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—DEMETRIUS S. IATRIDIS

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND SOCIAL WELFARE

ABSTRACT: Political ideologies shape public policy debates as well as the social policy strategies developed to address "social problems." The clashes among long-standing political traditions—conservatism, liberalism, radicalism, and feminism—reflect fundamental and often irreconcilable differences regarding social, economic, and political life. The four political

ideologies are compared for their varied perspectives on several core issues that underpin social welfare provision, including human nature, need, the general welfare, social problems, racial inequality, and the role of government. The resulting distinctions provide social workers with a framework to more effectively assess social welfare policy.

KEY WORDS: ideology; social welfare; conservatism; liberalism; radicalism; feminism

An ideology is a relatively coherent and comprehensive system of ideas (beliefs, traditions, principles, and myths) about human nature, institutional arrangements, and social processes held by individuals and groups in society (Blau & Abramovitz, 2007). For some people, the word *ideology* suggests rigid ideas, biased thinking, or simplistic notions. While this is sometimes the case, in practice most ideological thinking is fluid, contested, and complex.

The Role and Function of Political Ideologies

The three standard political ideologies—conservatism, liberalism, and radicalism—draw upon longstanding political philosophies that contain core assumptions about social life. Each ideology offers (a) an explanation of social problems and conditions; (b) criteria that help people decide what is right and wrong, good and bad, fair and unfair; (c) a road map or a framework of reference for individuals that helps to organize tremendous complexities; and (d) a general plan for political action. Feminism, also discussed below, presents a gendered critique of these mainstream perspectives (Blau & Abramovitz, 2007). Although different ideologies coexist in a single society, in most cases, one ideology prevails and provides a framework for seeing the world, shaping public policy, and guiding both scientific inquiry and professional practice. In today's large, internally divided, and unequal societies, the governing ideology typically reflects the economic and political interests of the established powers. Its messages may appear so natural and logical that one can easily miss how powerfully these ideas shape individual thinking and uphold the status quo. Taken for granted or regarded as truth, the dominant set of ideas often screens out important alternative views by labeling them as unrealistic, deviant, or extreme. Groups backing an oppositional ideology such as feminism rarely have equal access to the center of power where decisions are made (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963).

The clash among the three main ideologies has dominated both U.S. and world politics for centuries. The stakes in the outcome of the conflict are high

because the winning system of beliefs plays a key role in who benefits and who loses from the distribution of income, wealth, and power and because the prevailing ideology does not go unchallenged. Instead, other ideological perspectives provide the basis for negotiating, resisting, and changing the overarching view of social life (Love, 2006). History is filled with stories of individuals and social movements that resisted mainstream ideas and in the process transformed both their own thinking and the world. Depending on the strength of the challenge, officialdom may try to ignore, co-opt, or repress the new ideas. Such as those presented by the civil rights, gay rights, and women's movements (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963; Piiven & Cloward, 1979).

Political Ideology and the U.S. Welfare State

Awareness of political ideology is critical for social work, given the critical role it played in the nation's response to the two major economic crises of the 20th century that fueled both the rise of the welfare state—the institution intended to provide a minimum level of income and services to individuals and families—in the 1930s and then its contraction since the mid-1970s. Those in charge blamed the first crisis—the collapse of the economy in the 1930s—on the failure of the market. By the 1920s, the rise of monopolies and other structural changes in the economy had weakened the institutional arrangements put in place to support profitable production and political stability in the 1890s. The severity of the 1930s Great Depression led the nation's leaders to call upon the government to address their economic woes. However reluctantly, they replaced the accepted conservative *laissez-faire* economic policies with liberalism that supported a redistribution of income downward and an expanded role of the state. The resulting New Deal programs, especially the welfare state, increased the standard of living and reduced the hardship millions of individuals and families faced (Jansson, 2005).

