

Richard M. Titmuss (1974)

What is Social Policy?

In the chapters that follow we look first at the term 'social policy' and ask a good many questions about it. In doing so, we shall inevitably have to consider various definitions of associated concepts and categorised labels – social administration, social services, social welfare, social security, welfare states and so forth. We will have to ask ourselves why we should study social policy at all or, for that matter, society's response as it identifies or fails to identify social needs and problems. Are we concerned with principles and objectives about certain areas of social life and organisation – or with social engineering: with methods and techniques of action, management, organisation and the application of games theory?

Whatever the answer we arrive at, we cannot fail to become heavily involved in the issues of moral and political values. Indeed, political propaganda frequently masquerades under social policy labels.

What do we mean by social policy? Connected with this is the equally important question: whose social policy? For our purposes the word 'policy' can be taken to refer to the principles that govern action directed towards given ends. The concept denotes action about means as well as ends and it, therefore, implies change: changing situations, systems, practices, behaviour. And here we should note that the concept of policy is only meaningful if we (society, a group, or an

Social Policy

organisation) believe we can affect change in some form or another. We do not have policies about the weather because, as yet, we are powerless to do anything about the weather. But we do have policies (or we can have policies) about illegitimate children because we think we have some power to affect their lives – for better or worse depending on whether you are the policy-maker or the illegitimate child.

The word 'policy' is used here in an action-oriented and problem-oriented sense. The collective 'we' is used to refer to the actions of government in expressing the 'general will' of the people – whether of Britain, Nigeria or China. The meaning and validity of a concept of the 'general will' is, of course, hotly debated.

The greatest semantic difficulty arises, inevitably, with the word 'social'. Nor is it made any easier today by the fact that so many disciplines, professions and groups claim it as a Christian name and, indeed, flourish it about as something distinctly different. We have, for example, social geography, social planning, social psychology, social psychiatry, social administration, social work, social law, social linguistics, social history, social medicine, social pathology, and so on. Even the Bank of America created in January 1972 a new post of executive vice-president in charge of social policy! Why not social theology? Is it really necessary to drive home so ponderously the fact that all these subjects and groups are concerned in some way with man in society – and particularly with the non-economic factors in human relations? Are they not all, in short, emphasising that man is a social being; that he is not solely Economic Man; and that society cannot be thought of in terms of mechanistic-organic models or physiological models? It may well be that much of the current fashion for 'social' is a reaction against the sillier models of man in society constructed in the past by economists, political philosophers, experimental psychologists and sociologists.

Take, for example, the attempts of the Victorian economists to establish a competitive, self-regulating total market

What is Social Policy?

25

economy, or Radcliffe-Brown's doctrine (as one of the 'fathers' of modern anthropology) that the organic nature of society is a fact. Such a doctrine implies that integration and solidarity must be 'natural' attributes of all social systems. 'Social structures', he wrote, 'are just as real as are individual organisms. A complex organism is a collection of living cells and interstitial fluids arranged in a certain structure. . . .'¹

This is what another anthropologist, a *social* anthropologist, Edmund Leach, had to say about this doctrine: 'If you feel certain, on *a priori* grounds, that all forms of social stress must produce a reaction which will tend to restore or even reinforce the solidarity (i.e. organic health) of society then you will quickly persuade yourself that war is peace and conflict harmony.'²

You might argue, if social stresses correct themselves automatically (on the analogy of the self-regulating market economy), then there is no place for an unpredictable concept like social policy.

But it can, of course, be argued that social policy (or, to be more precise, a system of social welfare) is simply part of the self-regulatory mechanisms built into a 'natural' social system. This would mean that the history of the development of the social services in Britain since the beginning of the twentieth century was, in a sense, predetermined; that it was bound to happen because of a 'natural' tendency in the social system toward equilibrium and order. Some part of the theory of Talcott Parsons sustains this equilibrium-order concept.³ Fundamentally, it is a conservative ideology akin to the philosophy that 'All is for the best in this best of all possible worlds,' – or akin, to take another analogy, to neo-classical economic theory with its conception of the best possible self-regulating supply and demand private market (largely, as the

¹ Radcliffe-Brown, A. R., *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Cohen & West, London, 1952, p. 190.

² Leach, E., 'Models', *New Society*, 14 May 1964.

³ See, for example, Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1949; and *The Social System*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1964.

Women's Liberation Movement has pointed out, a private market for men).

All this is a rather roundabout way of saying that these mechanistic theories of orderly man and society consign a minor subsidiary role to social policy; indeed, not a 'policy' role at all; a role similar to that assigned to the State in nineteenth-century Britain by Lassalle when he wrote about 'the Night Watchman State' (the 'Law and Order State' in the language of the 1970s). Only in a very restricted and contradictory sense could it be said that Night Watchmen have *policies* – unless it can be argued that to watch and keep order and not to act and change is a policy.

