Class, Capital and Social Policy

Critical Texts in Social Work and the
Welfare State

General Editor: Peter Leonard

Published

Steve Bolger, Paul Corrigan, Jan Docking and Nick Frost:

TOWARDS SOCIALIST WELFARE WORK:

WORKING IN THE STATE

Paul Corrigan and Peter Leonard: SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

UNDER CAPITALISM: A MARXIST APPROACH

Norman Ginsburg: CLASS, CAPITAL AND SOCIAL POLICY

Ian Gough: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE WELFARE STATE

Forthcoming

Peter Alcock and Phil Harris: WELFARE WORK AND THE LAW

Christopher Jones: SOCIAL WORK, CAPITALISM AND

THE WORKING CLASS

Geoffrey Pearson: IDEOLOGICAL CRISIS IN SOCIAL WORK

Chris Phillipson: THE ELDERLY

Class, Capital and Social Policy

Norman Ginsburg

M

© Norman Ginsburg 1979

All rights reserved. No part of this publication
may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form
or by any means, without permission.

First edition 1979

Reprinted 1981

Published by

THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD

London and Basingstoke

Associated companies throughout the world

ISBN 978-0-333-21600-2 ISBN 978-1-349-16169-0 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-16169-0

Typeset by Santype International Ltd, Salisbury, Wilts

The paperback edition of this book is sold subject to the condition
that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold,
hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior
consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which
it is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Editor's Introduction</i>	ix
<i>Notes to the Editor's Introduction</i>	xv
1 Introduction: Class Power and the Welfare State	1
2 Some Basic Concepts and Assumptions	20
3 Social Security, Class Struggle and the Reproduction of Capital	46
4 Social Security and the Questions of Women and Bureaucratic Power	79
5 Private Housing, the State and the Working Class	108
6 Council Housing	138
<i>Notes and References</i>	169
<i>Index</i>	187

Acknowledgements

I should like to acknowledge the assistance of the innumerable people with whom I have discussed the questions covered in this book, notably colleagues and students at Warwick University, welfare activists in Coventry and elsewhere and members of various discussion groups within the Conference of Socialist Economists.

In particular I am grateful to Simon Clarke, Lena Dominelli, Simon Frith, Tim Godfrey, Ian Gough, Peter Leonard and Jane Taylor, who made painstaking comments on various drafts of the manuscript. I would also like to acknowledge the general support and encouragement which I have received from Veronica Beechey, Simon Clarke, Paul Corrigan, Simon Frith, Peter Leonard, Heather Macrae, Dave Smith and Jane Taylor. Finally I must thank Pat Ludgate and Lydia Thorpe for their assistance in typing sections of the final manuscript.

Coventry
November 1978

N. G.

Editor's Introduction

The welfare state in Britain is in a condition of profound crisis; this can no longer seriously be questioned. Although the precise nature of this crisis is subject to much debate, its effects are recognised everywhere, but especially among those working within the apparatus of the welfare state at central and local level, and those most dependent on certain welfare services – the poor, the deprived and the most exploited, including women, the black population and the unemployed.

EXPLANATION OF THE CRISIS

But although the material effects of the crisis on services are increasingly evident, its ideological and political repercussions are also becoming clearer and, to some at least, almost equally disturbing. Thus, at one level, resistance to welfare cuts is sometimes associated with political subversion and the debate moved from the substance of the cuts to the issue of seeking out those who are attempting to infiltrate the 'democratic processes'. At another level, the failure of crude models of individual pathology to explain continued poverty has led to the invention of an apparently more sophisticated response – the idea of 'transmitted deprivation'. As an explanation of the 'cycle of poverty', it performs an invaluable ideological function in directing attention towards those experiencing poverty and away from the broader structural questions which might be raised about the effects of fundamental features and contradictions of an advanced capitalist economy. At yet a further level, attacks on 'welfare scroungers' reflect explanations of the crisis which reveal a deeply reactionary ideological response which may eventually work its way

through into more overt political strategies.

Despite the impact of the powerful apparatus of the mass media and education which frequently support these and other self-justifying explanations of the crisis, those who work in welfare frequently experience a disturbing degree of cognitive dissonance between the dominant explanations and their knowledge of the material reality of their work. A realisation that the crisis in welfare reflects more fundamental crises also leads to increasing demands, especially among students in the social sciences, in social administration and in social work, that more structurally informed explanations should be developed. Within social work, for example, the crisis raises in an inescapable form the dilemma which faces practitioners in struggling with their roles as agents of the state. In assessing their clients and in delivering services, social workers are undertaking a profoundly ideological task on behalf of the established structures; at the same time they are often trying to help clients resist the most oppressive and discriminatory features of the welfare system. How are social workers to understand this conflict in their practice?

