



## The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 2  
Issue 1 *Fall*

Article 3

October 1974

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### Recommended Citation

Goroff, Norman N. (1974) "Social Welfare as Coercive Social Control," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol2/iss1/3>

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## SOCIAL WELFARE AS COERCIVE SOCIAL CONTROL

by

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The key concepts which require some basic definitions in the title are "social welfare, social control and coercion". For the purposes of this paper, social welfare is defined as those public programs designed to provide an individual who is in financial need with the resources (financial and/or in kind) to exist in our society. Social control refers to the entire range of actions and pressures which are designed to lead the individual to function within society without threatening to disrupt the social order. These actions and pressures are embodied in sanctions for enforcing group norms as well as in formal sanctions formulated through laws or administrative rulings. The sanctions are physical, material and/or symbolic [Etzioni, 1964]. Coercive refers to situations in which individuals either have no viable options available to them in making decisions or are required to conform to a specific classification or perform specific actions or desist from specific actions in order to obtain that which is an entitlement to resources and/or services. Kallen contends that coercion obtains whenever the action or thought of one individual or group is compelled or restrained by another through some form of physical or moral compulsion [Kallen, 1933]. There can be little doubt that the action of welfare recipients are frequently compelled or restrained through physical means, i.e., the level of assistance; and moral compulsions, i.e., the myths which define them as inferior.

In our abstract society [Zijerveld, 1970] social welfare is not the humanitarian benevolent expression that "we are our brother's keepers". It is an integral part of the coercive social control system developed to maintain the status quo in which the dominant classes of the society try to control those they define as potential, if not actual, disruption of the stability of the community. The stability of the community incorporates maintenance of the present inequitable power arrangements, the inequitable distributions of economic resources and inequitable life chances. Basic to the maintenance of the "stable social order" is the availability to the ruling class of force, the mechanisms of suppression and repression and control of those ruling ideas designed to justify the existing social arrangements. These ruling ideas are the myths and legends which frequently are referred to as knowledge designed to legitimate the social arrangements [Marx, 1961].

One of the most insidious myths is that there are "worthy" and "unworthy" poor. This classificatory system has a long history dating back to the English Poor laws. A sociology of knowledge approach to this myth in America

clearly demonstrates how the idea is related to attempts by the wealthy and their apologists to diffuse the tensions and conflicts arising from the imbalance of wealth between the elite and the poor.

Spearheading the drive to legitimate the inequitable distribution of wealth, by defining it as the will of God, were such organizations as the American Bible Society, the American Sunday School Union and the American Tract Society [Griffin, 1957]. Strongly influenced by Puritanism and Federalism, the people involved in these organizations believed firmly that "a minority of special attainments should supervise the majority" (Ibid pp.28). Bringing religion to the common people was important because "Christianity would help bridge over the dangerous chasm between the rich and the poor; so that instead of mobs and outbreaks destroying life and property, there will be between these two great classes a reciprocation of confidence and good feeling, as there will be also a ready harmonious interest in their immortal brotherhood".(Ibid pg. 34)

In 1847 Emory Washburn verbalized the basis of what was to become the criteria of the worthy and unworthy poor. He did this in the course of outlining what the American Bible Society needed to do to help preserve "good order in society". It was critical that it be shown "that rich Christians had a right to their wealth" and therefore there "would be no demand from the poor and debtor classes for a share of that wealth. Christians would certainly not rise against Christians; the poor would not desire the rich man's gold". The worthy poor were those who did not desire the "rich man's gold because they agreed that" rich Christians had a right to their wealth (Ibid pg. 37).

Three years later, the Reverend Gardiner Spring, preaching on behalf of the American Tract Society, sounded the Social Darwinian theory "that those who became rich by their own toil and economy had superior intellectual faculties and strength of character". Both they and those who inherited wealth had influence in the community because they deserved to have influence. They were men of "mind", "forethought", "great practical wisdom", "energy", "integrity" and "moral virtue" (Ibid pg. 37).

Thus we see how the concept of the "worthy rich" and its corollary the "worthy poor" and the "unworthy poor" became integral components of the rationale for the existence of the inequitable distribution of our economic resources. The superiority of the wealth, as outlined by Spring, implied the inferiority of the poor. The process of objectifying a human being by categorizing the individual as worthy or unworthy is symptomatic of our inhumane, alienated, abstract society. The unworthy poor challenged the right of the rich to their wealth.

Two recent studies illustrate the prevalence of the concept of 'worthy' and 'unworthy' poor. A study of the County Commissioners' view of poverty revealed that 68% believed that people were unemployed because they did not want to work. Only 22% believed that there were not enough jobs to go around. 82% believed that children from welfare families stay on welfare as adults because they inherited inferior talents from their parents [Ramsey and Braito, 1973]. The second study dealt with citizen attitudes towards welfare. The researchers note "The data consistently indicated that the extent to which a

respondent approved or disapproved of providing a welfare service depended on whether he considered the recipient worthy"... Finally, respondents considered provision of welfare assistance as a right, but only if the recipient is worthy [Ogren, 1973].

