandings are rooted in the society of which we are part; these phenomena are socially constructed, relative, contingent and particular. A society is not a single 'thing': it is a network of networks, depending on a mesh of interactions, exchanges and obligations. Welfare provision has developed from the networks, duties and conventions which bind a society together.*

*The welfare state is commonly understood in three ways: as provision by government, as a complex set of systems for social protection, and as a normative ideal. This presentation will argue for a fourth understanding. The welfare state is a way of describing a set of normative aspirations. These aspirations are sometimes thought of as universal, but all welfare states apply principles of 'bounded solidarity'; the terms of the welfare state depend, like ideas of equality, social justice, or democracy, on the context of the society in which they are applied. The 'welfare state' is a direction of travel, not a destination.*

## 1. What is a society?

A large part of political theory, and an even larger part of economics, centres on the 'individual': a single person, considered in isolation from other people. In *Reclaiming individualism*, I distinguished three somewhat different styles of individualism: moral, methodological and substantive.<sup>1</sup> Moral individualism is a defence of the rights and duties of the individual person; methodological individualism, a determination to analyse individual and social behaviour as if it were the action of individuals; and substantive individualism, the view that all forms of social action are reducible to the actions of individual people. Milton Friedman, for example, refers to a society consisting of 'a number of independent households - a collection of Robinson Crusoes, as it were.'<sup>2</sup> Karl Popper argued that

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<sup>1</sup> P Spicker, 2013, *Reclaiming individualism*, Bristol: Policy Press.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. M Friedman, 1962, *Capitalism and freedom*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p 13

the 'behaviour' and the 'actions' of collectives, such as states of social groups, must be reduced to the behaviour and actions of human individuals .... we should never be satisfied with an explanation in terms of so-called 'collectives'.<sup>3</sup>

In a later book, *Thinking collectively*, I extended the same framework to consider collectivist approaches.<sup>4</sup> Moral collectivism concerns the actions of groups and collective entities; methodological collectivism works on the basis that large groups or categories of people can be understood collectively; and substantive collectivism is built on the idea that living in families, groups, communities, and society are the normal pattern of human life. We are social animals.

The dominance of methodological individualism in the literature has meant, unfortunately, that collective action is very poorly understood. The position of the 'individual' is set against the decisions or will of 'society', an amorphous blob of people who happen to live in the more or less the same place. This picture of a society is not much use. A person's electricity bill, record of educational achievement or bank account cannot sensibly be understood as a transaction between individuals. Extreme substantive individualism, of the sort advocated by Popper or Friedman, is difficult to make sense of: if we were to take that view, we could not explain the behaviour of organisations, businesses, religious worship or indeed of any social phenomena.

Our social relationships are founded in the actions of groups. Groups of people - families, business, institutions and organisations - can be defined in terms of three elements. First, they share a common identity - we can tell who is a member of a group, and who is not. Identity, however, is not enough. The second element of a group is that the people in it have some relationship to each other: family members, pupils and teachers, employees. The customers of a supermarket are not a 'group' in this sense; they may have a relationship to the store, but not to each other. Typically the relationships within a group imply a set of mutual obligations and responsibilities. Thirdly, groups have a capacity for collective action. It makes perfect sense to say that a family is going on holiday, that a business has signed a contract, or that a congregation is at prayer. Because this is all a part of normal social life, we do not have much difficulty in telling the actions of a group and the actions of individuals apart. We can generally tell when an employee is acting on behalf of an employing organisation, and when not.

A society can be seen as a group in itself: it has identity, internal relationships and, I would argue, a capacity for common action. However, that does not quite capture the special nature of society, because in principle a society is made up of lots of lesser groups. It is a group of groups. That implies, necessarily, that those groups are identifiable as operating in a society; that they have some connections to each other, typically within a common legal and administrative framework; and that there will be some mechanisms by which they can act in

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<sup>3</sup> K Popper, 1945, *The open society and its enemies*, vol 2, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul pp 87, 91

<sup>4</sup> P Spicker, 2019, *Thinking collectively*, Bristol: Policy Press.

concert with each other, commonly done through the role of government.