Those who have studied or lived through the social legislation of the 1960s and early 1970s are bound, as the crisis deepens, to ask themselves on what assumptions this legislation was based and whether it had any relevance to the most crucial problems involved in developing welfare within a specific kind of economy at a particular historical juncture. The slogans of that era – community care, participation, family-oriented services, prevention, consumer rights – pervaded the government reports, the legislation and much of the writing and discussion which took place in the fields of planning, housing, mental health, child care and personal social services generally. These slogans, and the policies and practices which were initiated to reflect them, based their ideological justification on the liberal democratic assertion that humane, universalist and non-stigmatising services could be developed within the existing structure of British capitalism. The essence of this assertion is captured in the following passage from the Seebohm Report, published in 1968:

we see our proposals not simply in terms of organisation but as embodying a wider conception of social service, directed to the well-being of the whole of the community and not only of social casualties, and seeing the community it serves as the basis of its authority, resources and effectiveness. Such a conception

spells, we hope, the death-knell of the Poor Law legacy and the socially divisive attitudes and practices which stemmed from it.¹

To read such a passage now provokes an acute awareness of how far the British welfare state has moved into a different situation in the intervening years, and how necessary it is to re-examine the historical antecedents, ideological underpinning and economic context of the present services in the welfare state.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

One main function of this series of 'Critical Texts in Social Work and the Welfare State' is to address itself to explanations of the crisis which relate to the immediate material reality experienced by state workers in the welfare field and to link this to the economic, political, ideological and historical context within which the crisis occurs. Some of the volumes in the series therefore focus primarily on *explanation*. Others also place emphasis on sketching the beginnings of alternative forms of *practice* which some workers within the welfare state might test out against the realities and possibilities of day-to-day activity. Prescriptions for practice, however tentative, are bound to be received with justifiable scepticism among those, such as students and practitioners in social work, who have a bitter experience of the gap between theory and practice revealed in most of the textbooks they have tried to use. A frequent complaint is that many of these books hardly reflect the desperate pressures of present-day practice – the lack of resources, the bureaucratic oppression, the despair and fatalism which often come from struggling against problems which are totally unresponsive to social-work intervention.

In general terms the series approaches the theory–practice relationship from two starting-points. One starting-point is to reflect systematically on practice and develop theory from it. Gramsci² writes that 'one can construct, on a specific practice, a theory which, by coinciding and identifying itself with the decisive elements of the practice, can accelerate the historical process that is going on, rendering practice more homogeneous, more coherent, more efficient in all its elements'. The task here is to select those areas of practice within the welfare state which seem most promising as points of departure in developing critical, 'progressive' strategies and which deserve theoretical attention.

Alternatively, Gramsci continues, 'given a certain theoretical position, one can organize the practical element which is essential for the theory to be realized'. In this second process, ideas actually become a material force. Here, the series draws primarily, but not exclusively, on Marxist theory as a basis for its efforts to contribute to the development of practice.

The emphasis on practice in this series stems in part from the importance which is attached to the difficult struggle involved in developing knowledge and in the need to change reality in order to understand it. Mao Tse-tung, in a seminal paper, writes:

If you want to know a certain thing or class of things directly, you must personally participate in the practical struggle to change reality, to change that thing or class of things, for only thus can you come into contact with them as phenomena.³

Because the series takes a stand severely critical of dominant forms of theory and practice in the welfare field, it would be valuable to sketch in the ideological context within which it attempts to make an intervention. It is not possible, however, to give a full account of this context – we shall instead simply indicate one feature of the surrounding landscape: prevailing accounts of social policy development.

ACCOUNTS OF SOCIAL POLICY

We have argued that students and practitioners in the social welfare field have found that the dominant accounts of the crisis in the welfare state are unsatisfactory in that they neither relate to experienced reality nor link to the wider structural features of society and the economy. This is especially true of the *ad hoc*, low-level explanations of social problems and social policy which have dominated much of the work undertaken in the study of social administration in Britain. Even accounts of social policy development which operate at a more theoretically sophisticated level nevertheless are based upon consensual and pluralist theories of the state and society which are ill equipped to handle, for example, the phenomenon of increased class conflict or the relationship between community problems and international capital.

At the peak of Fabian optimism in social policy, two simultaneous developments took place which have since been seen, in their different ways, to fail to live up to the expectation which surrounded them at their birth. They will serve as examples of both the limitations and the ideological functions of dominant forms of explanation in the social policy field. They are the reorganisation of local authority welfare services with the setting up of a unified social service department, and the establishment of government-sponsored Community Development Projects.

