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The Welfare State: A Fundamental Dimension of Modern Government

Abstract

What, in fact, *is* the Welfare State? This article traces the emergence of the welfare state as a specific mode of government, describing its distinctive rationality as well as its characteristic forms, functions and effects. It identifies five sectors of welfare governance, the relations between them, and the various forms these take in different times and places. It discusses the contradictory commitments that shape welfare state practices and the problems associated with these practices and contradictions. It situates welfare state government within a long-term account of the changing relations between the social and the economic spheres. And it argues that the welfare state ought to be understood as a "normal social fact"—an essential (though constantly contested) part of the social and economic organization of modern capitalist societies.

Keywords: Welfare state; Governmentality; Capitalism; Neo-Liberalism; Moral economy; Normal social fact.

WHAT, IN FACT, *IS* THE WELFARE STATE? This long-standing question has once again become timely and important. Political commentators on both left and right talk as if the welfare state were an historic moment in post-war Britain or New Deal America—a bygone era that has been overtaken by events, discredited in theory, and largely dismantled in practice—rather than a vital aspect of modern government.[1] And when welfare state programs are discussed, as they were in recent US debates over healthcare reform, "entitlement" programs, and minimum wage legislation, the debates—with their talk of "socialism" and "class war"—reveal a remarkable depth of misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Even in Britain, where the welfare state was once regarded as a defining feature of national character and cultural achievement, there is a growing

[1] See Yergin and Stanislaw (2002) for an early summary of this now conventional wisdom.

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acceptance—after decades of free-market policies, de-regulation and privatization—that the welfare state has become, a thing of the past.[2] Nor are these confusions confined to public discussion. In academic discourse too, there is tendency to talk of "the death of the social" and a shift from "social state" to "penal state" as if the welfare state had been altogether displaced by some neo-liberal alternative.[3]

In these circumstances, it falls to social science to clarify the actual nature of the phenomenon in question and to debunk the myths and misinformation that too often pass for fact. This essay aims to contribute to that task by providing some basic conceptual clarifications and analytic observations and, in the process, to recover a key concept in historical sociology. Its aim is to offer an account of the welfare state that characterizes it not as a historical project or a partisan politics, but as a fundamental aspect of modern government.

In what follows, I will trace the emergence of the welfare state as a specific mode of government, describe its distinctive institutional forms, and explain its basic functions and effects. I will argue that talk about the "end of the welfare state" is ideological chatter and is not to be taken seriously. Far from having ended, the welfare state is, and will for the foreseeable future remain, a necessary dimension of contemporary capitalist democracy. It is, as I will argue, a "normal social fact" that forms an essential (though constantly contested) part of the social and economic organization of advanced industrial societies. A more realistic understanding of the welfare state and its place in capitalist democracy should serve to focus policy debate on the issues that matter—which is to say, on the structure, settings, and impacts of specific welfare state practices.

Before setting out that analysis, let me clarify some basic premises. I will argue that the concept of "the welfare state" refers to a specific mode of governing that deploys a particular set of social and economic techniques and specific forms of administration. Borrowing from Michel Foucault (1991; 2007), I conceive of the welfare state as a distinctive "governmentality"—that is to say, a mentality or "rationality" of governing that combines specific conceptions of the problems

[2] *The Guardian* newspaper recently ran an article entitled: " The Welfare State, 1942-2013: An Obituary" (Chakrabortty 2013). On the demise of Britain's National Health Service, see Meek (2011). On public misunderstandings of the welfare state in the US, see Marmor (1990) and in the UK, see McKibben (2013).

[3] See Rose (1996); Wacquant (2009). Talk of the triumph of neoliberalism has been pervasive in the sociological and political literature for decades now: see Harvey (1995).

and processes to be addressed; specific ways of thinking and acting upon these practical objects; and specific forms of knowledge and technology with which to do so. As I will show, this welfare state governmentality emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, was instituted across the developed world in the aftermath of World War II, and has since become a normal feature of capitalist democracy.

When I talk of the welfare state I will be referring to a form of social and economic administration rather than to a specific brand of politics or ideology. Welfare state government is often viewed as being intimately linked with a particular politics—above all with social democracy (Judt 2010)—but it is important to regard these governmental and political dimensions as analytically distinct. Welfare state governmentality has co-existed with a variety of political tendencies, having been deployed by conservative regimes (e.g. Bismarck's Prussia), fascist governments (e.g. Nazi Germany and Vichy France) and by quasi-authoritarian states (e.g. Singapore and Saudi Arabia) as well as by liberal, social democratic and Christian democratic ones. And despite a general retrenchment of poverty-relief programs, the abandonment of full employment, and a shift away from Keynesian economic management, three decades of New Right politics in the US, the UK and elsewhere have left the core infrastructure and institutions of welfare state government firmly in place (Pierson 1994; Barr 2001).

Finally, my analysis will mostly refer to "the welfare state" rather than to specific welfare state programs or national welfare regimes. I will talk about the welfare state *as a whole* and *as such* rather than discuss individual programs or national variants. I realize, of course, that the welfare state operates by means of a complex amalgam of programs such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, public assistance and so on (to mention just the major US programs). And I am well aware that policy debate is always and necessarily about the specific character of such programs and that conflict over these issues forms the core of domestic politics. I also realize that *welfare state regimes* take several distinct and divergent forms: that "social democratic" regimes (such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark), and "corporatist, Christian Democratic" regimes (such as Germany, Italy, France and Austria), are different in important respects from each other and from the "liberal, market-oriented" regimes of the US and (increasingly) the UK

(Castles *et al.*, 2010).[4] Indeed, a large part of the social science literature on the welfare state is given over to classifying welfare state regimes and their varying characteristics (Esping-Andersen 1990; Bonoli 1997; Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser 2011). But my concern here is not with program description or international comparison. Instead I aim to address some important prior questions about the fundamental character of this historically-emergent social fact.[5]

In what follows I define the welfare state as a distinctive form of governmentality: a specific mode of constituting the economy, assuring social security, and guaranteeing social provision. I then proceed to situate the welfare state historically by conceptualizing it as a distinctively modern form in which the social and economic domains are articulated.[6] Drawing on Karl Polanyi (1944), I locate this specific articulation of the social and the economic within a longer-term history of the intertwining of economic action and social protection. Finally, I develop the claim that the welfare state has become a fundamental institutional dimension of modern capitalist societies; so fundamental in fact that it can properly be described as a "normal social fact" in the sociological sense that Emile Durkheim (2013) gave to that term.

This last claim is based on empirical evidence about the universality of welfare state arrangements in advanced industrialized nations and on a conceptual argument demonstrating that the welfare state is an integral, functionally necessary, dimension of such societies. In making this argument, I draw upon recent work by

[4] *Social democratic* welfare states exhibit high levels of de-commodification; generous, universalist benefits; strong cross-class solidarity; state rather than private provision; and a commitment to equality. *Conservative* welfare states provide moderate levels of de-commodification; a stress on preserving occupational status stratification; a commitment to subsidiarity principles; and a concern to preserve traditional family structures. *Liberal* welfare states are characterized by low levels of de-commodification, low-level benefits; a preference for private forms of social provision; and a concern to reinforce rather than replace markets. See Esping-Andersen (1990; 1999).

[5] Addressing the welfare state at this level of generality might be viewed as "counter-ideological". Opinion polls in the US regularly show low support for "the welfare state" co-existing with strong support for most of the specific programs of which it is composed (Skocpol and Williamson 2013). Exactly the opposite is the case in respect of "the free market" which is generally regarded very positively, despite the fact that many of its specific consequences are viewed as detrimental and sometimes disastrous (Harcourt 2011). One explanation of that paradox may be that while there is no end of rhapsodizing by its proponents about the "free market", social policy experts typically refrain from totalizing generalizations about the welfare state.

[6] Besides the capitalist welfare state, state socialism is the other important modern form in which the economic and the social are articulated. In nations such as East Germany (GDR), Hungary and Yugoslavia, between 1949 and 1990, state ownership of the means of production was combined with a welfare state that guaranteed full employment, provided wide-ranging state services, and heavily subsidized basic goods such as food and housing.

Wolfgang Streeck (2011; 2012) that characterizes the relation between the capitalist economy and the state's social protections as *combined* and *contradictory*. I go on to argue that in this contradictory compromise-formation, the welfare state necessarily occupies a subordinate position—a structural subordination that has major consequences for the welfare state's functioning, for its ability to adapt to social and economic change, and for its long-term stability.

