The shift in the U.S. political climate away from liberalism and the lessened likelihood of a full-fledged welfare state justify a new concept for social welfare—the functional conception. In 1965, Wilensky and Lebeaux introduced two classic conceptions of welfare, the residual and the institutional. Residual welfare established a "safety net" of programs to assist people in the absence of normal structures of supply, family, and the market. The institutional viewpoint considered welfare a structure, like public education, that is essential for the functioning of a modern society. Significantly, Wilensky and Lebeaux expected the residual conception to give way to the institutional as capital and structural investments in social welfare became more necessary for industrial society.

Explicit in that expectation was an assumption that American welfare programs would parallel the European version of the welfare state, in which social provision was integrated in the social and economic structure of society. "The 'welfare state' will become the 'welfare society,'" Wilensky and Lebeaux concluded, "and both will be more reality than epithet." Titmuss hoped that the welfare state, as an instrument of government, eventually would lead to a "welfare world." A half-century after the inception of the New Deal, Axinn and Levin wrote optimistically about "a broadening of public responses, both in terms of programs to meet the needs and in terms of levels of government responsibility" for welfare.

Emergence of Neoconservative Thought

By the mid-1980s, welfare advocates were less sanguine about the promise of an institutionalized system of welfare in the United States. Painton foretold problems in the European welfare states:

Across the Continent, social security systems are grappling with fiscal crisis, in part because ponderous, costly bureaucracies have mushroomed to administer a vast array of programs that sometimes neglect the essential to serve up what is merely desirable....Bloated beyond its architects' intent, welfarism is threatening bankruptcy in some countries.

The election of conservative governments in the United States, Great Britain, and Scandinavia led Esping-Andersen to conclude "the voters have not only rejected flawed and expensive programs, they have renounced the very idea of the welfare state."

In the United States, a conservative revolution, led by the Reagan Administration, effectively halted the expansion of insurance programs and cut deeply into programs that were means-tested. The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, a Washington, D.C., policy institute, estimates that between 1982 and 1986, $60 billion was cut from welfare programs that benefited low- and moderate-income Americans. At the same time, the Reagan Administration sought to rework welfare programs to be more consistent with the traditional values of work, thrift, and self-help. In contrast to the antipathy for welfare shown previously by some conservatives, neoconservatives developed a more sophisticated appreciation for welfare. For example, earlier pettiness of trying to define catsup as a vegetable to reduce expenditures for the School Lunch Program was superseded by relatively substantial thinking about "workfare" programs. Essentially, neoconservatives are concerned about making welfare a productive institution rather than one that they perceive to be sapping the nation's social and economic capital.

Neoliberal Response

In an increasingly antagonistic political climate, liberals have had to work hard simply to defend existing programs. Facing the unlikely prospect of realizing a European-style welfare state—complete with guaranteed annual income, full employment, and national health insurance—neoliberals began to look to nongovernmental institutions for welfare provision. Although they did not reject outright a role for government in welfare, neoliberals preferred minimal government involvement in social affairs. Neoliberals recognized the aversion of white, working-class Americans toward redistributive welfare schemes that were intended to enhance the economic position of ethnic and minority groups.

As a post-New Deal ideology, neoliberalism already is having a pronounced effect on how Democrats think about social welfare. Peters has suggested streamlining the welfare system by means-testing all welfare programs. In reviewing income maintenance programs, such as Social Security, welfare, veterans' pensions, and unemployment compensation, Peters outlined one candidate for welfare reform:

We want to eliminate duplication and apply a means-test to these programs.... As a practical matter the country can't afford to spend money on people who don't need it...as liberal idealists, we don't think the well-off should be getting money from those programs anyway—every cent we can afford should go to helping those in real need. Social Security for those totally dependent on it is miserably inadequate, as welfare in many states.

Reich interprets welfare as investment in "human capital" that should be adapted to productivity. Restructuring human capital investment—in other words, reforming the current welfare apparatus—would involve revamping virtually every program.

Other social services—health care, Social Security, day care, disability benefits, unemployment compensation, relocation assistance—will become part of the process of structural adjustment. Public funds now spent directly on these services will instead be made available to businesses, according to the number of people they employ and the number of chronically unemployed they agree to hire. Government bureaucracies that now administer these programs to individuals will be supplanted, to a large extent, by companies that administer them to their employees.