The second major crisis of profitability surfaced in the mid-to-late 1970s as the changes in the domestic and global economies weakened the institutional arrangements put into place to promote economic growth and political stability in the 1930s and later, after World War II. This time the nation's leaders sought to restore profits by undoing the New Deal, that is, by redistributing income upward and downsizing the state, including the welfare state. They effectively abandoned postwar liberalism for a return to conservative *laissez-faire* economics now variously called Neoliberalism, Reaganomics, or Supply-Side Economics. [Neo-liberalism represents an updated and more extreme version of the "classical liberal" theory developed

in the 18th and 19th centuries by Adam Smith and David Ricardo. They argued that market forces self-regulate the capitalist economy, thereby limiting the need for government. Viewed as conservative today, the theory was considered economically liberal when developed (Kotz, 2003).] To build public support for this U-turn in public policy, its proponents blamed the stagnating economy on "big government," the expanded welfare state, and the gains of social movements. The resulting tax cuts, privatization (social welfare responsibility shifted from the public to the private sector), devolution (social welfare responsibility shifted from the federal government to the states), and the attack on social movements caused retrenchment in social programs. At the same time the Far Right gained considerable influence over the legislative agenda through electoral victories as well as legislation such as the Contract with America in 1994. They sought to restore "personal responsibility," "family-values," and a "color-blind" social order—key components of conservative political thought.

Competing Ideological Perspectives

The problem of racial inequality is used as an illustration, given both the widely held but incorrect belief that the majority of social welfare clients are persons of color and given the racialization of contemporary social policy debates. (Neubeck & Cazenave 2001; Gilens, 1999).

CONSERVATISM The rise of the U.S. welfare state represented a departure from traditional market-driven *laissez-faire* conservatism that opposed government intervention in the economy. Since the mid-1970s two types of conservatism have taken hold of social welfare policy: *social conservatism* and *laissez-faire conservatism*. The former has exerted as much if not more influence during the last 30 years than the latter.

Social conservatism, also referred to as the Far Right, is rooted in religious beliefs. It regards human nature as determined by the original sin, as more evil than good, and sees human beings as inherently flawed. If left unchecked, their uncontrollable impulses, untamed self-interest, and narrow selfish needs can create social chaos everywhere. This negative view of human nature as unbridled leads social conservatism to conclude that people are too unruly to be trusted to care for or govern themselves. Thus the general welfare or the common good depends on maintaining order by ensuring compliance with the moral authority of God, the patriarchal authority of the family, and the mandates of the state.

Social conservatism calls on *the government* to intervene in some areas of social life while strongly opposing its activities in others. It endorses using the robust power of the state to aid business. But contrary to popular wisdom it also supports the use of public policy to regulate personal life by penalizing "irresponsible" or immoral behavior such as drugs, crime, abortion, divorce, single motherhood, homosexuality, undocumented immigration, and the youth culture. Further, it encourages the government to restrict abortion rights, conduct prayer in school, ban same-sex marriages, reverse judicial leniency, privatize Social Security, and reduce, if not eliminate, the welfare rolls. At the same time, social conservatism deplores government intervention in other spheres of life, especially those related to the welfare state. It holds "big government," social programs, and social movements responsible for driving religion out of the schools, abetting the civil rights movement, liberating women, promoting homosexuality, weakening our national defenses, and launching the War on Poverty (Klatch, 1987). To dismantle the welfare state, social conservatism calls for tax cuts, privatization, devolution, and program cutbacks. It also disparages social welfare professionals as the "new class," "a liberal elite," "the intelligentsia," and "social engineers," who support the welfare state simply to further their own interests, not to help others.

Finally social conservatives typically explain *social problems* in ways that blame the victim. In the case of *racial inequality*, they have moved from the now discredited belief in biological inferiority to notions of cultural inferiority, which hold that existing inequities reflect moral or cultural rather than racial differences (D'Souza, 1995; Mead, 1992). These explanations argue that when persons of color do not succeed, the failure stems not from racism but from personal and community values, that is, a culture of poverty that violates the traditional American values of hard work, thrift, deferral of gratification, and respect for marriage. Social conservatism adds that *all* Blacks are too dependent on the government: poor Blacks on welfare, middle-class Blacks on government jobs, and Black owners of small businesses on government set-asides. Based on these arguments and the view that racism no longer exists, social conservatism calls for a return to race-neutral or color-blind social policy.