The "welfare state" as misnomer

The welfare state's name is itself a source of difficulty in understanding the reality to which it points. The phrase "welfare state" emerged from, and remains embedded in, the political histories of certain nations and certain periods, above all Britain and Sweden in the post-war era. As a result, it functions not just as an analytical term but also as an ideological one: the identification of welfare state government with the politics of social democracy being a case in point (Judt 2010). But even beyond this—at the level of denotation rather than connotation—talk of a "welfare state" can easily mislead. First of all, what we call the welfare state is not primarily about "welfare" and certainly not primarily about welfare for the poor.[7] It is about social insurance, social rights, social provision, and the social regulation of economic action, the chief beneficiaries of which are not the poor but rather the middle classes and those in employment as well as employers and corporations (Barr 2001; Le Grand 1982).

Nor is the welfare state necessarily about the state or state institutions. It is true that welfare state programs are legislated and funded by government since they depend, for the most part, on taxation and legal compulsion. But the services and benefits these programs involve need not necessarily be produced, administered, or delivered by state officials. In many European nations—Germany, France and Italy, for example—the tasks of administering social insurance and delivering benefit payments are devolved to religious and voluntary associations. In Canada, healthcare is privately provided but medical providers are paid by a government insurance fund. And in the US, a great deal of tax-funded and government-subsidized welfare

[7] In the US, and increasingly in the UK, the terms "welfare" and "welfare state" are used to refer to poverty relief programs; above all to means-tested transfer payments targeting single mothers and destitute individuals (Gilens 1999).

is distributed in and through private corporations as part of the employment contract (Castles *et al*. 2010; Barr 1992; Hacker 2002).

Nor is the "welfare state" an appropriate way to describe the state as a whole, as if the whole of central and local government were taken up with the task of welfare provision. No modern state—and here I include post-war Britain and Sweden—"is" a welfare state any more than it is a "neo-liberal state", a "carceral state", or a "security state".[8] Properly used, the concept of the welfare state only ever refers to a specific dimension of governmental activity—one part of a much larger complex that carries out many other functions and forms of expenditure. On the other hand, there is no state in the industrialized world that *lacks* a developed welfare state apparatus or which does not devote a significant fraction of its budget to social expenditures.[9] So although welfare state sectors take a variety of forms, and some are more extensive or resource-intensive than others, the existence of such a sector is a feature of all developed industrial nations, the US very much included.

The welfare state's name has been problematic from the start. It is well known that the phrase first entered English usage in 1941 when the Archbishop of York, William Temple, contrasted Britain, which he termed a "welfare state", to Nazi Germany, which he described as a "power state".[10] In using the phrase in this way, the Archbishop was seeking to give a positive connotation to a German term—*Wohlfartsstaat*—that had originally conveyed a negative meaning, having been used by Weimar conservatives to criticize the social policies of their opponents.[11] And while Temple's welfare state conception evoked a state that was democratic, consensual and law-governed—as opposed to totalitarian—in the post-war years the phrase came to refer to a state, above all the British state, that provided social services and economic security.

What is less widely known, however, is that when the phrase first entered common usage in the 1950s and 1960s, it was least popular

[8] On the "neo-liberal state", see Plant (2010); on the "carceral state", Simon (2007); and on the "security state", Priest and Arkin (2011).

[9] "[P]ublic spending on the welfare state in all OECD countries is at least 12.1% of GDP, and public medical spending is at least 40% of total medical spending", Barr (1992: 758).

[10] Temple was borrowing from the Oxford classicist and international relations scholar, Alfred Zimmern, who first set out that contrast in a lecture in 1934. See Edgerton (2005: 59-60).

[11] Chancellor Franz van Papen stated in 1932 that the Weimar Republic's "welfare state" had "sapped the moral fiber of the nation" (Hong 1998: 208). Hong notes that the term "Wohlfahrtsstaat" had been in use since at least the 1920s. Social democratic supporters of social insurance and social welfare policies rejected "the mean-spirited definition of the state as a welfare institution" and argued for "the idea that the state should be an organization for mutual aid" (quoted at 208).

with the people most closely associated with the institutions it supposedly described. William Beveridge, who is generally regarded as the father of the British welfare state, heartily disliked the term. He objected that the welfare state phrase implied a "something for nothing", "Santa Claus state" that was quite at odds with his stress on the importance of worker contributions, voluntary effort, and personal responsibility. As Beveridge insisted in his *Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services* of 1942, "the citizen should not be taught to regard the state as the dispenser of gifts for which no one needs to pay". The LSE sociologist T.H. Marshall—the theorist of the welfare state and who gave us our modern conceptions of "social rights" and "social citizenship"—also distanced himself from the term. In his celebrated lecture on *Citizenship and Social Class* Marshall never once used the phrase and he said in 1953 that "the welfare state is a term for which I have developed a very strong dislike".[12] And Richard Titmuss, the LSE Professor of Social Policy who became the leading academic spokesman for Britain's post-war social policies, regarded "the welfare state" as a hostile phrase, used by social policy's enemies rather than its friends. On those occasions when he acceded to conventional usage, Titmuss took care to place the phrase in inverted commas, and he repeatedly denounced what he called the "myth of the welfare state for the working classes".[13]

What Beveridge, Marshall and Titmuss each understood was that the welfare state phrase carried all the wrong connotations. It evoked the dubious values of "something for nothing" and suggested an overbearing, bureaucratic state that—according to contemporary opponents such as F.H. Hayek, Herbert Hoover, and Winston Churchill—might one day become totalitarian.[14] That the name eventually became established, despite these objections, and has come to be used by supporter and opponent alike, means that these associations remain just beneath the surface of our discourse. Were the phrase not so deeply embedded, it might be possible to

[12] "Social Selection in the Welfare State", The Galton Lecture, delivered at a meeting of the Eugenics Society, 18 February 1953, reprinted in Marshall (1963).

[13] Titmuss's 1958 book, *Essays in "The Welfare State"* accedes to the by-then established usage, but insists on placing quotation marks around the term. And ten years later he wrote that "I am no more enamoured today of the indefinable abstraction 'The Welfare State' than I was twenty years ago when [...] the term acquired an international as well as a national popularity" (Titmuss 1968: 124).

[14] Churchill's infamous 1945 speech, where he suggested that Labour's welfare state policies would require "Gestapo" methods of enforcement is discussed in Toye (2010). Hayek (1944). Former US President Herbert Hoover was quoted in Life Magazine (22 August 1949) as saying that "the slogan of a 'welfare state' has emerged as a disguise for the totalitarian state".

drop it from social scientific usage and replace it with a more neutral, descriptive term such as "the social state"—but as a practical matter that now seems unlikely. In these circumstances, the work of theoretical definition and conceptual clarification becomes more especially important.

Defining the welfare state

The essential starting point for any attempt to specify this phenomenon is to realize that we cannot define the welfare state in terms of its supposed *aims* or *ends*—whether the promotion of welfare or the provision of security. As Max Weber (1948: 77) insisted when he set out his famous definition of the modern state:

> Sociologically, the state cannot be defined in terms of its ends. There is scarcely any task that some political association has not taken in hand, and there is no task that one could say has always been exclusive and peculiar to…[the state]. Ultimately, one can define the modern state sociologically only in terms of the means peculiar to it…

I would argue that Weber's argument applies, *a fortiori,* to the welfare state. Every government, whether despotic or democratic, ancient or modern, claims to enhance the welfare of its nation, serve the commonweal, and provide its subjects with security and protection. So if we were to define states by their professed aims then all states would be "welfare states".[15] On the other hand, there are countless non-state organizations (churches, charities, guilds, mutual aid associations, trade unions, and so on) that pursue "welfarist" ends but which ought not to be included in the definition. Following Weber then, we can define the welfare state not by reference to a set of ends (whether poverty relief, risk-management, security, full employment, or whatever) but instead by reference to "*the means peculiar to it*"—i.e. to the distinctive methods and instruments that it deploys to pursue its multiple and various ends. The welfare state, like the state more generally, is not some kind of historically embedded idea or teleological essence that was always in the process of emerging. Nor is it an essentially unified conceptual whole. It is, instead, the name we give to a distinctive set of practices that emerged at a specific historical moment.

[15] *Cf.* Waltzer (1984) who writes that "All states are protector states". See also Skinner (2010).

In tracing these practices, we can usefully borrow from Michel Foucault, whose analytics of power focus precisely on this question of the "how of power" and the means, techniques and rationalities through which governmental power is exercised (Foucault 1991; 2007). What makes the "welfare state" distinctive as a modality of government, what sets it apart from prior institutional and administrative arrangements for managing subjects and securing their welfare, is a specific set of rationalities and techniques—developed in the late 19th century and widely established in the 20th century—employed to govern the nation's economy and its population in the interest of economic growth and social security. Understood in these terms, it is not the *aim* of promoting welfare that defines the welfare state but instead the deployment of specific *means* of governing: a distinctive governmentality that brings a distinctive set of instruments to bear upon a distinctive set of objects.