At the other end of the spectrum of values is the rejection of the notion of a mechanistic or residual role for social policy. Social policy can be seen as a positive instrument of change; as an unpredictable, incalculable part of the whole political process.

We must not, however, jump to the conclusion that social policy as conceived in this or any other way is necessarily beneficent or welfare-oriented in the sense of providing more welfare and more benefits for the poor, the so-called working-classes, old-age pensioners, women, deprived children and other categories in the catalogue of social poverty. A redistributive social policy can redistribute command over material and non-material resources from the poor to the rich; from one ethnic group to another ethnic group; from working life to old age within income groups and social classes – as, for example, in middle-class pension schemes – and in other ways.

There are social policies in South Africa today which many people would not regard as being beneficent or welfare-oriented. There are social insurance programmes in some Latin American countries, Brazil in particular, which function as concealed multipliers of inequality – they transfer resources from the poor to the rich. Hitler developed social policies in Nazi Germany – they were in fact called social policies – concerning the mentally ill and retarded, the Jews and other ethnic

What is Social Policy?

27

groups. World public opinion condemned these instruments of social policy which had as their ultimate ends the use of human beings for medical research, sterilisation and the gas chamber.

When we use the term 'social policy' we must not, therefore, automatically react by investing it with a halo of altruism, concern for others, concern about equality and so on. Nor must we unthinkingly conclude that because Britain – or any other country – has a social policy or has developed social services, that they actually operate in practice to further the ends of progressive redistribution, equality and social altruism. What is 'welfare' for some groups may be 'illfare' for others.

And, lastly, in guarding against the value implications of the term 'social policy', I should point out that it does not imply allegiance to any political party or ideology. We all have our values and our prejudices; we all have our rights and duties as citizens, and our rights and duties as teachers and students. At the very least, we have a responsibility for making our values clear; and we have a special duty to do so when we are discussing such a subject as social policy which, quite clearly, has no meaning at all if it is considered to be neutral in terms of values. Or as Nye Bevan, the architect of the British National Health Service, was so fond of saying: 'This is my truth, now tell me yours.'¹

Gunnar Myrdal has had much to say in his writings on economic and social policy about the dangers of deceiving ourselves and others about our values and biases. He has criticised sociologists and anthropologists for believing in the possibility of a value-free approach in their studies of social organisation.²

¹ 'Life with Nye', Jenny Lee, *The Observer* Colour Supplement, 10 December 1972.

² He did so first in his book *An American Dilemma: the Negro problem and modern democracy*, Harper & Row, London, 1962, and more recently in *The Challenge of World Poverty*, Allen Lane, London, 1970 (see Ch. 1, 'Cleansing the Approach from Biases').

Hume once said that the true sceptic should be as diffident of his philosophical doubts as of his philosophical convictions. Can we then say that a true believer should be as diffident of his philosophical convictions as of his philosophical doubts – so a true sceptic and a true believer would be one and the same? Is such a paragon possible? Can a man temper his doubts with assertion, and his assertions with doubt, and yet act in pursuit of certain social policy goals? Is this what in the ordinary life of decision-making some people call wisdom – the power to be both critical and practical, both speculative and pragmatic?¹

To return, however, to this tiresome business of defining social policy. Let us consider what some other writers have said on the subject. At one extreme, we can find the most comprehensive definition in the statement by Professor Macbeath in his 1957 Hobhouse Lecture: 'Social policies are concerned with the right ordering of the network of relationships between men and women who live together in societies, or with the principles which should govern the activities of individuals and groups so far as they affect the lives and interests of other people.'²

It would be difficult to be more sweeping than that. It could easily be read as a grand definition of the scope of sociology; indeed, a definition that includes economics and all the social science disciplines. However, one should point out that it was Professor Macbeath's purpose to state the central issue in social policy – or any policy determined by Government to intervene in the life of the community. As he saw it, the central issue was between the self-regarding (egotistical) activities of man and the other-regarding (altruistic) activities. Professor Ginsberg took much the same position. Arguing that some forms of social policy are based on the notion of moral progress, he then used criteria of moral progress which are to be

¹ See Corbett, P., *Ideologies*, Hutchinson, London, 1965, p. 209.

² Macbeath G., 'Can Social Policies be Rationally Tested?', Hobhouse Memorial Trust lecture, Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 1.

What is Social Policy?