In the case of the new social service departments, the unification which was so welcomed by social workers and social administrators at the time of the Seeböhm Report in 1968 was implemented in legislation in 1970. Since that time the promise of a destigmatised, community-based and easily accessible service has not materialised. Explanations of the reason for this failure include lack of resources, bureaucratic growth, weak professionalism, and local political and professional resistance to community participation. In addition, some would argue that the transformation of social workers into agents of outdoor relief to the poor has struck a nearly fatal blow at the more traditional, humane, therapeutic roles of social workers.⁴ Whilst all of these points have a certain validity they are usually made without reference to their relationship to more fundamental questions; they remain at a symptomatic level. Dominant accounts of social policy fail to use a class analysis which would highlight the role of personal social services in deflecting attention from structural failures by focusing on individual or community 'pathology'. They fail to see how professionalism can, in effect, be allied with bureaucracy against the interests of the welfare client. They see bureaucracy as a dysfunction of organisation rather than a form of organisation which merely reflects the dominant political and economic imperative to control the welfare system in the interests of the state.

In the case of the Community Development Projects, the picture which emerges is one where the unintended consequences of government policy at the ideological and political level lead to a retreat to safer ground. The Community Development Projects were begun in 1970 on the basis of a conception of community pathology central to the ideology of the consensual and pluralist policy-makers in government. As in the case of the Educational Priority Areas, special resources and knowledge were to be pumped into certain selected

communities which exhibited a high level of pathology in terms of delinquency, deprivation, mental disorder and other associated indices. The experiment was ostensibly designed to show whether more resources, better co-ordination and more effective connection to community needs could contribute to ameliorating the extent and depth of individual and community problems in the selected areas. The end result, in most cases, was that the workers came to reject the assumptions upon which projects were established and to see individual and community problems as inextricably related to the class structure and the exploitive nature of the capitalist economy. Such alternative explanations, however, are ill fitted to take their place beside those which emphasise community apathy and the need for more effective corporate management in local government. The consequence, however, is that the monopoly of consensual and pluralist explanations of social policy has at least been broken in the fields of community action, housing and planning.

CLASS, CAPITAL AND SOCIAL POLICY

The way in which consensual and pluralist explanations of social policy have been challenged can be seen in this present volume in the series. In it, Norman Ginsburg develops an impressive analysis of the relationship between social policy developments and the imperatives of the capitalist economy. Whilst a previous volume in the series, Ian Gough's *The Political Economy of the Welfare State*,⁵ provided an overview of the state's response to the functional needs of capital and to the pressures of class struggle, Ginsburg deepens the historical and political analysis by selecting two areas of welfare: social security and housing.

The most important feature of this book lies in its detailed account of the way in which the administration of particular sectors of the welfare state can be shown to reflect, in precise ways, the balance of class forces within the society as a whole. In particular, Ginsburg is able to produce compelling evidence that whilst organised working-class power has definitely influenced the administration of some aspects of welfare at the local level, this has been continuously counteracted by the growth of state bureaucracy. Concentration on the issue of bureaucratic power is most significant here, and the book shows how a Marxist analysis of this phenomenon can cut through what

Alvin Gouldner referred to as the 'metaphysical pathos' of many writers on bureaucracy. Ginsburg shows us that the characteristics of modern state bureaucracy, scientific management, professionalisation, corporate planning and the rest, can only be understood as *specifically* related to the demands of and crisis in capitalist development. Far from being 'inevitably' the result of organisational growth *per se*, bureaucratic development has to be located precisely within specific historical processes reflecting the stage which the capitalist mode of production has reached.

This book is quite clearly, then, a most important contribution to that development of a political economy of welfare to which this series is committed. But it not only raises theoretical questions of great significance but also provides an analysis of value to those who are working within the state apparatus itself. Ginsburg's work on welfare administration reveals itself as especially powerful when he discusses the position of women in relation to social security. The oppression of women is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the exercise of state power, economically and ideologically, in the field of social security. The penetration of Ginsburg's analysis at this point will do much to clarify the nature of the struggles to be engaged in here.

PETER LEONARD

NOTES TO THE EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

1. *Report of the Committee on Local Authority and Allied Personal Social Services*, Cmnd. 3703 (1968) para. 474.
2. A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1971) p. 365.
3. Mao Tse-tung, 'On Practice', *Selected Readings* (Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1971) p. 71.
4. See B. Jordan, *Poor Parents* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974).
5. I. Gough, *The Political Economy of the Welfare State* (Macmillan, 1979).