These group actions are basic to social welfare provision. Social protection and the provision of welfare services began, in many societies, through the actions of the constituent social groups - among them religious organisations, charities and trades unions. Government has evidently played a major role, but it would be misleading to suppose that government has generally had the principal role. Historically, the development of solidarity in much of Europe was often done without, and sometimes despite, the state.<sup>5</sup> The patterns of provision, and the mechanisms of governance and accountability, were often developed through non-governmental organisations - a mixture of charitable, religious, private and mutualist provision, sometimes lumped together under the title of the 'voluntary' sector. States came late to the party.

## **2. Communitarianism**

Communitarianism starts from a central focus on the relationships that people have with other people. It attempts to explain the pattern of rights and responsibilities as aspects of an interconnected social system. Our responsibilities are not responsibilities to everyone in the world: there are moral priorities, such as the priority one gives to members of one's own family or a local community. We are born into a series of networks, which begin with family life and go from there to make up a web of relationships and responsibilities. MacIntyre writes:

we all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles.<sup>6</sup>

From a communitarian perspective, moral and social obligations are necessarily located within a society, and an identifiable set of relationships; that also means that they differ (or at least, that they manifest themselves differently) for everyone.<sup>7</sup> This might be read as an argument for moral relativism, but the principles of communitarianism do not exclude universal principles altogether. The position is, rather, that if there are universal principles - such as 'Honour your father and mother' - they have to be refracted through the prism of social life; that principle implies a distinctive, personalised obligation for different people in different families. The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child defines children's rights explicitly in those terms:

The child, for the full and harmonious development of his personality, needs love and

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<sup>5</sup> P Baldwin, 1990, *The politics of social solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

<sup>6</sup> A MacIntyre, 1981, *After virtue*, London: Duckworth.

<sup>7</sup> D Rasmussen, 1990, *Universalism versus communitarianism*, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press.

understanding. He shall, wherever possible, grow up in the care and under the responsibility of his parents, and in any case in an atmosphere of affection and of moral and material security. ...<sup>8</sup>

Social relations are an important constituent of people's well-being. Communitarianism locates each person in a set of networks that define a series of rights, obligations and social roles. The fundamental glue of a society is solidarity: networks of social responsibility, where obligations and roles are intertwined. It is in the nature of solidarity that our obligations multiply and grow thicker in relation to the people we are closest to. The closest of these networks is usually a family, but the range of solidaristic networks, both formal and informal, is wide: it can be expressed through organisations, community, regional and national identity. Alfandari writes:

Solidarity supposes the interdependence of individuals within a defined group. One can imagine a system of concentric circles of solidarity, wider and wider, which go from the nuclear family up to the international community.<sup>9</sup>

The very idea of a society refers to a complex system of overlapping, interlocked networks. In social terms, this is often translated into a concern with 'social cohesion'. Social cohesion can mean many things<sup>10</sup> - social ties, shared values, a sense of belonging, the ability to live and work together - but at root it must depend on the existence of relationships between different members of society. Part of this can be attributed to the relationships of family, religion and community, but there are limits to how effective or inclusive such factors can be. The idea of solidarity has been identified strongly with mutual support and 'gift-exchange',<sup>11</sup> including altruism, balanced and generalised reciprocity. Reciprocity and mutuality are fundamental to the development of enduring social obligations. The early advocates of solidarism emphasised the role of social insurance in social integration;<sup>12</sup> over time, the emphasis has shifted towards broader forms of welfare provision.

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<sup>8</sup> UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child, 1959, Principle 6.

<sup>9</sup> E Alfandari, 1989, *Action et aide sociales*, Paris: Dalloz, p 73.

<sup>10</sup> Council of Europe, 2005, *Concerted development of social cohesion indicators: methodology guide*, Council of Europe.

<sup>11</sup> R Titmuss, 1971, *The gift relationship*, London: Allen Lane.