A distinctive governmentality

I have suggested that the welfare state is best conceived of as a distinctive mode of government, a specific governmentality. What exactly does this mean? When historians consider what was new and distinctive about the 20th century welfare state—what set it apart from prior forms of poor relief or social provision—they point to several developments and discontinuities. They point to the "abolition of the Poor Law" and the ending of the stigma, discipline and indignities that local government assistance had imposed on the destitute from the 16th century up until its repeal in the 20th century. They point to the emergence of government schemes for organizing the labor market and securing workers' income by means of new institutions such as labor exchanges and social insurance. They point to the increased role of central government and the shift of responsibility from local to national officials. They point to the changed character of the archetypal welfare transaction, from paupers receiving doles to citizens claiming rights. And they point to the expanded role that the state and professionalized social workers came to play in the "private" lives of families and individuals.

All of these developments are significant. But I would argue that the most important discontinuity marking the emergence of the welfare state was actually a change in conceptions of the problems being addressed and the emergence of new ways of conceiving the relationship between the social and the economic and the new rationality of governing that followed from it. What marks the welfare state off from its predecessors is above all a new style of thinking and acting on the problems of employment and security; one that affected the whole economy and the whole population, and not merely the poor.

I would also insist that the new governmental rationality that emerged at that time continues to stand at the core of the welfare state, along with the technologies of social insurance, social regulation and social provision that emerged alongside it. So, although policies and programs have constantly evolved over the course of the last century, and although their political character, economic distributions, and ideological meanings have been repeatedly challenged and changed, the underlying modality of government that took shape in the early 20^{th} century continues to structure the fundamental forms and functions of the welfare state.

I can describe the emergence of this new rationality in more detail by focusing on the case of Britain.[16] For most of the 19^{th} century, the popular teachings of political economy had insisted that the relation between social protection and economic enterprise was, to speak anachronistically, a zero sum game (Sowell 2006). Money spent on poor relief was a drag on industry and a disincentive to work; every shilling given to a pauper was a shilling removed from the productive economy. Malthusian ideas, memories of the old Speenhamland system, and the teachings of the Charity Organization Society, combined to persuade policy-makers that charity and poor law provision should be minimized lest they multiply the poor and worsen the population/resources ratio. More generally, the *laissez-faire* ideas to be found in Paley and Bentham, Bastiat and the Physiocrats, Nassau Senior and the Poor Law Commissioners, converged to form the central principles of the philosophy in office.[17] But at the start of the 20^{th} century there was a marked shift in thinking about government's capacity to manage the economy and the benefits of so doing—a transformation that would come to be associated with the name of John

[16] Britain's transition is not especially "typical": every nation had its own distinctive process of emergence. But it is a revealing case to discuss, since the UK moved, in short order, from being avowedly *laissez-faire* liberal to being the first, full-fledged welfare state.

[17] Keynes (1926: 27) points out that the writings of Smith, Ricardo and even Malthus provide slim support for an unbending *laissez faire*. But their popularizers had no such hesitations: "the guarded and undogmatic attitudes of the best economists had not prevailed against the general opinion that an individualistic *laissez-faire* is both what they ought to teach and what in fact they do teach". See also Viner (1960).

Maynard Keynes but that also involved other prominent figures such as William Beveridge (1909), Beatrice Webb (1909), Sidney Webb (1926), and Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree (1935/41) all of whom broke with the orthodoxies of their 19th century predecessors.[18] In the economic prescriptions of 19th century *laissez faire*, raising workers' wages and providing income transfers to the poor had been vices with detrimental economic and social effects. In the new approach, they became virtues bringing economic and social benefits in their wake (Keynes 1926; Beveridge 1909: 1944; Webb 1926; Harris 1972).

The new thinking that emerged in the wake of the Great Depression of the 1890s and was reinforced by the economic collapse of the 1930s regarded unemployment not as a problem of "work effort" on the part of individual paupers but as a "problem of industry" operating at a level of the labor market as a whole (Beveridge 1909; Webb 1926). It pointed to the possibility—confirmed by real-world events but long denied in economic theory—that markets could reach equilibrium at low levels of employment and produce prolonged, destructive depressions. It pointed to the positive effects that government interventions could bring about in such circumstances, not merely by creating jobs in local public works but by injecting money into a depressed economy to buoy up demand, boost investor confidence, and set off multiplier effects. And it pointed to the positive outcomes that were generated when workers were insured and made to feel secure against the risk of economic misfortune. It was, in effect, a transformation of the perceived problem and the means of addressing it. The object to be addressed by government was now seen to be the national economy (understood in terms of macro-economic relations between aggregates such as national revenue, total consumption, and the total volume of savings and investment, operationalized by means of national accounts); the labor market as a whole; and the structure of industrial production.

Welfare state governmentality involves the socialization or collectivization of activities. Managing risk, providing healthcare, relieving poverty, securing employment, insuring household income—all of these become functions to be undertaken at an aggregate level. The welfare state is, in that sense, a form of macro-economic and macro-sociological

[18] The shift described here was a shift in the thinking of policy-makers and their advisers. It did not take place in "academic" economics and ought not to be confused with the shift from the classical economic ideas of Smith, Ricardo, Mill, Malthus, and Say to the neo-classical economics of Jevons, Walras, Menger, and Marshall with its "marginalist" concepts of utility and value. Before the middle of the 20th century, academic economics had little direct impact on government policy (Tomlinson 1990).

governance, directed and overseen by the nation state. It is thus a "statification" of governing practices that were previously local, private, and piecemeal and a "professionalization" of practices that were previously voluntary, philanthropic and amateur. As a result, the welfare state is more comprehensive, more routine, more systematic, and more encompassing than any prior form of social provision, utilizing nation-wide apparatuses of insurance, risk-management and normalization that have no historical equivalents. It moves welfare provision from the margins to the mainstream, targeting the mass of employed workers rather than the residuum of the poor and unemployed. What were once private, voluntary, and *ad hoc* civil society practices are collectivized and scaled up, becoming comprehensive, compulsory, state-guaranteed routines.

The use of comprehensive, compulsory, collective action is the fundamental mechanism that makes the welfare state possible. But this new governmentality was by no means totalizing. As Keynes argued in 1926 the state ought not to supplant other activities but ought instead to act at a scale and in a way that other social forces could not: "the important thing is not to do things which individuals are doing already, and to do them a little better or a little worse; but to do these things which at present are not done at all" (Keynes 1926: 47) Reducing uncertainty by insuring risks, preventing cycles of unemployment, controlling currency and credit, collecting and disseminating the facts of business and industry, publicly controlling saving, socializing investment, and even controlling the growth and quality of the population—these were all proper objects of state action (Keynes 1926; Webb 1926: 440).

Moreover, as Keynes insisted, these new conceptions and practices did nothing to undermine capitalism's basic principles: the love of money, the private quest for profit, the animal spirits than drove investment and speculation. Instead, they helped manage the market's uncertainties and ensured that consumer demand would not collapse into a depressed equilibrium as it had in the 1930s. They were, as Keynes put it, "techniques" for the better management of capitalist market economies (1926: 43).

The welfare state's boundaries

If the "welfare state" concept is contested and ambiguous so too are the contours of the thing to which it refers. In the existing literature, there are three main delineations of the welfare state, each with a different set of boundaries and a different conception of the welfare state's central functions:

(i) *Welfare for the poor.* This is the narrowest conception and the one usually preferred by the welfare state's opponents, since it refers to the most problematic and least popular aspects of the system: namely means-tested income support such as "supplementary benefits", Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, and public assistance. It is also the conception that is invoked in American political discourse whenever "welfare" or the "welfare system" is being discussed.

(ii) *Insurance, income maintenance and health and social services.* This is the analytical focus of most comparative social policy experts, and includes the institutions—Social Security and Medicare in the US; National Insurance and the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK—that account for the greatest part of government social expenditure. This is usually what people have in mind when they refer to the "entitlement programs" established by America's New Deal or the "universalism" of Beveridge's welfare state.

(iii) *Government at the level of the economy and the population.* This is the broadest and least frequently invoked conception but it is the one standardly used by political economists and institutional sociologists. It brings into the scope of welfare state discussions the government's market-forming fiscal, monetary, and employment policies—as well as its bio-political ones. This fundament dimension of welfare state government is frequently ignored in political debate and overlooked in social policy textbooks but it is precisely this conception of government that is highlighted by Foucault's analysis of the character and practical objects of modern governmentality.[19]

These three conceptions ought not to be seen—as they usually are—as competing, mutually-exclusive characterizations of what the welfare state is. We ought instead to view them as the concentric circles of welfare state government, each one forming a structurally integrated element of the whole. At the core of the welfare state complex are the institutions that insure against loss of earnings by reason of unemployment, ill-health, old-age, and so on—what Foucault

[19] See Foucault (1991: 102-103) where he describes the governmentality of the modern state in the following terms: "The ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security".