Functional Welfare

Neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies seek to recast welfare programs to be more consistent with economic productivity. Although the two groups' methods for accomplishing this change differ somewhat, the result is an emphasis on the functional relationship between welfare and society. This emphasis on the functional represents a divergence from traditional conservatives, who pursued a restrictive approach to welfare provision consistent with the residual...
conception, as well as from traditional liberals, who preferred open-ended welfare programs associated with the institutional conception. Thus welfare benefits under a functional conception likely would be somewhat more generous than conservatives would desire but less generous than advocated by liberals.

A good example of this compromise appears in current proposals for welfare reform. Most welfare reform plans, such as the Family Support Program and the Family Security Act, consist of relatively modest workfare programs that pale in contrast to the New Deal or War on Poverty initiatives. The costs of these programs, $2.5 billion and $2.4 billion, respectively, do not begin to recover the massive amounts cut from welfare programs in recent years. Still, conservatives complain that increased appropriations for reform are counterproductive to the poor who, they claim, are better off having their social and economic needs met through nongovernmental initiatives. Liberals argue in response that these amounts are inadequate for populations that increasingly are vulnerable because of reductions in governmental welfare supports.

Functional welfare is related closely in design and execution to sociological functionalism. The functional school of sociology interpreted society as a set of interdependent elements held together by system-maintaining behavior that ensured social stability. The key to understanding society—and also to changing it—is to identify and enhance the relationships among central institutions. Acting in a manner that diminishes social and institutional relations is dysfunctional.

Functional welfare, then, would reinforce social institutions and insist that beneficiaries participate in them in an appropriate manner. As applied to income maintenance policy, for example, functional welfare would not provide benefits unconditionally, as is much the case with the current Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, but would require beneficiaries to engage in job-seeking activities, as in the case of workfare. The reciprocity in both social interaction and institutional relations that is implicit in functional welfare shows the inherent conservatism of the concept.

Functional welfare places different demands on welfare professionals than do the earlier residual and institutional conceptions. Under the earlier conceptions, welfare advocates worked to support individuals and families until welfare provisions could become universal as a social right. The implication was that advocates should work toward social equality by broadening the coverage of welfare benefits as a right of citizenship. In contrast, the functional conception emphasizes the differentiation of programs that are beneficial (functional) from those that are detrimental (dysfunctional). The functional conception also advocates the empirical demonstration that social harm is the result of dysfunctional practices. In proposing new programs in an atmosphere of functional welfare application, welfare professionals will have to base their advocacy less on moral grounds and concentrate more on factors that show cost-effectiveness. Social justice may remain an objective for welfare professionals, but the means for achieving that end are more empirical under the functional conception of welfare.

**Effects of Functional Welfare on Practice Areas**

Despite conservative tendencies, the functional welfare conception is consistent with recent developments in social work. Foremost is the emergence of industrial social work, a new field of practice in the private sector for clinical social workers. Functional welfare also affects administration in the public sector; the expansion of programs that train or retrain welfare recipients, such as workfare, will create opportunities for experienced human service administrators, particularly in the area of program development.

In contrast, functional welfare is likely to present problems for social workers in some established fields of practice. Applying a functional "litmus test" to client groups that are not as productive economically, such as the aged, children, or the retarded, may mean that these groups will have to work harder to justify their share of welfare resources. Under the functional conception of welfare, their social claim may be interpreted as a drag on the economy, and in an era of competitiveness, these groups may have to strive harder to retain their worthiness for welfare.

For other practitioners, functional welfare may prove a mixed blessing. Social workers serving groups that are either engaged in the labor market, such as the working poor, or are striving to become so, such as unemployed minorities and women, may have a stronger argument for benefits. If the welfare state becomes the "work-ethnic state," members of these groups may be able to justify additional benefits for clients to become more "productive." On the other hand, groups that have not been able to participate fully in the labor market—women, racial minorities, the handicapped—will face even greater obstacles to achieving social and economic equality if benefits are not allocated to improve their chances in the labor market.

**Notes and References**

3. Ibid., p. 147.
11. Ibid., pp. 34, 36.
13. Ibid., p. 248.
14. In this context, functional welfare is a normative theory rather than a purely descriptive theory, which is ironic because functionalism was established primarily to bypass the "unscientific" excesses associated with Marxism and social Darwinism. As these examples illustrate, any scientific theory can convert to ideology once it attracts sufficient loyalty of a social elite and becomes an instrument with which to shape social reality.

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