<sup>12</sup> e.g. L Bourgeois, 1896, *Solidarisme*, Paris: Armand Colin; M Mauss, 1924, *Essai sur le don*, [http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/mauss\\_marcel/socio\\_et\\_anthropo/2\\_essai\\_sur\\_le\\_don/essai\\_sur\\_le\\_don.pdf](http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/mauss_marcel/socio_et_anthropo/2_essai_sur_le_don/essai_sur_le_don.pdf)

‘By and large’, Boulding wrote, ‘it is an objective of social policy to build the identity of a person around some community with which he is associated.’<sup>13</sup> In France, where solidarity has been represented as the basis of social policy,<sup>14</sup> people are said to be integrated in society when they are part of such networks and protected by them; those who are not part of the social system are described as marginal or ‘excluded’. The idea of social exclusion spread from France to the European Union,<sup>15</sup> and from the EU to international organisations.<sup>16</sup> The model of social inclusion - or ‘insertion’ - was based on a negotiation between the individual, supportive social institutions and the wider society. The contracts of insertion built into the French system were made not just between the excluded person and the agency (the ‘*Commission Locale d’Insertion*’), but between the agency and stakeholders who were in position to offer opportunities.

The concept of inclusion has been given a prominent role in European social policy. In part, the emphasis on inclusion it came about because of a confluence of political events: the UK government starting to object to discussions of ‘poverty’ in Europe at more or less the same time as French social policy had crystallized around the idea of social inclusion, and the French-speaking Directorate had little difficulty in adapting to the objection.<sup>17</sup> In part, too, it made it possible to argue for a gradual, incremental, piecemeal development of services, a patchwork quilt, on the basis that every further development of networks could be said to reinforce solidarity. A universalist model calls for comprehensive inclusion; solidarism only requires ‘generalisation’, the progressive extension of the boundaries. If the influence of this model seems to have reduced in recent years, that is because many member states have come to resist the idea of a shared social policy.

### **3. A communitarian view of social policy**

Communitarianism stands in contrast on one hand with the sort of individualism that insists that every type of action is taken by individuals standing alone, and on the other with the kind of sociology that tries to explain social structures in generic terms, such as ‘capitalism’ or ‘new social movements’. From a communitarian perspective, both the values we hold, and the issues we are attempting to deal with, are inherently social and culturally specific. Some of our values - family, community and nation - are self-evidently communitarian, but the

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<sup>13</sup> K Boulding, 1973, The boundaries of social policy, in W Birrell, P Hillyard, A Murie, D Roche (eds.), *Social administration: readings in applied social science*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, p.192.

<sup>14</sup>Code de Sécurité Sociale, 2016, article L111-1, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichCodeArticle.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000006073189&idArticle=LEGIARTI000006740075&dateTexte=&categorieLien=cid>

<sup>15</sup> P Spicker, 1997, *Exclusion Journal of Common Market Studies* 35(1) pp 133-143.

<sup>16</sup> UN DESA, 2016, *Leaving no one behind*, New York: United Nations, ST/ESA/362

<sup>17</sup> Economic and Social Committee, 1993, *Opinion on Social Exclusion*, Official Journal of the European Communities 93/C 352/13

argument stretches well beyond this: it applies to values such as justice, equality of democracy. Placing values in a specific social context is sometimes identified with ‘moral relativism’, but the idea that morals are relative tends to carry the unfortunate implication that these terms are ephemeral and negotiable, and might as easily be dismissed. They are relative in two senses: they are socially defined, taking on distinct meanings and applications in different settings, and socially constructed, because they are based in the relationships that make a society. They are contingent, in the sense that their nature and force depend on the circumstances in which they are applied: Walzer argues that “All distributions are just or unjust relative to the social meanings of the goods at stake”.<sup>18</sup> They are contextual: they have to be applied in a specific social context, and lose some meaning when they are taken out of that context - fairness in the classroom is not the same thing as fairness in a court of law. And they are often particular: something that is true of one set of circumstances or relationships is not certain to be true of others.