To be poor is to be inferior. To be inferior is a stigma. Matza notes, "attempts to clearly distinguish the disreputable poor from others who superficially resemble them are systematically frustrated because a certain element of disrepute attaches, even to the poor who are deemed deserving and morally above reproach. Poverty itself is slightly disreputable, being on welfare somewhat more so. The inner circle - the so-called hard core is not alone in living in disrepute. That feature is shared to some extent by all who are poor or on welfare. To the minor shortcoming of being poor is added the more substantial vice of requiring assistance and finally the major stigma of immorality' [1971].

To provide a complete catalogue of the coercive practices heaped upon the poor on welfare would require more space than is available in this paper. The Supreme Court in King v Smith decision (B92US309, 88 S Ct. 2120, 20L Ed. 2nd 1118, 1968) noted that "each State is free to set its own standards of need and to determine the level of benefits by the amount of funds it devotes to the program... that States participating in AFDC were free to impose eligibility requirements relating to the 'moral character' of the applicants." We would need to examine the requirements in all States and their practices to provide an exhaustive catalogue of coercive practices. We will cite a few examples as illustrations.

1. Clients on welfare are obligated, under penalty of not receiving assistance, to give up rights which members of nearly all status groups in society are entitled to, i.e., the right to privacy, the right to conceal parts of his role behavior from public observation (Coser, 1965). The welfare client must allow the welfare worker to visit the home. In *Wyman v James*, (400 U.S. 309, 1971), the Supreme Court ruled that although Mrs. James met the eligibility requirements, the Department of Welfare could legally close payments to the family because Mrs. James refused to make an appointment with the caseworker to visit Mrs. James' home.
2. The Welfare Department can tell a recipient how and where to live. In *Wilkie v O'Connor*, the Courts ruled that a welfare department may impose 'somewhat artificial' social conventions upon welfare recipients. Mr. Wilkie, the recipient, claimed he had a "right to sleep under an old barn, in a vest of rags to which he had to crawl upon his knees." He argued that he had a right to live as he pleased. The Court ruled against him noting "One would admire his independence, but he has no right to defy the standards and conventions of civilized society while being supported at public expense."
3. For those who have not had the opportunity to examine the Work

Incentive Program, the program appears to be extremely beneficial. Who could find fault with a program that provides incentives for work for welfare recipients? However, the program, in reality, provides neither work nor incentives to any degree. Rather a very high measure of coercion is inherent in the Work Incentive Program. The rules and regulations (Federal Register, 1972) require "Every individual, as a condition of eligibility for aid under the State plan, shall register for manpower services, training and employment, as provided by regulations of the Secretary of Labor, unless the individual "is exempt because he or she is in one of six status exemptions." The consequences of not complying is stated as follows: "The needs of any individual who fails to register as required under paragraph (a) of this section shall not be taken into account in determining the need of the family and the amount of assistance, and assistance will be furnished to eligible members of the family."

4. "When money is allocated to members of any other status group in society, they have the freedom to dispose of it in almost any way they see fit." (Coser, 1965) The Welfare recipient does not have this freedom. They must account for their expenses and others decide whether the money is spent wisely or foolishly. The Supreme Court in Wyman v James case ruled "The State, working through its qualified welfare agency, has appropriate and paramount interest and concern in seeking and assuring that the intended and proper objects of that tax-produced assistance are the ones who benefit from the aid it dispenses."
5. In California, if a mother receiving aid to dependent children uses any portion of the grant to support a man 'assuming the role of the spouse' to whom she is not married, she may be charged with the crime of misusing the grant. (Reich, 1965) There are no such coercive controls on most other status groups related to how they can dispose of their funds.
6. In public housing, the Housing Authority can terminate a tenancy if they deem that the conduct of any member of the family imperils the morals of his neighbors or the community or violates accepted social norms. Who defines what imperils morals of the neighbors or the community and what are the accepted social norms that are violated? The ambiguity of these regulations allows for considerable coercion to occur in controlling the poor.
7. The utilization of sterilization as a means of coercion with welfare clients came to light in 1973. In the event that one may consider this an aberration, it is important to note that at least fourteen State Legislatures are considering legislation designed to coerce women receiving welfare to submit to sterilization. These attempts

to formally control "illegitimacy" and adding to the AFDC roles are probably unconstitutional under the equal protection section of the constitution. Nevertheless, since 1964 more than 1,000 women, most black and all poor, have been forced to submit to involuntary sterilization. (Note: 1973)

8. Welfare departments have attempted to coerce clients into particular modes of sexual behavior in the name of establishing "moral characteristics of eligibility." In the District of Columbia, the courts were faced with the question of whether the mother of nine must be denied aid because her estranged legitimate husband visited her too frequently. Mothers who are receiving assistance and give birth to an out-of-wedlock child have been charged that the latest pregnancy constitutes "neglect" of the previous children. Reich notes that "in no other area of entitlement such as social security or veterans benefits are there similar pressures to impose a moral code." (1965)
9. The most compelling restraint on the welfare clients stems from the inadequate level of assistance that is provided by the various States. The level of assistance compels them to live in particular places, to eat inexpensive carbohydrates, to dress in particular ways, and, generally, to bear the stigma of poverty in public. In order to receive any assistance, the recipient must be completely impoverished without any financial resources or property. This is due to the view that public assistance is charity. The Supreme Court in the Wyman v James case ruled "One who dispenses purely private charity naturally has an interest in and expects to know how his charitable funds are utilized and put to work. The public, when it is the provider, rightly expects the same." The view of welfare as charity and not a right, a 'grant or gratuity' not a debt permits the Welfare Departments to establish many regulations which deny the recipients rights and privileges enjoyed by other status groups in society.