(1991) calls the "mechanisms of security". The operation of this comprehensive, compulsory insurance scheme, pitched at a national scale and affecting the whole population, is itself a mode of economic and bio-political governance. It, in turn, depends for its solvency on government policies that raise taxes, sustain employment, and promote growth, while it simultaneously contributes to these ends by enhancing labor flexibility, providing economic security, and enabling counter-cyclical spending. These social insurance schemes are, in turn, supplemented by non-contributory, poverty-relieving programs that form a "safety net" for those individuals who are uninsured (i.e. are outside the labor market) or who have somehow exhausted their insurance benefits. No one of these three sectors can long exist without the others as structural supports: each is a condition of existence of the other.[20] We can thus characterize the welfare state as the *government of the economy and the population* in the interest of *security, stability and welfare,* utilizing the tools of *insurance, economic management, and comprehensive social provision* together with the *taxes, legal regulations* and *forms of expertise* required for their operation.[21]

Welfare state institutions

I have stressed that the means through which the welfare state operates are the most distinctive features of this mode of government and the firmest basis for its definition.[22] What follows is a brief

[20] Beveridge saw this clearly and insisted on the inter-dependent and mutually-conditioning nature of full employment, social insurance, and the new welfare state services. See for example, Beveridge (1942) and (1944).

[21] Compare Asa Briggs' frequently-cited definition: "A welfare state is a state in which organized power is deliberately used (through politics and administration) to modify the play of market forces in at least three directions—first, by guaranteeing individuals and families a minimum income irrespective of the market value of their work or property; second, by narrowing the extent of insecurity by enabling individuals and families to meet certain social contingencies (e.g. sickness, old age, and unemployment); and third, by ensuring that all citizens without distinction of status or class are offered the best standards available in relation to a certain agreed range of social services" (Briggs 1961: 228). And the Marxist definition developed by Ian Gough (1979: 44-45) "we shall characterize the welfare state as the use of state power to modify the reproduction of labour power and to maintain the non-working population in capitalist societies".

[22] The adoption of new technologies (i.e. new "means") tends, over time, to make possible new "ends". So, for instance, the system of unemployment insurance benefits served not just to replace lost earnings and prevent destitution—its original "ends"—but also to buoy up aggregate demand in an economic downturn. Over time, demand management and the smoothing of consumption would become explicit ends of welfare government.

description of the five main sectors of welfare state government and the technologies that they employ.[23]

Social insurance

Insurance against loss of earnings forms the core of welfare state government. Social insurance programs are generally comprehensive, compulsory schemes designed to protect workers and their families against the risks of lost earnings due to injury, sickness, old age, disability or unemployment. These programs typically simulate the forms of private insurance by requiring the insured to make contributions and specifying the contingencies that trigger benefit payments. But they diverge from standard actuarial principles in important respects: for instance by de-linking premium levels from risk levels, and by enrolling everyone, regardless of risk profiles—departures that are made feasible by the large population of those insured and the scheme's compulsory nature (Barr 2001).

In most such schemes—such as "National Insurance" in the UK and "Social Security" in the US—employees are obliged by law to make regular contributions, and are, in turn, entitled to benefits such as retirement pensions, sickness benefits, unemployment payments, and so on. The effect of these forced saving, risk-pooling schemes is to smooth out fluctuations in earnings and consumption, redistributing income across the life-course and across economic cycles. And although these schemes produce some cross-class redistributions—for example, low paid workers will tend to benefit more than they contribute—their primary effect is to reduce uncertainty and provide security to all those in (insurance-eligible) employment. Where the schemes are run on a pay-as-you-go basis, they also involve an intergenerational transfer, with pensions for today's retirees being funded by contributions from today's workers. In practice, social insurance schemes vary across time and place, in terms of coverage, eligibility, premiums and benefit levels, and so on—and each variant creates different costs and benefits, different winners and losers, and different levels of political and financial sustainability.

[23] The following statements generalize across nations and should be taken as statements of widespread patterns to which there will always be exceptions. In Australia and New Zealand, for example, there are no explicit social insurance contributions: loss-of-earnings benefits are funded out of general taxation and usually income-tested. (Barr 1992: 744) And the same service—e.g. healthcare—may be provided in many different ways: e.g. as a de-commodified social right (the UK's NHS), as a social insurance benefit (US Medicare), and as means-tested social assistance (US Medicaid).

Like all techniques of government, the details of formulation and operation are politically and economically decisive. The social insurance model is also symbolically significant in that it simulates a contractual exchange in which contributory payments establish a reciprocal set of entitlements—thereby distinguishing it from any hint of doles, hand-outs, or charity.

Social assistance

Alongside these insurance programs, non-contributory, income-support programs create a "safety net" to deal with anyone who falls outside the system of insurance or whose income from employment is insufficient for his or her basic needs. The founders of the US and UK welfare states assumed that the need for assistance would diminish and eventually disappear as the whole workforce came to be insured. The collapse of full employment and a shift to an increasingly precarious labor market have meant, however, that these programs remain a key part of most contemporary welfare states.

The transfer payments involved may be universal, as with UK child benefit payments which were, until recently, paid to parents regardless of income. But more often they are means-tested. The American programs of public assistance, food stamps, earned income tax credits, TANF and Medicaid and the British ones such as "income support" (formerly "supplementary benefits"), housing benefits, council tax allowance, job seekers allowance, etc. are programs of this kind.

These programs are funded out of general taxation, account for a much smaller proportion of social spending than insurance programs, and are modestly redistributive (Barr 2001). They also tend to be strongly gendered, since the primary recipients are women and children (Fraser 1987). Of all welfare state programs, means-tested income support is generally the most stigmatizing and the most reminiscent of 19th century Poor Law arrangements. To the extent that neo-liberal assaults on the welfare state have succeeded (beyond the domain of economic governance), it is mostly these programs that have been negatively affected. Recent "reforms"—most notably the 1990s "welfare to work" laws (King 1995)—have reduced the value of benefits, tightened eligibility, and imposed additional disciplinary conditions.

Public services and social rights

The welfare state's publicly-funded social services provide "de-commodified" access to essential goods such as education and vocational training, healthcare and social care, housing, transport, legal aid, and so on. At the municipal level, parks, libraries, museums, sports and recreational facilities, and other public amenities may also be provided. Such services—which are generally the least stigmatizing, most egalitarian aspects of the welfare state—come closest to being the "social rights" that T.H. Marshall described inasmuch as they are provided as citizen entitlements and operate outside of the market. The extent of tax-funded public services varies considerably across nations but even in a largely market-oriented welfare state system such as the US, some services—primary and secondary education for example—are provided free of charge and as of right to American citizens and legal residents.

Employee rights—including minimum wage, paid holidays, maternity and paternity leave entitlements, employment protections, workplace dismissal and promotion procedures—are also social (or "economic" rights), as are labor laws regulating the right to join a union, the right to strike, and so on. These vary greatly between nations and generally reflect the political strength of labor unions. The expansion and contraction of these rights, and with them the power of organized labor, tend to run parallel with the expansion and retrenchment of welfare state provision.

Personal social services

As well as contributory benefits, transfer payments, and public services, welfare states provide personalized social services such as social work and children's services; social care for the elderly and the disabled; community care for the mentally ill; probation for offenders, and so on. These services may take the form of public provision—as when healthcare includes home-based care for the elderly. But a more distinctive technique is one that combines care and control and focuses on families that have come to the notice of the authorities because of some perceived dysfunction or because of claims made upon the state. These personal social services function to "normalize" and "discipline" at the same time as extend care and support—and they are often focused on the same population that receives social assistance.

Donzelot (1980) describes these as so many ways of "policing the family" by which he means that families deemed problematic are routinely subjected to practices of inspection, examination and normalization. As Donzelot points out, the welfare state regulates and secures the family just as much as it regulates and secures the market. Indeed, for many observers of the early welfare state, these interventions into the "private" realm of family—this "invasion of the home" (Pepler 1915)—were the most radical aspects of the new dispensation.

Government of the economy

Welfare state programs co-exist with, and depend upon, the operation of wider government controls on economic life.[24] Fiscal and monetary policies; labor law and labor market policies; corporatist agreements between management, labor and government; prices and incomes policies; farming and food subsidies—all of these are features of welfare state government. Governments in the developed nations have assumed responsibility for assuring economic growth, controlling inflation, curbing booms and slumps, and keeping unemployment within acceptable levels, and they use a variety of free trade, protectionist, Keynesian, monetarist, supply-side, or neoliberal policy instruments in pursuit of these goals. This dimension of the welfare state was quite explicit in the post-war era when governments undertook to ensure full employment, both as a right for workers and as an essential economic underpinning of the welfare state's spending programs (Beveridge 1942; 1944). It became less apparent after the 1970s, when governments placed inflation control ahead of full employment and ceded control of interest rates to central banks. Nevertheless, economic governance remains an essential element of all welfare states—even where neoliberal policies prevail—with the government's annual public expenditure budget operating as an important tool of economic management.