The same conditions apply to concepts such as poverty, disability, needs, or welfare: they are no less socially constructed, contingent and dependent on the social context. Disability is widely interpreted in terms of a ‘social model’, describing the condition as a product of social construction.<sup>19</sup> Needs have to be translated from capabilities- we all need to have the capacity to do certain things, such as communication or mobility - into commodities, and the commodities which are used to achieve this are different in different societies.<sup>20</sup> Welfare is a broader term still, encompassing both resources and relationships at a personal, group or communal level; but the terms in which welfare is conceived are unavoidably defined and constructed in social terms.

The example of poverty brings many of these issues into relief. It is widely accepted that poverty is, to some extent, ‘relative’ to the society where it occurs. That expression may, however, mean different things. For some writers, such as Martin Ravallion, relative standards are standards that shift as lesser needs are satisfied: a relative standard of poverty is simply a lesser standard.<sup>21</sup> For others, relative poverty shows that poverty is socially defined: that social norms, decency and the understanding of what is ‘essential’ develop over time. For Peter Townsend,

People are relatively deprived if they cannot obtain, at all or sufficiently the conditions of life - that is, the diets, amenities, standards and services which allow them to play the roles, participate in the relationships and follow the customary behaviour which is expected of them by virtue of their membership of society. If they lack or are denied the incomes. or more exactly the resources, including income and assets or goods or

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<sup>18</sup> M Walzer, 1983, *Spheres of justice*, New York: Basic Books, p 9.

<sup>19</sup> S Edwards, 2005, *Disability: definitions, value and identity*, Abingdon: Radcliffe.

<sup>20</sup> A Sen, 1999, *Commodities and capabilities*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>21</sup> M Ravallion, 2016, *The economics of poverty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

services in kind to obtain access to these conditions of life they can be defined to be in poverty.<sup>22</sup>

Others argue that poverty is socially constructed - that the items which it is possible to use, such as the definition of food or shelter, depend on the social context. Amartya Sen's concept of 'capabilities' suggests that while we all need to have the capacity to do certain things, such as communication or mobility, the commodities which are used to achieve this are different in different societies.<sup>23</sup>

None of these formulations altogether captures the change in focus that is brought about by a communitarian perspective. They share a crucial limitation: poverty is being treated as a state of being - a defined condition that people are in, or not in, that can be described at the level of the individual. There are forms and aspects of poverty that might be described in these terms: a lack of water, having no access to an energy supply. However, once we set foot beyond the confines of the conventional academic discourse, most expressions of poverty are not like that. When the World Bank conducted its major qualitative study, *Voices of the Poor*, it identified a range of issues that stretched across different societies. Some of the themes are concerned with material circumstances; they include a concern with precarious livelihoods, problems of physical health and living in excluded locations. Other themes put more great emphasis on social relationships: relationships of gender, social exclusion and lack of security. And then there are political issues - limited communal organisations and abuse of authority by those in power.<sup>24</sup> What is striking about the analysis is the very limited reference to basic or essential material factors. Poverty is being described by poor people, around the world, as a set of issues concerned with relationships with other people. The many dimensions of poverty - inequality, economic distance, powerlessness, command over resources and exclusion - are not just socially constructed, but relational.<sup>25</sup> And that, in turn, tells us something important about the nature of social policy. Economic analysis has tried to locate the response to poverty in terms of the condition of the individual, and much of what is presented as the 'measurement' of poverty is conceived in those terms. Social policy involves rather more than an engagement with social relationships, but it is barely comprehensible without it.

#### **4. The universalist critique of communitarianism**

The scope of communitarianism is wide ranging, and its implications for social policy are profound. In political thought, it is an argument for localism and self-determination, reflecting the relative strength of personal, local and communal relationships. In economics, the recognition of mutual responsibility and common interests make a strong case for collective

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<sup>22</sup> P Townsend, 1979, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p 36.