Laissez-faire conservatism is grounded in classical economics that puts its faith in a self-regulated market and disdains government intervention in the economy. Neo-liberalism, the name given to the mid-1970s revival of this economic theory, should not, however, be confused with political liberalism that refers to political rather than economic beliefs or with neo-conservatism

that refers to socially conservative beliefs held by a group of 1960s liberals who turned to conservatism in the mid-1970s.

Unlike social conservatism, laissez-faire conservatism exalts human reason and intelligence. It regards human nature as rational, self-regulated, and competitive and individuals as autonomous, detached, and dedicated to the pursuit of self-interest. The general welfare depends on leaving individuals alone to compete in the market economy, with a minimum of control or interference from the state. Instead an "invisible hand" maintains order by coordinating market activities. It automatically channels the selfish motives of many individuals into complementary activities that enhance the well being of all.

Laissez-faire conservatism calls upon the government to maximize individual freedom by doing as little as possible. That is, the government should stay out of the market—except to perform a few important oversight functions such as protecting national security, private property, and basic liberties. Driven by economic rather than moral concerns, laissez-faire conservatives argue that "big" government interferes with the unrestricted pursuit of self-interest, limits the ability of individuals to be self-determining, and stifles both initiative and innovation. Further, it believes that the redistributive nature of social welfare programs wrongly promotes equality over freedom (Mullaly, 1997; Klatch, 1987).

However reluctantly laissez-faire conservatism accepts a temporary welfare state limited to emergencies (the residual welfare state) as a necessary evil. It tolerates a meager safety net for the "truly needy" (Will, 1988; Ball & Dagger, 1998, p.116), favors local or state rather than federal social welfare programs (devolution), and promotes private over public sector provision (privatization). It tolerates abortion and other such services as long as they remain in private hands and do not interfere with personal liberty. Paradoxically, except for extreme libertarians who oppose all taxation, in *practice* laissez-faire conservatives support "corporate welfare"—various tax deductions and business subsidies—although this violates the rules of free competition on which conservatism stands (Abramovitz, 2001; Zepezauer, 2004).

Both social and laissez-faire conservatives define personal and societal *needs* in relation to market behavior. Drawing on neoclassical economic theory, both schools presume that people know what they need and have all the information required to make an informed choice. Because human decisions are shaped by nothing other than market forces, the individual's market behavior expresses actual need. Individuals reveal their

needs or market "preferences" by virtue of how they spend their money. People buy what they need and need what they buy—and these choices accurately reflect their true physical and emotional requirements. The needs of society as a whole represent no more or less than the sum total of millions of individual preferences. In brief, consumer demand for goods and services backed up by the dollar translates into need. Because people buy what they need, the gap between needs and resources—the liberal justification for the welfare state—does not exist. This individualized understanding of social needs also supports conservatism's opposition to nearly all forms of government intervention in the economy.

Laissez-faire conservatives explain social problems as the result of individual choice. Its three economic explanations of racial inequality either blame the victim or dispute the existence of racism. The *human capital theory* holds that Blacks and Whites have equal opportunity to pursue their self-interest in the market. Therefore, racial disparities grow not from racism but from differences in personal traits (motivation, behavior, ability, talent, and so forth) and differential choices to invest in human capital (that is health, education). The *irrational firm theory* holds that racial discrimination cannot exist for long in a profit-driven market economy. Any preference for hiring White people becomes economically irrational because it deprives the business of the profit-enhancing value of cheaper Black labor. Given this reality faced with competition from nondiscriminating firms the inefficient discriminating firms go bankrupt. The *rational odds theory* (or racial profiling) suggests that discrimination makes sense because the individuals in question belong to a group whose statistical pattern makes discriminatory judgments reasonable. The cab driver who is reluctant to pick up young Black males, the police officer who collars a Black teenager, the store clerk who keeps an extra eye on Black customers—all are working on a rational assumption of criminal behavior based on the statistical odds. Laissez-faire conservatives call for changes in individual behavior but otherwise look to market forces to end racial inequality.