These are the five main sectors of the modern welfare state: the distinctive practices and institutions that constitute its materiality. They vary in the kinds of power they utilize, the techniques they deploy, and the forms of knowledge on which they rely. In that sense,

[24] Prasad (2012) argues that US governments have preferred to provide easy consumer credit and tax-subsidized home mortgages —rather than welfare state transfers—to enhance social welfare and stimulate consumer demand. Compared to regular welfare provision, this "mortgage Keynesianism" does little for the very poor, increases household debt, and builds volatility into the US economy—as the crash of 2008 demonstrated.

the welfare state has no unified character or essential properties. Moreover, each sector operates within different bandwidths of success and failure. The state has it within its power to establish insurance programs, social services or family laws and ensure compliance. Its powers to govern the economy are much less certain.

There is one further aspect of the modern welfare state to which I want to draw attention before concluding this descriptive account: an aspect that cross-cuts the other sectors but which deserves specific attention. What I have in mind is often referred to as the *hidden welfare state*: welfare benefits that are channeled through the tax system or through private employment contracts (Howard 1997; Hacker 2002). The home mortgage allowance, for example, is a large-scale government welfare (and stimulus) program the costs of which are much greater than those allocated to public housing. Similarly, corporate welfare schemes—providing retirement, healthcare and other benefits to certain employees—are subsidized and regulated by government but provided by employers as a form of tax-exempt compensation. These provisions, the least egalitarian of all, are mostly buried in the complex provisions of the tax code and are rarely the focus of public discussion or political debate.[25] Bringing these practices into focus is an important corrective to "welfare state" discussions that ignore welfare for the rich (Kristoff 2014).

Functions and dysfunctions

These, then, are the major sectors of the welfare state complex and the most important instruments of welfare state government. Operating at the macro-level of the national economy and the population, and at the micro-level of families and individuals, they function to *modify* the economic outcomes and social relations that capitalist markets would otherwise create; *secure* a politically-agreed minimum of social welfare and economic security; and *ensure* the education, training, socialization and well-being of children, young workers and citizens. Moreover, these practices are designed to operate in ways that sustain and do not undermine the fundamentals of the capitalist economy and of liberal democracy (Hirst 1981).

[25] In the US, the Veterans Administration is also a relatively hidden—and relatively generous—benefits system that is usually exempted from the standard criticisms made of welfare state schemes, despite being "socialistic" in character.

But this talk of "functions" ought not to suggest the absence of conflict or the routine attainment of success—like the markets and the families they are designed to support, welfare states also exhibit failures and dysfunctions. Welfare state policies are rarely carried out smoothly because the relation between the welfare state and market capitalism is at once a necessary and a contradictory one. In modern societies, privately-determined economic action and publicly-determined social protection are shackled together to form a contradictory unity in which each aspect works simultaneously to sustain but also to undermine the other. Moreover, this contradictory unity is, to put it in Althusserian terms, a formation "structured in dominance" because the welfare state is, in effect, an ancillary institution and not the primary one. Welfare state transfers are politically-generated secondary distributions that modify a more fundamental market-based distribution that is grounded in private property and the transactions of property owners.[26] And while a well-adjusted and high-functioning welfare state can augment and enhance a nation's economy, promoting flexibility, cooperation, managed change, and stabilized consumer demand, a welfare state can only survive if it is underwritten by a flourishing economy and sustained economic growth.

Welfare state government is always, therefore, a delicate balancing act: a matter of modifying economic outcomes without obstructing enterprise; protecting labor without reducing employment; limiting exploitation without provoking capital flight; taxing profits to fund public spending without harming growth or prompting investment strikes. It is also always a regulatory challenge. Welfare state government seeks to impose social and political controls on economic and family processes that all too easily escape, elude, or respond perversely to these regulatory efforts (Hirschman 1991). These fundamental problems of *system-conflict* ensure that the basic practices of welfare state government are, in themselves, a source of chronic difficulties. The result is that contradictions, conflicts, and periodic "crises" are characteristic of all welfare states.[27]

[26] To be sure, both private property *and* welfare distributions are legal arrangements that have been politically constructed. But in contemporary capitalist societies, the former is more deeply entrenched and more widely regarded as legitimate. Challenges to welfare distributions are regarded as politics as usual; challenges to private property are regarded as revolutionary.

[27] The perceived character of these crises is always changing. In the 1950s, the most pressing problems were perceived to be the threat of inflation and limited growth. In the 1960s, when America and Western Europe mostly enjoyed sustained growth, the chief problem was too much bureaucracy, too much control, and the persistence of poverty. In the 1970s and 1980s, rising social spending was regarded as the cause of stagflation and government overload. Since the 1990s, concern has moved from so-called "dependency culture" and family instability to public debt and cost containment.

System-conflict problems are ongoing challenges for any welfare state government. They can be managed more or less effectively but they can never be wholly eliminated. But there are also other, lesser problems about which it is useful to say a few words, if only to put them in perspective. These are the *administrative problems* that attach to poor relief, insurance and social provision; *adaptation problems* that arise from the welfare state's need to keep up with changes in economic and family life; and *political problems* generated by class forces and actuarial groups contesting the distribution of costs and benefits that particular policies impose.

Problems of administration

Selective, means-tested, poverty-relief programs are prone to problems—the stigmatizing and demoralizing of recipients; the fostering of passivity and dependency; a "poverty trap" whereby benefit thresholds discourage low paid employment, and so on—that have been familiar since the days of the Poor Law, even if the magnitude of these problems has always been fiercely contested. Similarly, social insurance can be prone to adverse selection, moral hazard, and problems of cost-containment, especially in a context of demographic change and labor market restructuring. Welfare programs also tend to generate expanding expectations with consequences for public spending levels—healthcare being the leading example.

These are all real, sometimes insurmountable problems. But historical and comparative evidence suggests they can be effectively managed given the requisite political will and administrative competence. Indeed, long-standing experience of these challenges has generated a repertoire of administrative fixes designed to curtail and moderate their detrimental effects. Poverty traps can be diminished by graduated withdrawal of benefits; income support can be conditioned on evidence of job-seeking, disability or care-giving responsibilities; insurance contributions and pension eligibility can be brought into a more balanced alignment; unemployment benefits can be time-limited, offered at less than replacement levels, linked to vocational training, and so on (Barr 1992). The welfare state's opponents despair of these problems and present them as fatal flaws but in the real world of administration, such problems are mostly amenable to pragmatic solutions of one kind or another (Marmor 1990: Hirschman 1992). Moreover, many of these "welfare problems" can be directly traced to underlying market failures of one kind or another—labor markets that do not clear, imperfect information, imperfect competition, uninsurable risk, and so on (Barr 1992). To regard them as the welfare state's fatal flaws is to express a political animus that does not correspond to administrative experience.

Adaptation problems

Welfare state programs are aligned with the structures and flows of the national economy and with the behaviors and characteristics of individuals, families and households. To the extent that these undergo change—and both economic and social life have changed dramatically over the last thirty years—welfare state programs have to evolve with them.[28] Some of the major challenges facing welfare states today involve the need for programs and policies to adapt successfully to the new world of post-industrial capitalism and the "new social risks" that this entails (Bonoli 1997; 2007).

The welfare state schemes set up by the New Deal and by post-war European governments were established in a specific socio-economic context and predicated on a definite set of assumptions. They assumed, for the most part, a male industrial worker, employed in a secure job, earning a family wage sufficient to meet the needs of his wife and children, in a protected national economy characterized by strong trade unions, full employment and long-term growth. Most of these assumptions no longer hold good. In the early 21st century, welfare states are having to adapt to a new world of globalized, high tech, post-industrial service economies in which employment is increasingly precarious, family forms increasingly diverse and unstable, and economic growth slow and uncertain.

Welfare state "adjustment" and adaptive reform raise some peculiar difficulties of their own. As Pierson (1994) has shown, the politics of welfare expansion are quite different from those of retrenchment. Political actors find it easier to enact new benefits than to remove or reduce existing ones. Interests vest, expectations rise, and powerful endowment effects become a drag on change. The interests of older, insured workers are made to seem opposed to those of young recruits; those in employment are ranged against the unemployed; the unionized

[28] When retirement pensions for those aged 70 and over were established in Britain in 1908, the average life expectancy was 50 years. In 2010, life expectancy for British males was 78 years and 82 for females, but workers have a settled expectation that they will be able to retire with a pension by their mid-60s.

against the non-unionized. In all this, the programs that are most vulnerable to downsizing tend to be programs that affect the poor and those located within the weakest and least generous welfare state regimes.