<sup>23</sup> A Sen, 1999, *Commodities and capabilities*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>24</sup> D Narayan, R Chambers, M Shah, P Petesch, 2000, *Voices of the poor: Crying out for change*, World Bank/Oxford University Press,

<sup>25</sup> See P Spicker, 2020, *The poverty of nations*, Bristol: Policy Press

and group action, remote from the naive individualism that dominates the field. In sociology, the emphasis on solidarity leads to a complex construction of society which defies generic classifications of social structures. Neither individualism nor holism can capture the distinctive character of social institutions.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, there are important reservations to make about communitarianism - I discuss them in depth in *Thinking collectively*. It serves very well as a description of social relationships; it does less well as a guide to moral action. An emphasis on obligations and responsibilities can be intensely conservative; at times it may be repressive. Insistence on integrating people into social networks might seem also to be a pressure to conform. People who are excluded have to accept obligations as part of the process of inclusion, and several schemes emphasise those obligations to such an extent that it seems to put the main onus on the excluded person. Discussion of 'rights and responsibilities' has become a code for imposing moral judgment on people who are disadvantaged,<sup>27</sup> and some of the advocates of inclusion clearly identify it with workfare. There is a further problem, too, which is intrinsic to the idea of inclusion; defining people as members of a group inevitably implies that some will be included, but others will not be. We know that our obligations to those who are closest to us are greater than those who are not so close; that is what being close means. But the model of social integration I have been discussing is intrinsically discriminatory. It has to be balanced with other, universalist principles - principles such as fairness, tolerance and empowerment. Without them, it can become exclusive, intolerant and unjust. Communitarianism needs, then, to be moderated if it is to offer any protection for individuals or minorities. Peter Jones argues that

strictly, there is no reason why moderate particularism should not also accommodate an idea of universal rights of citizenship - if by that we mean only that there are certain rights which every political community must accord to its members.<sup>28</sup>

Amitai Etzioni argues for a communitarian social order that will defend individual autonomy.<sup>29</sup>

Many writers in social policy begin from a position of universalism: the principles they are dealing with apply to everyone. (Universalism, an approach to principles, should not be confused with universality, which is a method of distributing goods and services.) Any moral principle that can be said to apply to everyone in the same circumstances is universal in this

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<sup>26</sup> A Bouvier, 2011, Individualism, Collective Agency and the 'Micro-Macro Relation', in I Jarvie, J Zamora-Bonnilla (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of the Philosophy of Social Sciences*, New York: Sage.

<sup>27</sup> e.g. L Mead, 1986, *Beyond entitlement*, New York: Free Press.

<sup>28</sup> P Jones, 1990, Universal principles and particular claims, in R Goodin, A Ware (eds) *Needs and welfare*, London: Sage, p 40.

<sup>29</sup> A Etzioni, 2004, *From empire to community*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp 24-5.



sense: principles like justice, equality or tolerance are commonly presented in universalist terms.

Universalism offers an important counterbalance to communitarian arguments. It applies common principles to everyone, or at least to everyone in a common category. The basic argument for universalism is an argument for consistency - people in the same circumstances they should be treated in the same way. That works well in theory - universal values are widely held, and often referred to. Inconsistency, Wolff argues, is not the knock-down argument that it may seem to be:

In the seminar room the appeal to inconsistency is perhaps the strongest argument we have. ... No one should hold an inconsistent position. But in public policy this does not work so well. ... If we find out ... that the treatment of ecstasy and alcohol is inconsistent, then so what? You can still follow the law. Ideally, of course, there would be no inconsistencies, but many laws are compromises between competing interests, and different laws are made by different people, at different times for different purposes. While one can hope for consistency it would be foolish to expect it

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When we look at social policy in practice, universalism seems (perhaps unavoidably) to be subject to a series of compromises. In most cases, the provision of social welfare is tied to residence, citizenship or nationality. Benefits and services are not aimed at everyone, but at segments of a population - older people, children, minority groups such as indigenous peoples. Fiona Williams argues:

The distrust of uniformity and universalism and the recognition of diversity and difference has emerged in two ways within social policy. The first has been a 'top down' approach to diversity in the form of welfare pluralism. The second has been a 'bottom up' development of work around gender in particular, but also race, disability, age and sexuality. One consequence of this latter work has been to expose the 'false universalism' of the post war welfare state ... Whilst welfare pluralism stresses the diversity of sources ... for welfare provision, the second places emphasis on the diversity of identity, experience, interest and need in welfare provision.<sup>31</sup>

## 5. The right to welfare

The recognition of personal rights - such as rights to dignity, respect, or access to the conditions of civilisation - is an essential safeguard. Universal human rights offer some of the best known examples. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, among many other themes, that

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<sup>30</sup> J Wolff, 2011, *Ethics and public policy*, Abingdon: Routledge, p 82.