LIBERALISM Liberalism also contains two sectors: pragmatic and humanitarian liberalism. In the United States, pragmatic liberalism, also called reform liberalism, broke with laissez-faire conservatism in the early 20th century as people lost faith in the capacity of the totally unregulated market to meet basic needs, maximize success, keep the economy afloat, and sustain the civic peace. Humanitarian liberalism, also known as social democracy, is more common in western Europe

and stands somewhere between liberalism and left wing or socialistic radicalism on the ideological continuum (Mullaly, 1997).

Pragmatic liberalism shares laissez-faire's positive view of human nature as rational, self-interest, and competitive but adds that everyone merits an equal opportunity to succeed. As more and more people failed to achieve the good life in the rapidly industrializing society, pragmatic liberalism concluded that the disadvantaged lacked an equal chance to compete for success in the market. Like laissez-faire conservatism, pragmatic liberalism defines *need* in relation to individual's interaction with the market. However, pragmatic liberalism adds that some people lack the financial wherewithal to buy what they need. Therefore, their market behavior does not accurately mirror what they require to survive. Equating consumer preferences with real needs allows the community to wrongly conclude that poor people actually prefer less food, second-hand clothes, inferior education, and substandard housing. For pragmatic liberalism, the general welfare or the common good requires that everyone has an equal opportunity to maximize the pursuit of self-interest and to achieve at least a minimum standard of living. To this end, this brand of liberalism moved away from the laissez-faire economic doctrine to the support of government intervention in the economy. It asks the state to create the conditions that would enable the disadvantaged to compete for success in the market on an equal footing with others and to meet at least the subsistence needs of those the market cannot serve. Pragmatic liberalism explains social problems in both social and individual terms. It argues that racial inequality stems from prejudice (beliefs and attitudes) and racial discrimination (actions and behaviors), both of which deny persons of color equal opportunities to pursue their self-interest and to succeed in the market economy and other spheres of life. It calls on the government to ensure legal equality, meaning equal treatment under the law; to reduce or eliminate the racially biased barriers; and to provide needed supports.

Humanitarian liberalism regards human nature as rational and autonomous but also altruistic, dependent, cooperative, and interdependent. Its definition of *need* goes beyond mere survival to the ability to participate fully in society. Humanitarian liberalism holds that the market responds to economic demand (that is, purchasing power) rather than need and thus fosters inequality. The general welfare cannot be achieved unless everyone has access to a community-defined measure of well being based on the general standard of living in wider society. Without such resources, individuals are "in need" because they cannot think, compete for

success, vote intelligently, develop relationships, enjoy leisure time, or otherwise participate fully in society. The general welfare also rests on people putting the common good ahead of one's private desires, cooperating rather than competing, and sharing responsibility for others, and otherwise promoting social cohesion and solidarity.

Humanitarian liberalism concludes that the government rather than the market is best positioned to create the conditions needed to meet basic needs, and maximize civic participation, that is to ensure the basic right of citizenship defined as community membership not national origins. These rights include (a) civil rights (the right to individual liberty and equality before the law); (b) political rights (the right to vote and to run for political office); and (c) social rights (the right to a community-defined adequate standard of living via the market plus a universal, comprehensive, and adequate system of government-provided benefits). Access to social rights can reduce social, economic, and political inequality; defuse collective resentment bred by social stratification; and otherwise promote social solidarity and cohesion. Humanitarian liberalism approximates the human rights model.

Humanitarian liberalism explains social problems as a product of unequal institutional arrangements and racial inequality as a product of institutionalized racism or those established laws, customs, and practices that appear to be intrinsically free of racial bias (that is, race-neutral or color-blind) but whose impact falls heavily and unfairly on persons of color. It denotes patterns, procedures, practices, and policies that consistently benefit White persons while penalizing, disadvantaging, and exploiting persons-of-color by ignoring the consequences of past prejudice, discrimination, and racial subordination. To erase racial inequality requires more than the conventional legal responses to racial discrimination as the latter do necessarily alter embedded racial hierarchies. Instead the achievement of racial equality must move beyond the individual's right to legal equality before the law to the collective or human right to nondiscrimination and beyond equality of opportunity to equality of result, which involves undoing the racial hierarchies of domination and subordination.

RADICALISM Radicalism regards human nature as socially constructed through the historic interplay of human biology, the physical environment, and human society. Human nature is the product of human activity and is not fixed. According to Karl Marx, a father of radicalism, "All history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature" (Jaggar, 1983, p. 130).