Adaptive challenges of this kind are often represented as catastrophic problems that signal the collapse of the system. But the chief problem they embody is one of politics rather than of government. A welfare state's capacity to adapt is only as great as the capacity of the nation's political institutions to manage change effectively, and this varies across nations. As is apparent from recent episodes—the debt ceiling crisis, healthcare reform, "entitlements reform"—the US federal government has become increasingly incapable of meeting these challenges. Elsewhere political adaptation has been more successful. The Nordic countries, for example, have proved themselves much more effective in building compromise and consensus around adaptive policy reform (Castles 2010).

Political problems

Welfare state programs moderate and transform market-based distributions of income, wealth, and life chances and in so doing they confer costs and benefits, creating redistributive winners and losers. The politics of welfare is inevitably a struggle over scarce resources and each program or proposal tends to mobilize—or bring into being—a distinctive array of interest groups (Baldwin 1992). Employers and employees, actuarial and demographic groups, professional associations and trade unions, skilled workers and unskilled workers, retirees and those still in work, families with children and those without—all of these have material stakes in the struggle over welfare policies. And effective outcomes will depend not just on the balance of power between these groups, but also on the efficacy of the political process and the ability of party leaders to find compromises and mutually advantageous solutions. Political action favors insiders, repeat players, the well-organized and the well-funded. As a result, the poor tend to lose out in the political process just as they do in the market. Working people, especially low-skilled employees, are also at a disadvantage *vis-à-vis* employers unless they can turn superior numbers to political advantage.

All policy is also political. The social policy changes of the 1950s and 1960s saw the empowerment of trade unions, the compression of income inequalities, and an increased level of security and affluence for middle and working class families (Krugman 2007). By the same token, the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s—the abandonment of full employment, the turn to "supply-side" economics and monetarism, privatization policies, the stress on individual responsibility, internal markets, workfare, austerity, and so on—were not merely policy adjustments or economic adaptations. They were expressions of class and sectional interest that shifted the balance of power away from organized labor towards corporate capital and away from the public sector toward private market actors (Dumenil and Levy 2004).

Capitalism develops, expands and transforms itself through the actions of millions of market actors pursuing their private interest. And that interest—in generating profits, creating new markets, competing over market share, driving costs down and productivity up, bringing returns on investment—is well understood by the private actors concerned, even if its externalities and social consequences are less clearly kept in mind. In contrast, the welfare state can only grow through a political process that requires cooperation, coordination, system-level knowledge, and productive compromise. And the political actors —including voters and citizens—need to have a clear conception of their interests and their common project as well as a collective capaicity to carry this through into law and practice. These collective long-term projects depend for their viability on political vision and leadership, upon social trust and faith in government, and on a capacity for building political coalitions and cross-class solidarities (Heclo 2010; Rothstein 2011). The structure of a nation's political institutions and the character of its political process—as well as the social groups and relations that make up civil society—are enormously important in shaping the character and adaptability of any welfare state.

The international diffusion of welfare state governmentality

The "welfare state" involved a new governmentality, a new style of social and economic administration, organized at the national level. Like other successful technologies, welfare state programs spread rapidly, becoming more or less universal across the industrialized world in a matter of a few decades. The earliest "insurance state" took shape in Germany in the 1880s when Chancellor Bismarck enacted social insurance laws in an effort to head off the socialist movement and win the loyalty of civil servants and better-off workers. In the early 1900s, Britain's Liberal government, led by Prime Minister Asquith and his Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd-George, introduced Workmen's Compensation, Old Age Pensions, Labor Exchanges, and National Insurance. By the 1930s, the new techniques of government had spread across the Atlantic to the US, where President Roosevelt responded to the Great Depression with a massive public works program and later with a raft of "New Deal" legislation establishing Social Security, progressive taxation and trade union recognition. After 1945, the new welfare state was everywhere expanded and consolidated as part of the post-war reconstruction of Europe (Heclo 2010: 10-11). By 1960, every developed nation had established a core of welfare state institutions and every government had accepted responsibility for managing the economy (Baldwin 1992). As Wilensky (1975) observed in 1975, in a remarkably short period of time, the welfare state had become "one of the great structural uniformities of modern society".

Why was this? The reasons for this world-historic development are not hard to fathom. Indeed, in retrospect, its emergence appears over-determined. In any particular nation, the enactment of new welfare programs was always the outcome of historical processes involving individual reformers, social movements, political parties and the choices, contingencies and compromises these involved.[29] But viewed as a cross-national development, we glimpse the operation of large-scale processes that reshaped the social and political landscape of the entire developed world. Welfare state government was a response to the new and distinctive problems of the urban, industrial, market societies that were taking shape at the end of the 19th century—above all, to the "normal accidents" of industrial production and the risks and uncertainties caused by insecure wage labor (Ewald 1986; Witt 2004). As the economic depressions of the 1890s and 1930s revealed, the economic hazards of industrial society rendered unworkable the older forms of social provision such as charity, churches, Poor Law, and the workhouse. The local, *ad hoc* character of these institutions left them unable to address the new economic and social dislocations in effective ways. The old arrangements operated with the wrong structure and the wrong scale; and they relied on the existence of traditional support mechanisms—rural

[29] Welfare states were rarely the achievement of one class over another. More often they were the outcome of complex, criss-crossing coalitions between actuarial and occupational groups, sometimes imposed from above (as in Bismarck's Germany), sometimes attained from below (as in social democratic Sweden). See Baldwin (1992).

paternalism, community and kinship groups, common access to land—that were fast disappearing.

Welfare states were also a product of the new-found power of working class voters and organized labor—and of the response of ruling elites to these new social forces—occurring at a time when states were becoming capable of taking on tasks of this scale and complexity. And of course these transformations were occasioned by momentous historical events—the Great Depression, the collapse of democracy and the rise of Fascism, mobilization for total war, and the reconstruction of Europe after 1945—which created historic possibilities for political change and institutional renewal. This was a *universal* transformation. It affected not just this or that society but *all* industrialized nations, even if the new welfare regimes exhibited a great deal of national and regional variation in composition and functioning (Esping-Andersen 1990; Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser 2011; Heclo 2010). And once established—as it was, everywhere, by the 1960s—the welfare state was embraced by all mainstream political parties, no matter what their complexion. As (Republican) President Eisenhower wrote in 1954: "Should any political party attempt to abolish social security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again in our political history" (quoted in Krugman 2007: 58-59).

The "economic" and the "social" in long-term perspective

I have argued that welfare state government emerged in the 20th century and that its specific practices marked a break with prior forms of poor relief and welfare. But for all its historical specificity as a mode of government, it is also possible to regard the welfare state as a chapter in a longer-term history of the relations between economic action and social provision. And viewing it in this long-term perspective allows us to appreciate some important characteristics that are obscured by short-term or presentist sightlines. Libertarian critics of the welfare state often refer to the *laissez faire*, free market world of the 19th century as if these arrangements were the natural condition of mankind. They view the "self-regulating market" as the original state of nature and regard government "interference" as largely illegitimate and counter-productive.[30] But in the broad sweep of history, 19th century *laissez-faire*

[30] See Harcourt (2011) for examples. Writers such as Hayek and Von Mises did not share this naïve free market naturalism.

capitalism was very much an exceptional case. And far from being "natural", free market economic arrangements had to be forcibly established by government action that overturned customary laws and set aside traditional collective safeguards and "rights in common" that working people had long enjoyed (Polanyi 1944; Thompson 1971).

Traditional societies—pre-capitalist social formations—did not have distinct "economies" that were set apart and organized according to a purely economic logic of profit and loss. They did not regard "market" exchanges as transactions that ought to be governed solely by the laws of supply and demand. Nor did they separate work from the worker by treating commodified labor power as an alienable "property" distinct from the human being who labors and the social context in which that labor is undertaken. Production and exchange were instead embedded in and constrained by religious, moral, and social rules that limited exploitation and protected against starvation in times of dearth or famine.

To point out these protections and restraints is not to romanticize the pre-capitalist past or represent it as some idyll of mutual care and support. Pre-modern social arrangements were neither equitable nor democratic, and in many respects, the coming of *laissez faire* was a liberating escape from a world in which narrow special interests used political power to secure sectional advantage. But for all their commitment to group privileges, monopolies, protectionist duties, rank and status hierarchies, these communities insisted that economic action should be subject to social and moral restraint.