<sup>31</sup> F Williams, 1992, *Somewhere over the rainbow: universality and diversity in social policy*, in N Manning, R Page (eds) *Social Policy Review* 4, Social Policy Association, pp 206-7..

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.<sup>32</sup>

The idea of rights is, historically speaking, a relatively recent concept, associated with the enlightenment; before it developed, the obligations that people held were not necessarily held to the potential recipient. Charity, for example, has been conceived as a religious obligation - either a responsibility to God - to a community, or to the wishes of a founder. If a person donates money to a charity, the obligation of the trustees who manage the donation lies toward the donor, not to the recipient. When we say that people have right to welfare, however, we usually mean to consider the position of the beneficiary, not the donor. Rights imply that other people will act differently towards that person as a result. Marshall observed that various legislatures in the past have tried to resist the shift in emphasis this implies:

In some other countries, notably in Scandinavia and the United States, there was evident a desire to recognise the pauper as something more than an object, and to regard him, in fact, rather as the subject in the case, that is to say as a person who could be a source of rights and therefore of obligations. And this led, at times, to the very brink of an admission that the poor had a legal right to receive what the society had a legal obligation to give them.<sup>33</sup>

Part of the argument for rights is based in the idea that they are implied by the recognition of obligations. Benn and Peters suggest that if I have an enforceable obligation towards you, you effectively have a right towards me.<sup>34</sup> However, rights are generated in other ways too. Hohfeld's classic article on fundamental legal conceptions identified four kinds of right.<sup>35</sup> First, there are claims, where one person can require someone else to do something. This is the characteristic form of right in social security: for example, the right to claim social assistance. Second, there are liberties or privileges: things that people can do, that they cannot legitimately be stopped from doing, and where action can be taken to stop other people from interfering. Freedom of assembly or freedom of worship are liberties. Third, there are powers: rights or authority that people have to impose duties on others. The police are granted rights to the limited use of physical force in order to maintain social order; parents have powers relating to children. Fourth, there are immunities, where rights-holders are exempt from obligations that might apply to others. Tax reliefs often provide an example.

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<sup>32</sup> United Nations, 1948, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 22.

<sup>33</sup> T H Marshall, 1965, The right to welfare, *Sociological Review* 13(3) p 263.

<sup>34</sup> S Benn, R Peters, 1959, *Social principles and the democratic state*, London: Allen and Unwin, ch 4.

<sup>35</sup> W Hohfeld, 1920, *Some fundamental legal conceptions as applied in judicial reasoning*, New Haven: Yale University Press, obtained at [archive.org](http://archive.org).

Marshall identified the ‘right to welfare’ in broad terms, with a general model of citizenship that would apply equally to everyone. That presentation seems imply a uniform set of general legal rights - that is, general or universal claims, sometimes moral, sometimes backed up by law. As Marshall recognised, this may be misleading; rights, irresistibly, are hemmed in with conditions and restrictions.<sup>36</sup> Many of the rights that people have in contemporary societies are not universal at all. They are particular: that is, they are distinctive and apply only to the person who holds them. The rights that people have under a contract, for example, are held by the contracting parties, not by anyone else. Debts are a particular obligation; the creditor holds rights against the debtor. Around the world, contributory pensions schemes - arguably the schemes which can best claim to offer a good, secure pension - are founded on particular rights: that is, they are based on individual contributions and entitlements that differ person by person. When the Inter-American Human Rights Court considered the human rights of five Peruvian pensioners who were being denied their pension,<sup>37</sup> they passed over the submission that this was a ‘grave violation of the human right of social security’ and opted to treat the issue instead as a denial of specific property rights. Social policy in practice is liable to be based in particular rather than universal rights. Pensions are the clearest example; health care in much of Europe follows similar rules. The ‘right to welfare’ is neither a right to everything, nor a right for everyone.