These illustrations indicate the wide range of life experiences in which the poor on welfare are subjected to coercive pressures. An area which creates considerable conflict for the ethical social worker involves the relationship with the client.

The Supreme Court, in the Wyman v James case notes:

"The home visit, it is true, is not required by federal statute or regulation. But it has been noted that the visit is "the heart of welfare administration"; that it affords a "personal, rehabilitative orientation" unlike that of most federal programs; and that the "more pronounced service orientation" effected by Congress with the 1956 Amendments to the Social Security Act "gave redoubled importance to the practice of home visiting..."

The home visit is an established routine in States besides New York."

This was one of the points made by the Court in ruling against Mrs. James. The process of labeling the program rehabilitative serves as a shield against judicial scrutiny. The assumption that the goals of the program and the goals of the client are identical and that the caseworker is always acting in the client's best interests allows the worker to meddle in the most personal affairs of his client. This situation is insidious and permits abuses which are not scrutinized by the judicial. The recipient is afforded no legal rights against the caseworker's intrusions.

Even in situations in which the caseworker is a highly skilled, ethical, professional social worker truly concerned with helping the client, the worker's function as investigator is always potentially operative. "Whatever the initial intent, if in the course of a "routine home visit" the worker comes upon evidence of ineligibility or fraud, however, inadvertently, the worker is legally required to report it." (1970) In effect, all casework contacts have the characteristics of "searches" in that the worker possesses executive power or discretion and commits official incursions into the privacy of an individual.

The potential for coercion inherent in such a situation is great. In view of the fact that most recipients of welfare are powerless and frequently wholly ignorant of their legal rights under the program, the probability of coercive practices occurring that are never brought to light is high. There is a long history of caseworkers meddling in peoples' lives dating back to the "friendly" visitors of the early charity movement. The early charity movement was based on an extension of the myths about the inferiority of the poor. Josephine Shaw Lowell, founder of the New York Society held firmly to the conviction that "the usual cause of poverty is to be found in some deficiency - moral, mental, or physical - in the person who suffers." (Bremner, 1956) The individualistic interpretation of poverty assumed that all was well with the social arrangements. This period was the highpoint of social darwinism, the remnants of which are very much part of our present day mythology (Hofstader, 1955).

The individual social worker who has a great deal of difficulty reconciling the helping role with the investigative function in public welfare is defined as having problems with "authority". It is frequently assumed that the worker has failed to work through his or her feelings about authority figures in his own life and thus has problems dealing with the authority vested in his or her role as a social worker. (Towle, 1950) This psychological explanation denies the basic contradictions between the requirements of a helping person and an investigator. Rather than having to deal with the social structural problem, inherent in the contradictory demands, the psychological explanations place the problem within the head of the worker. The social worker is also frequently compelled to act because of threats of loss of job. It is ironic that the social worker who typifies the hero in fiction is frequently the one who breaks the rules on behalf of the client.

It seems that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for professional social workers to be part of a coercive social system without being coerced themselves. Yet as Dr. Weiss, professor emeritus of Philosophy at Yale, said, "Man is the only creature who can say and believe almost anything. Tables

and porpoises can't and God Himself won't." (1969)

The myth used by social workers to rationalize their participation in a coercive system is the belief that they are providing rehabilitative services. Silverman (1974), however, sees "relief and rehabilitation as being conflicting goals within the American social welfare system."

Social workers are becoming increasingly aware of the social control function they perform. Weisman and Chwast (1960) contend, "Social work treatment, whether casework or group work, is one of society's alternative ways of exercising social control of persons who manifest deviant behavior, although such services are not usually regarded in this way." Cowger and Atherton (1974) note "The real issue, then, is not whether social workers engage in social control. Clearly, they are engaged in it, as the term is defined sociologically. The questions are to decide what values to support and how to support them."

The concluding point in this paper is that social workers who are part of the current social welfare system do not have the real choice as to what values to support. The welfare system is designed to coerce the poor to maintain their proper place in society. The social worker is frequently required by law to act in ways that will keep the recipients in their place. Only a major restructuring of the public welfare system based on the principle that all human beings are entitled to an adequate level of financial assistance as a right and a societal debt will permit the social workers in the system a choice as to what values to support. Until that occurs, we are only creating a new set of myths which we want to believe. Welfare recipients can't and God Himself won't.

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