29

found 'in the growing power of altruism over egoism'¹ brought about by a fusion of intelligence and concern for social justice and equality. *The Gift Relationship* was an attempt to provide a concrete illustration of this philosophical view from an international study of blood donor systems.²

At the other extreme, let us take Professor Hagenbuch's definition of social policy. 'Stated in general terms,' he said, 'the mainspring of social policy may be said to be the desire to ensure every member of the community certain minimum standards and certain opportunities.'³ This I think is typical of many definitions offered by other writers in a large number of Western countries. It is similar also to the views expressed by the United Nations in a series of studies and reports in recent years: for example, in the *Report on the Organization and Administration of Social Services*⁴ published in 1962.

These and similar definitions, whether one views them as limited or broad, all contain three objectives – and, of course, value judgements. First, they aim to be beneficent – policy is directed to provide welfare for citizens. Second, they include economic as well as non-economic objectives; for example, minimum wages, minimum standards of income maintenance and so on. Thirdly, they involve some measure of progressive redistribution in command-over-resources from rich to poor.

Dissenting somewhat from these views is Professor Lafitte of Birmingham – the only professor in Britain with the title 'Social Policy'. He sees social policy as being more concerned with the communal environment – with the provision of social amenity (urban renewal and national parks, for example, and measures against pollution, noise, etc.) which the individual cannot purchase in the market as a lone individual. He puts less emphasis on individual transfer payments (like pensions) and

¹ Ginsberg, M., *The Idea of Progress: a revaluation*, Methuen, London, 1953, p. 24.

² Titmuss, R. M., *The Gift Relationship*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1971.

³ Hagenbuch, W., *Social Economics*, Nisbet, Welwyn, 1958, p. 205.

⁴ *Report on the Organization and Administration of Social Services*, Report by Group of Experts to UN Secretary General (ST/SOA/44 and E/CN.5/360/Rev. 1), 1962.

argues that 'in the main social policy is an attempt to steer the life of society along channels it would not follow if left to itself'.¹ This is in some senses a more limited definition – but it does imply a substantial interventionist role by Government in the provision of a wide range of community facilities and safeguards.

Professor Marshall is more practical and down-to-earth: "Social Policy" is not a technical term with an exact meaning ... it is taken to refer to the policy of governments with regard to action having a direct impact on the welfare of the citizens, by providing them with services or income. The central core consists, therefore, of social insurance, public (or national) assistance, the health and welfare services, housing policy.'²

Again, social policy is seen to be beneficent, redistributive and concerned with economic as well as non-economic objectives. Like many of the other definitions, social policy (as with economic policy) is all about 'what is and what might be'. It is thus involved in choices in the ordering of social change.

As an aid to our inquiries, it is helpful to examine three contrasting models or functions of social policy. The purpose of model-building is not to admire the architecture of the building, but to help us to see some order in all the disorder and confusion of facts, systems and choices concerning certain areas of our economic and social life. Tentatively, the three models can be described as follows:

MODEL A *The Residual Welfare Model of Social Policy*

This formulation is based on the premise that there are two 'natural' (or socially given) channels through which an individual's needs are properly met; the private market and the family. Only when these break down should social welfare

¹ Lafitte, F., *Social Policy in a Free Society*, Birmingham University Press, 1962, p. 9.

² Marshall, T. H., *Social Policy*, Hutchinson, London, 1965, p. 7.

What is Social Policy?

31

institutions come into play and then only temporarily. As Professor Peacock puts it: 'The true object of the Welfare State is to teach people how to do without it.'¹ The theoretical basis of this model can be traced back to the early days of the English Poor Law, and finds support in organic-mechanistic-biological constructs of society advanced by sociologists like Spencer and Radcliffe-Brown, and economists like Friedman, Hayek and the founders and followers of the Institute of Economic Affairs in London.

MODEL B The Industrial Achievement-Performance Model of Social Policy

This incorporates a significant role for social welfare institutions as adjuncts of the economy. It holds that social needs should be met on the basis of merit, work performance and productivity. It is derived from various economic and psychological theories concerned with incentives, effort and reward, and the formation of class and group loyalties. It has been described as the 'Handmaiden Model'.

MODEL C The Institutional Redistributive Model of Social Policy

This model sees social welfare as a major integrated institution in society, providing universalist services outside the market on the principle of need. It is in part based on theories about the multiple effects of social change and the economic system, and in part on the principle of social equality. It is basically a model incorporating systems of redistribution in command-over-resources-through-time.

These three models are, of course, only very broad approximations to the theories and ideas of economists, philosophers, political scientists and sociologists. Many variants could be developed of a more sophisticated kind. However, these

¹ Peacock, A., *The Welfare Society*, Liberal Publication Department, London, 1960, p. 11.

approximations do serve to indicate the major differences – the ends of the value spectrum – in the views held about the means and ends of social policy. All three models involve consideration of the work ethic and the institution of the family in modern society.

The three contrasting models of social policy represent different criteria for making choices. We analyse the implications of Model A in the next chapter and refer to it and the other models in a number of other chapters later in the book.