## **6. Rethinking the welfare state**

The idea of the ‘welfare state’ is commonly used in three different ways. The first refers to a state that makes provision for some of its citizens. It’s possible to find texts that discuss the welfare state in a wide range of countries - the USA, the Middle East and North Africa, Latin America or South-East Asia - simply on the basis that the state makes some provision for welfare. Just about every government in the world does that. All modern states, not just the ‘welfare states’, make some provision for health care. The vast majority make some provision for basic education; and recently, in the last twenty-five years or so, there has been a mushroom growth of national schemes for cash support, with roughly 150 countries now delivering some kind of cash benefit.

Then there are discussions of welfare states, notably those in continental Europe, which don’t necessarily depend on the ‘state’ as such. They are based on systems of welfare that rely on a mix of public, private, voluntary and mutualist provision. Systems delivered by employers and unions - such as Unédic, which administers unemployment benefits in France - are routinely considered as part of the ‘welfare state’.

The third main usage presents the welfare state as a normative ideal. The historian Asa Briggs picked out three main elements in the foundation of the British welfare state: a minimum income, protection against various contingencies such as sickness and old age, and provision of a range of services at the best possible level. Gosta Esping-Andersen’s ‘welfare

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<sup>36</sup> Marshall, 1965.

<sup>37</sup> Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 2003, Case of the “Five Pensioners” v. Peru, Judgment of February 28, [http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec\\_98\\_ing.pdf](http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_98_ing.pdf)

régimes' are partly justified in terms of empirical evidence, but the theoretical basis of the classification is based in 'ideal types' of service delivery.<sup>38</sup>

Much of the effort in comparative social policy has been devoted to grouping 'families' of different welfare regimes. There is a minor cottage industry engaged in the process of developing models,<sup>39</sup> but ultimately the exercise is futile. For one thing, the field is littered with exceptions and 'black swans'. For another, we cannot tell from the way that a system provides for one identifiable group - such as unemployed people, people with disabilities or lone parents - what it will do for others. Nor can we tell, from the description of a system as a 'welfare state', what is going to be done about housing, water supply, child care, food or support for immigrants. The communitarian approach asks us to look for different kinds of criteria. If welfare and the institutions of social solidarity have to be understood and interpreted within their social context, any approach which is undertaken at arm's length risks losing sight of the way that issues are understood and constructed in particular societies. Social policy in different countries is typically shaped in terms of a social construction, reflected in distinct political discourses: for example, Australia's use of means-testing for 'radical redistribution', the French emphasis on solidarity and inclusion rather than welfare statism, or the Islamic emphasis on support for people buying bread.

There are some quite basic problems that bedevil attempts to define welfare provision in terms of externally imposed normative standards. The criteria used - 'institutional', 'residual', 'liberal', 'corporatist' and so on - are vague and often ambiguous. The elements that are selected for consideration - such as public spending, the structure of cash benefits or methods of finance - tend to be those which are available, rather than the ones which are theoretically more important. The criteria that are considered most relevant in different countries - such as solidarity, inclusion or redistribution - are not necessarily the factors that drive the classification. Comparative social policy has been festooned with alternative definitions of welfare regimes, which have common vices: among them, lack of consistency across different fields of operation within welfare states, selective criteria, and deracination from the political and social context where the provision is made. In a world where just about every government in the world provides some health care, nearly all sponsor education and most now offer some form of cash assistance, none of those formulations captures the nature of 'welfare states', or what distinguishes them from any other system of welfare.