Human nature reflects the existing mode of production (for example, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, or communism) and the individual's location in society's class structure. Marx adds, "The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men [sic] that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness." (Tong, 1998, pp. 94-95). Thus, it is through social production and human labor that individuals collectively create the society that in turn shapes them.

Instead of defining need in terms of market behavior, radicalism argues that the class structure and the profit motive socially construct need. For example, the wealthy tend to expect a relatively high standard of living, whereas marginalized and deprived people, having access to fewer possibilities, often settle for less. These low expectations harm the poor but benefit the affluent as rising expectations can lead deprived groups to demand a larger share of the economic and political pie. Further, the profit-driven culture of consumerism actually creates need. It induces people to realize their personal identity through what they consume and encourages people to "need" what companies produce whether or not the product is necessary or good for them. At the same time, the market economy allows important needs for income, food, housing, and health care to go unmet. It also fails to register the need for parks, schools, satisfying work, environmental protections, and other improvements in the quality of life that do not yield a profit. For radicalism, the main aim of production and distribution is the full satisfaction of human needs.

The general welfare rests on a social or collective definition of need. Only after everyone reaches this civic standard should other needs be met. Given the market economy's cash nexus, reliance on competition, need for coercion, and widespread social stratification, its dynamics tend to alienate people from each other, their work, and their environment, and fail to produce the necessary social solidarity. The notion of the general welfare is more possible in an egalitarian society where people contribute according to their ability and receive resources according to their need. Such societies promote participatory over elite democracy, and minimize special privilege based on an unequal distribution of resources. Radicalism sustains skepticism about the role the government in capitalist societies and their capacity to achieve the above ends. Given the government's ties to the dominant class's members and interests, its leaders can only go so far. By definition the elite must support the interests of the powerful, mediate their internal class rivalries, and contain working-class

demands. Welfare states exist primarily to cushion the blows of the market inequality, to create the conditions for profitable production, to enforce the class structure. Radicalism also insists that "the people" can influence the government through social movements and other elements of class struggle. In the final analysis, radicalism argues that human liberation requires a welfare society—one that subordinates the interests of the market to the people. Among other things, such a transformed society would replace private ownership of production and the profit motive with communal control over all areas of life.

Radicalism argues that social problems are socially constructed as well and reflect unequal power arrangements (Mullaly, 1997). In this view, racial inequality derives from institutionalized racism, but also from the social construction of the meaning of race. Since modern genetic analysis (DNA) reports greater variation within racial groups than between them, the "races" are not biologically distinct groups (Omi & Winant, 1994). Even so, being born or labeled Latino, African American, or Native American in the United States has immediate and often negative and unequal outcomes. The fluidity of racial attribution (for example, in the mid-1800s California changed the designations of Mexican and Chinese Americans) also points to a social rather than a biological basis of race. Radicalism argues that the powers-that-be often assign social, political, and economic meanings to physiological racial categories to achieve other ends. The resulting elaborate system of pseudo-intellectual categories, stereotypic assumptions, and negative contentions are then used to justify a system that installs White power and privilege to the disadvantage of persons of color.

FEMINISM Feminism criticizes each of the prior political ideologies for focusing solely on male experiences, regarding women as inferior, or remaining silent on women. Feminism in general seeks to account for the experience of women resulting from women's subordination to men, but there are three basic versions of feminism—liberal, cultural, and socialist. All three have responded to earlier criticisms of their analysis by regularly taking account of race and class dynamics as well as gender.

Liberal, cultural, and socialist feminism each add a gendered dimension to the discussion of human nature. *Liberal feminism* argues that men and women share a common human nature beneath the surface of male or female differences. It rejects standard liberalism's view that women are irrational by nature and therefore inferior as contradictory to liberalism's claim that because all humans possess the capacity for reason they should

be treated equally. *Cultural feminism*, sometimes referred to as radical feminism, holds that the powers-that-be presume that biology is destiny and define women as inferior and subordinated to men. They argue instead that while male and female may differ biologically, the social categories of woman and man are neither natural nor eternal. *Socialist feminism* argues that human nature is socially constructed through the interaction of two deeply intertwined master systems—capitalism and patriarchy—along with racism.