The coming of a modern, fully-fledged capitalist society in 19^{th} century Britain was the first time in human history that economic actors shrugged off these social constraints and persuaded the nation's rulers to entrust the collective welfare to the logic of private accumulation. The creation of *laissez faire* capitalism was, in that respect, an economic and social revolution: a departure from the long-term pattern of socially regulated production and exchange. And as Polanyi (1944) points out, it was in reaction against this revolution—and against the social dislocations that followed in its wake—that the modern welfare state was established.

Viewed in a long-term perspective, then, the coming of the welfare state in the 20^{th} century does not mark the beginning of an era in which social protections overlay and interrupt economic processes. It does not represent a turning away from the natural order of untrammeled commerce. It is instead the resumption, in a distinctively modern form, of a near-universal pattern that had briefly been pulled apart by the emergence of free-market capitalism. In the history of human societies, economic action has generally been embedded in, and constrained by, the norms of social, political, and moral life. The welfare state marks a return to that historical norm of social organization rather than a deviation from it.

What explains this remarkable historical pattern? Why haven't societies through the ages allowed the poor to starve and the weak to go to the wall? The answer has less to do with altruism and human sympathy—though they certainly play a part—and more to do with the facts of human co-existence. In any social organization, however hierarchical and exploitative, social groups are related by ties of interdependence. Masters and slaves, lords and vassals, landlords and tenants, employers and employees, states and citizens are interconnected. These relations are unequal and exploitative, to be sure, but they tie group fates together in important ways. It is consequently in the interests of dominant groups to preserve those they dominate, if only to ensure a regular supply of tax, labor or military service; to limit the ravages of disease and the spread of epidemics; or to head off riot and insurrection.

Machiavelli advised that a prince who would maintain his state and fend off attacks must keep the body politic in security and good health. But the same mutual dependence operates on a different scale within the family. Young children are dependent on their parents but these parents age and become dependent in their turn. Those who can work provide for others who cannot, trusting that they will be taken care of when their time comes. Reciprocity extends across generations. Positive feelings of love and affection, solidarity and fellow feeling, *noblesse oblige* and respectful deference, altruism and gratitude, are actively fostered within these interdependencies, translating functional necessities into social morality and ethical norms. But intertwined with these altruistic sentiments are the hard bonds of mutual need. At the same time, aid to the poor helps justify the privileges of the powerful, upholding the legitimacy of their rule and preventing them from being seen as mere exploiters. Little wonder that beneficence and charity have long been cultural values embraced by elites and that rulers routinely declare devotion to the public welfare.

The character of these welfare arrangements depends, of course, on the nature of economic, social and political organization. And they always have their limits—excluding outsiders, the undeserving, the poor of other parishes or other faiths. But such arrangements always exist in some form, if only because social provision is essential to social integration and social order.

Moral economies and market economies

Sociologists and historians sometimes describe the welfare state as a kind of "moral economy" that has been imposed upon the market economy (Thompson 1971; Scott 1976). And writers such as Richard Titmuss in *The Gift Relationship* (1970) and Michael Ignatieff in *The Needs of Strangers* (1984) have stressed what they see as the altruistic nature of the welfare state, grounded in social solidarity. But characterizing the welfare state as "moral" and "altruistic" greatly simplifies the motivations involved in its creation and fails to capture the values and power relations that underpin its long-term reproduction. As a sociological account, this idealized explanation misses the robust social forces that sustain the welfare state not just in solidaristic historical moments such as post-war reconstruction but also through prolonged periods of crisis and conflict.

The motives that led to the creation of welfare states were as varied and as diverse as the political actors who took part in that process. And although reformers often proclaimed themselves to be guided by high-minded moral sentiments, these concerns were usually mixed with ulterior motives of a more self-interested kind. Welfare payments were given as a matter of right or social justice—but they were also made in exchange for some return such as votes, or loyalty to the state, or to avoid trouble. Payments were made to promote equality—but they were also made to uphold status hierarchies and occupational inequalities. Social provision was intended to "civilize" and "humanize" capitalism—but also to make it more efficient and resistant to fundamental change. Social provision was made to enable citizenship and positive liberty—but also to counteract "degeneration" and improve what policymakers saw as an increasingly "unfit race". Benefits were paid to secure workers and feed their families—but they were also made to stimulate demand, to keep money circulating, and to prompt investment and sustain capitalist commerce. The welfare state has always been about economic efficiency as well as social equity, and it has always served the interests of rulers as well as the needs of the ruled.

To be "for" the welfare state is not therefore to be on the side of the angels. It is to be in favor of the social control of economic processes—with all the political conflict and administrative challenges which that involves—rather than in favor of entrusting these processes to the self-serving choices and short-term interests of individual entrepreneurs, multi-national corporations, or financial speculators. Nor does being "for" the welfare state mean being "against" capitalism. Welfare state institutions are techniques for the management of capitalist market processes, not for their destruction. Capitalism is not abolished by the welfare state. On the contrary: it is altered by welfare state government in ways that make it socially and politically sustainable.

The welfare state as a normal social fact

I would like to conclude by setting out an argument that captures the basic points I have been making and expresses them in a classically sociological form. The argument is this: the welfare state is not a policy option that we are free to adopt or reject at will. It is, instead, a fundamental dimension of modern society, absolutely integral to the economic functioning and social health of industrialized capitalist societies. We can articulate this claim in its most a concise form by stating that in such societies the welfare state is what Emile Durkheim described as a "normal social fact".

Durkheim famously sets out two distinct criteria—an empirical test and a functional test—by means of which we can classify a social institution as normal or abnormal. A normal social fact is an institution that (i) exists in all societies that have reached a particular stage of their development; and (ii) is bound up with, and integral to, the functioning of such societies.[31] It is an easy matter to show that the welfare state meets the first of these criteria. The welfare state exists, in some version or other, in every developed society that has an advanced, industrial economy (Baldwin 1992; Castles *et al*. 2010; Wilensky 1975 and Flora and Heidenheimer 2005). And that continues to be true even after three decades of "assaults" on the welfare state by free-market policy reforms. In the US, the UK, and elsewhere anti-welfare politics have transformed aid to the poor, reducing benefit levels and tightening eligibility conditions. Anti-union legislation—in combination with structural

[31] Durkheim's exact formulation is as follows: "A social fact is normal for a given social type, viewed at a given phase of its development, when it occurs in the average society of that species, considered at a corresponding phase of its evolution... The results of the preceding method can be verified by demonstrating that the general character of the phenomenon is related to the general conditions of collective life in the social type under consideration" (2013: 60).

changes in the labor market—has reduced workplace freedom, increased income inequality, and made working class households more insecure. And neo-liberal conceptions have increasingly shaped how economies are governed. But these changes have had little impact on the welfare state's institutional core. Social Security and Medicare in the US, and National Insurance and the NHS in the UK, have expanded over that time and continue to command popular and political support. Today's welfare states have been transformed in important respects but their infrastructures remain firmly in place and they remain a vital dimension of modern government and of social and economic life.[32]

The second test is more complicated. How can we show that the welfare state is essential to the functioning of developed capitalist societies? How can we demonstrate that it is, as Durkheim put it, "bound up with the fundamental conditions of social life"? Here we need to recall some of the harsher characteristics of capitalist economies and competitive markets—features that we too often forget precisely because the welfare state successfully moderates and obscures them. Modern society is a *capitalist* society. It is, to follow Wolfgang Streeck's definition, a society that has set up its economy in a capitalist manner and in so doing has entrusted the vital task of material provision (upon which all human life depends) to private economic actors—i.e. to capitalist firms whose actions are oriented towards the accumulation of capital based on private calculations of utility and self-interest (Streeck 2011; 2012).

Capitalism is, it should be said, a tremendously powerful system of production and exchange: no other economic system can compare in terms of sheer productivity, innovation and dynamism. Capitalism's impact on technology and the accumulation of goods is likewise unsurpassed in human history. Open markets are remarkable arrangements for generating choice, communicating information, and promoting certain kinds of freedom and equality.[33] And the expansion

[32] One indication of this is the fact that when markets collapsed and a major depression and mass unemployment ensued in 2008, there were few challenges to the capitalist system itself, and none with any real prospect of success. The contrast with the 1930s is stark and chiefly explicable by reference to the political and economic effects of the welfare state.

[33] As Barr (2001: 52) points out, markets work better in some contexts than others. "Markets are generally more efficient (a) the better is consumer information, (b) the more cheaply and effectively it can be improved [...] (c) the easier it is for consumers to understand available information, (d) the lower are the costs of choosing badly, and (e) the more diverse are consumer tastes". Barr notes that food and consumer durables conform well with these requirements; healthcare much less so.

of trade and commerce has, if historians are to be believed, contributed to the softening of manners, the expanded scope of solidarities, and the civilizing of nations (Hirshman 1977; Appleby 2010). In these important respects, capitalist economies have been an enormous boon to human welfare.