Richard Titmuss called the welfare state 'an indefinable abstraction'.<sup>40</sup> If one approaches the subject, as Titmuss did, by positing ideal types, abstraction is the only option. Ideal types, in their nature, simplify and select; they can offer a perspective on the features of welfare states, identifying what seems to be important, but they are not a description. The best one can hope for is a model or template, to which reality will conform in greater or lesser degree. All ideal types are composites, bringing together a range of different principles and criteria. If the elements are considered distinctly, it is usually the case that the same principles and criteria

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<sup>38</sup> G Esping Andersen, 1990, *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity.

<sup>39</sup> C Aspalter, 2020, *Ideal types in comparative social policy*, London: Routledge.

<sup>40</sup> R Titmuss, 1968, *Commitment to welfare*, London: Allen and Unwin, p 124.

can be combined in different ways. A residual service, like child protection in social work, does not have to be part of a residual welfare system. Acceptance of one core principle in social democracy, such as gender equality, does not guarantee others, such as racial equality - the converse is also true. And it is impossible, once one principle or another is breached, to determine just how important that breach is for the application of a whole model. Does it change the classification, for example, that a supposedly 'liberal welfare state' has introduced universal health care? Or that a corporatist state has introduced a national system for cash support?

The preference for universalism in writing about social policy has promoted a vision of the welfare states as an expression of generally applicable approaches to welfare. That is questionable. Welfare states are only superficially universal; they do not apply the same standards to everyone. Banting and Kymlicka argue that welfare states have adopted a principle of 'bounded solidarity' - even the most developed systems generally stop at territorial boundaries<sup>41</sup>. Hartley Dean argues that the rights of citizenship which are so fundamental to welfare provision have gone much further than universal principles would allow.<sup>42</sup> And even within those limitations, many of the most important systems of provision - especially for pensions and medical care - have been based on particular rights, related to contribution and work record, rather than universal ones. A similar set of reservations must be made when we consider what welfare states actually do. All the welfare states, without exception, leave gaps: they cover some kinds of provision (typically health care and education) but not necessarily provide others (such as housing, fuel or social care). And many states which are not recognised as 'welfare states' have a similarly variable set of provisions, often extending only to part of their populations. Models which have been designed to capture the subtle differences between the most industrialised countries do not help to understand what is going on in the world beyond the OECD.

John Veit-Wilson, critically reviewing the concept of the welfare state, complained that the term was too imprecise to be of much use in social sciences. 'Analytical rigour', he argued, 'requires a discriminating definition'.<sup>43</sup> That seems to me to call for exactitude in a field where none is possible. Any 'discriminating definition' is certain to be selective, arbitrary, or will simply fail to take into account relevant criteria. In *States and Welfare States*, I make a case for a different understanding of what makes a 'welfare state'.<sup>44</sup> The 'welfare state' is not a 'thing'. It depends on a set of values, not a defined set of final end-states. The nature of the welfare state in general, and indeed of its many component parts - fields such as health care, education and social protection - has to be understood and applied within a communitarian context. The inevitable variegation distances the concept from any conventional presentation in the form of an ideal type. There is no definable bar to reach, no threshold beyond which a

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<sup>41</sup> K Banting, W Kymlicka (eds), 2017, *The strains of commitment*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp 6, 23.

<sup>42</sup> H Dean, 2007, *Social policy and human rights*, *Social Policy and Society* 7(1) 1-12.

<sup>43</sup> J Veit Wilson, 2000, *States of welfare*, *Social Policy and Administration* 34(1) 1-25, p 5.

<sup>44</sup> P Spicker, 2022, *States and welfare states*, Bristol: Policy Press.

system becomes a 'welfare state'. The idea has that much in common with a clutch of other normative principles - such as democracy, equality or social justice - which are also commonly presented as if they represented a clear ideal type, when there can be no single objective.

The description of a 'welfare state' is normative, rather than descriptive - it relates to a set of principles, rather than whether it meets specific descriptive criteria. The principles associated with welfare states include aspirations for greater equality, material and personal security, social inclusion, the provision of services, and a recognition of general rights to welfare. Within a communitarian perspective, a statement of principles cannot be enough: those principles have to be applied within specific social contexts, and different priorities can be attached to the various specific forms of implementation. This identifies a direction of movement, not a destination.