When it comes to the definition of *need*, feminism broadens the definition to include personal and societal needs for care regarded as a universal aspect of human life. The need for care arises because all individuals need care to thrive and to develop fully but also because at some time anyone may not be able to care of themselves or others. By not noticing the centrality of the need for care in human life, the nation's leaders can degrade the activities of care, exploit the caregivers (most of whom are women), and fail to provide for the needs of both individuals and society as a whole.

All three feminisms insist that the general welfare cannot be achieved without ending women's oppression. Liberal feminism emphasizes sexism (for example differential treatment of people based on sex), calling it an arbitrary constraint on the freedom of both women and men. For them the general welfare rests on equal opportunity to participate fully in all societal institution. For cultural feminism the general welfare depends on eliminating male control of women's bodies, labor, and resources as well as male control of marriage, employment, and government because the resulting domination deprives women of power and self-determination in all spheres of life. Socialist feminism highlights the gender division of labor. It argues that since this gendered structure serves both capitalism and patriarchy, the general welfare requires altering or eliminating it from the workplace and the home along with the ideologies that justify the subordination of women and as well as domination based on class and race.

Feminists of all political stripes also question the role of the government as outlined by the three main ideologies. They fault conservatism for ruling out state support, liberalism for allowing the state to downplay women's rights, and radicalism for critiquing the state's relationship to class structures but not patriarchy or racism. It critiques all three perspectives for ignoring the particular sources of women's oppression, the conditions needed for effective care, and the definition of care giving as work. They argue that to be relevant for women the analysis of the state must be broadened to include the family, social reproduction, the gender division of labor, and women's political struggles.

Liberal feminism sees government as an ally. It calls upon the state to end all of the sexist practices that bar women from full participation in society as well as all male or female double standards. Cultural feminism neither offers a specific analysis of the state nor automatically sees the government as an ally. But it argues that women cannot be free until society gives up the glorification of motherhood for all women, the sexual objectification of women, homophobia, and other oppressive structures. Socialist feminism argues that the state often reproduces and reinforces unequal power relations based on gender, race, and class. Socialist feminists also point to the emancipatory potential of the welfare state. By providing women with income outside of employment and marriage, its programs can increase the individual and collective leverage of women with both employers and male partners, which in turn weakens the power of both capitalism and patriarchy.

Ideology is more than abstract ideas. It has raised hopes, inspired fear, and drawn blood for millions of human beings. For better or worse, the impact of political ideologies is also woven tightly into the fabric of social work and social welfare policy. One look at the shift in public policy since the mid-1970s—from liberalism to conservatism—reveals its power as does the changes won by mobilized social movements. In order to serve their clients well, understand service delivery, influence public policy, and promote social change, social workers must understand the pros and cons of ideological prescriptions. This will make it easier to stand against ideologies that violate the profession's values, goals, and commitments and to join with allies to promote social justice as called for in the NASW Code of Ethics.

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—MIMI ABRAMOVITZ

POLITICAL INTERVENTIONS

ABSTRACT: Since the Progressive Era, social workers have played important roles in political struggles for social justice. They have criticized, designed, and implemented an array of social policies and have increasingly campaigned for and held political office. Even so, there has been considerable ambivalence within the profession about the extent to which social workers should engage in political action. A major challenge facing the profession during this century will be to ensure that social work students and practitioners understand the impact of political processes on their own and their clients' lives and develop the skills to identify which forms of political intervention are effective for different goals and contexts.

KEY WORDS: political intervention; social movements; globalization; electoral politics; identity politics; radical social work

Introduction

Political intervention is individual or collective action intended to influence public discourse, the structure and policies of government, and ultimately the distribution of rights and resources in a society. Methods of political intervention can vary significantly in their contentiousness and the degree to which they challenge the status quo. Among the least contentious are what scholars have described as conventional, insider, or institutional strategies. These include "the use of the electoral system, the judicial system, and the peaceful petitioning of public officials (lobbying, testifying at public hearings, presentations, letters, petitions)"