But there is also an important sense in which capitalism, as a system of economic action, is profoundly *anti-social*. Societies that allow economic life to be governed by the logic of market competition and private profit are necessarily societies at risk. Their laws of motion produce rapid undirected change; they generate marked inequalities and concentrations of wealth; and they are chronically prone to crises of accumulation, to booms and slumps, and to periodic economic collapse. If any of us had forgotten this, the events of 2008 and its aftermath have been a vivid reminder.

The chief characteristics of capitalist societies are not stability and equilibrium: these are the imaginary artefacts of classical and neoclassical theory not facts about real economies. The chief characteristics of capitalist societies are uncertainty, unpredictability, undirected change and unequal outcomes. Non-stop innovation and changing terms of trade constantly put established ways of life at risk. Intense competition generates fear and puts a premium on killing off competitors. The established goal of unlimited accumulation normalizes private greed and generates socially damaging inequalities, while the pursuit of private profit generates damaging externalities such as climate change, pollution, stress on families, and disruption of communities the costs of which are borne by others. As Marx and Engels (1848) pointed out long ago, capitalism permanently revolutionizes the societies it inhabits. It generates what Schumpeter (1942) called "creative destruction" leaving a trail of disruption in its wake. We see this all the time—the collapse of the old industrial sector, the rise and fall of the dot.com empire, the housing bubble, the Eurozone crisis, the global financial crisis, all of which caused massive disruptions to people's lives.

Beveridge, Keynes and their contemporaries recognized the uncertainty, instability and anti-social tendencies that are generated by capitalist processes. And they designed the welfare state as an apparatus that would manage these risks, stabilize these booms and busts, and establish a framework of collective economic security in which individual risk-taking might proceed. But that welfare state is constantly being put under pressure by the capitalist processes and market forces that it seeks to constrain.

Capitalist economies and welfare states have, to repeat a point made earlier, a "contradictory unity". They require each other; they sustain each other; but they also undermine each other. Profitable capitalist action requires a supportive social environment and an enabling material infrastructure. At a minimum it needs socialized, educated, healthy workers—and the functioning families, schools and healthcare systems that produce them—as well as a dependable supply of resources, a transportation infrastructure, a population of consumers, and a politically stable, business-friendly environment. But left to its own devices, capitalism tends to erode and destroy these vital social and natural environments (Hobsbawm 1996). Its tendency is to commodify, consume, and expand in a competitive drive to accumulate—and these processes produce disastrous side-effects, as witness the current threats affecting the climate, the environment, natural resources, family life, and the physical and economic health of populations.

Market capitalism is, in other words, an inherently "self-destructive social formation" which is protected from these dangers by the operation of anti-market and market-moderating processes. The paradoxical—one might say *dialectical*—consequence is that "capitalism depends vitally on the presence, essential but never guaranteed, of effective opposition to it" (Streeck 2012: 25). The result is that a resurgence of the power of capital and of free market forces is an ever-present danger to the social system within which capitalism exists. The neo-liberal project of dismantling collective institutions and regulatory frameworks in the name of untrammeled competition and market freedom may, as its critics insist, be pursuing an impossible ideal (Polanyi 1944; Peck 2010), but it carries the real dangers of economic and social collapse nevertheless, as the global crisis of 2008 has shown.

To avoid self-destruction capitalism needs a set of countervailing forces. And "the welfare state" is the collective name we give to these forces. The social regulation of markets, the social insuring of workers, and the public provision of social services and protections—in short, *the welfare state* in one or other of its variants—is our established means of restraining the rampant opportunism and untrammeled pursuit of private gain that are the essence of free-market capitalism. Critics of this arrangement often describe the welfare state as a hindrance to economic vitality. From a sociological point of view, this is the exact opposite of the case: the welfare state is an essential means of sustaining that vitality. As my Durkheimian analysis is designed to indicate, the welfare state is an essential basis for human flourishing in capitalist society *and* an essential basis for capitalist flourishing in human society.

Conclusion

I have tried to present a clear, succinct account of the welfare state as a distinctive form of government, together with its institutions, its functions and its characteristic problems. I have argued, against conventional wisdom, that the welfare state is *not* a thing of the past. On the contrary: it is very much a thing of the present and the future—though its capacity to adapt to new social and economic challenges depends on an efficacy on the part of political processes that is by no means guaranteed. The welfare state is not a characteristic of this or that society—of post-war Britain or Sweden after the 1960s. It is a universal feature of developed capitalist societies. And the welfare state is neither a form of socialism nor an enemy of capitalism. It is, instead, a technique for the better management of modern capitalism that preserves that system's essential principles and makes a capitalist economy socially and politically viable. Welfare state programs are, as we have seen, inherently problematic. But they are also an essential counterweight to problem-prone capitalist economies that could not exist without them.

My focus in this essay has been on the basic structures of welfare state government, on their persistence over time, and on the reasons for their persistence. Rather than reproduce the presentism of routine political debate, I have sought to stand back from day-to-day politics and focus instead upon modes of government, forms of statecraft, and the institutions and techniques through which they are realized. None of this is intended to diminish the importance of the political struggles over the details of these welfare state practices—their funding, management, internal organization, public or private character, targeting, delivery, coverage, payment levels, and so on. Nor is it intended to diminish the importance of neoliberal and other reforms that have occurred in recent decades, and their impact on the quality and impact of welfare state services. These arguments and struggles are, and will remain, at the very heart of our domestic politics. The point of this essay is to help us approach these debates and decisions with a clearer sense of the basic institutions involved and a more realistic sense of the horizons of reform.

In an era when the collapse of socialism has left us with no viable alternative to capitalism, the question of what *kind* of capitalism we are to have has become the essential issue of our time. What was once a world historic struggle for and against the capitalist system has now become a smaller-scale conflict, waged on a daily basis, over the terms on which capitalist corporations pursue their profits and governments secure the well-being of their citizens. In those struggles, the character of the welfare state is always what is at stake.

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Résumé

Qu'est-ce que l'Etat-providence? Nombre de commentateurs en font un moment historique dans la Grande-Bretagne de l'après-guerre ou l'Amérique du New Deal. Les académiques discutent de « la mort du social » et d'un glissement de « l'Etat social vers l'Etat pénal » comme si l'Etat-providence avait été transformé par le néo-libéralisme. Cet article retrace l'émergence de l'Etat-providence comme mode spécifique de gouvernance, en décrivant sa rationalité propre tout comme ses formes caractéristiques, ses fonctions et ses effets. Il identifie cinq secteurs de gouvernance de l'Etat-providence, leurs relations ainsi que les différentes formes qu'ils peuvent prendre en fonction de la période et des lieux observés. Il étudie les engagements contradictoires qui façonnent les pratiques de l'Etat-providence, tout comme les problèmes et contradictions associés à ces pratiques. Il situe le gouvernement de l'Etat-providence dans une analyse à long terme des relations évolutives entre les sphères sociale et économique. L'article propose de considérer l'Etat-providence comme un « fait social normal » – une partie essentielle (bien que constamment contestée) de l'organisation sociale et économiques des sociétés capitalistes modernes.

Mots-clés : Etat-providence ; Gouvernance ; Néo-libéralisme ; Economie morale ; Fait social normal.

Zusammenfassung

Was ist ein Wohlfahrtsstaat? Zahlreiche Kommentatoren sprechen über ihn, als handele es sich um einen historischen Moment im Nachkriegsengland oder im Amerika des New Deal. Akademiker sprechen vom „Tod des Sozialen" und vom Übergang des „Sozialstaats zum Strafstaat", als ob der Sozialstaat vom Neoliberalismus verändert worden wäre. Dieser Aufsatz geht der Entstehung des Sozialstaats als spezifischer Regierungsform auf den Grund, wobei sowohl seine eigene Rationalität als auch seine charakteristischen Formen, Aufgaben und Auswirkungen beschrieben werden. Er identifiziert fünf Regierungsbereiche des Wohlfahrtsstaates, sowie deren, je nach Ära und Ort verschiedenen, Beziehungen und Ausformungen. Er untersucht die gegensätzlichen Versprechen, die den Wohlfahrtsstaat charakterisieren, sowie die Probleme und Widersprüche dieser Praktiken. Die Regierung des Wohlfahrtsstaates wird in eine Langzeituntersuchung der sich wandelnden Veränderungen zwischen sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Sphären einbezogen. Der Aufsatz schlägt vor, den Wohlfahrtsstaat als einen „normalen sozialen Sachverhalt" zu begreifen – einen bedeutenden Bestandteil (obwohl dauernd angezweifelt) der sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Organisation der *modernen kapitalistischen Gesellschaften*.

Schlüsselwörter : Wohlfahrtsstaat; Regierung; Neoliberalismus; Moralische Wirtschaft; Normaler sozialer Sachverhalt.