

Ways to analyze the “welfare state” in the 21st Century
Updated Oct. 17, 2011
Ann Withorn

These approaches to analysis are not discrete categories, they should and do overlap and differ in emphasis depending upon the specific aspect of welfare state provisions under examination and all are also grounded in the specific historic era when the welfare state is being examined. All involve the use of “evidence” even though the relative weight of differing factors can vary greatly across approaches – and sometimes even within them.

- Within themselves all contain elements of what we often refer to as “liberal” and “conservative” values.
- Similarly, elements of support for all approaches can be found within all major world religions
- All can be used to support a capitalist market economic order and a more collective socialized economic order. Totalitarian regimes and all governments, by definition, act as some kind of “welfare states”
- All approaches can generate arguments for combating deep historical social strains of racism, sexism, and all types of intolerance, and can also be seen as examples of how these deep issues are institutionally supported.

1. The Professional/Functional Approach

Sees the welfare state is a product of on-going societal activity aimed at responding to human need via a wide range of publicly funded efforts and social programs and of expected “private responses”, usually religious or civic. Methods differ over time but the function of “social provision” for what we cannot provide private is always needed. It means seeing the welfare state as :

- A broad combination of humanist responses trying to help the stranger, and all, when need is beyond their private scope through social assistance competently provided.

- A public health obligation to maintain the societal “health”, broadly as well as medically defined
- The organized functions of domestic social control of human behavior that is dangerous to others.
- Goal is usually “more”: eligibility, more accountability, more attention to the roles and functions

If the welfare state is a legal, organized way to fund and set standards, then the Biggest questions regarding it are:

what rights do citizens have to a welfare state?

Are they individual rights, categorical rights or collective universal rights?

What are the limits and boundaries of welfare states, how extensive, what is “optional”?

What are the effects of social programs on individuals and groups who receive them?

Is it most helpful, since “welfare” is a normal public social function, to primarily value professional social work expertise and practice toward all aspects of policies/programs or more grass roots expansive models?

The professional/functional approach Jansson, lead thinker for our purposes

2. The Social/Economic Stability Approach

Sees the welfare state is a dynamic way in which organized national societies use their human and economic resources to maintain social peace within an unequal world of differential needs and opportunities
Has usually included a wider variety of programs than the more traditional functional programs led by social work professionals

- Taxes of all sorts and the ways they are shared and “earmarked” for specific uses are the source for all activity and should be examined
- Various kind of “benefits” available with a social program attached – tax deductions, passes, vouchers etc
- Military, educational, health and environmental programs are key public elements are key ways that this approach is implemented

If the welfare state is a broader way of distributing social resources, then the Biggest Questions are:

Who wins and who loses and who benefits?

What are the self-conscious justifications for these efforts?
To what degree can it be used to change, not simply ameliorate the results of the unequal distribution of wealth and social collective recognition?
How do we define and measure the social/economic effects
Does it necessarily value the goal of equality, but simply recognizes the need for social stability and the limits of the market to address it? Critics are always pushing for more social justice not just “response” public response

The social/economic stability approach Jansson/Piven lead thinkers

3. The Political Power Struggle Approach

Sees the welfare state as a direct result of the ways political actors in society and within governments choose to create structures that show the benefits of government under the regime, ruling party or elite power structure, and to show what happens to those who are dangers. Means that the major ways to understand the activities of the welfare state are

- Identifying the constituencies, representing any perspective within the State, that wants a particular program or approach to be changed or created, the primary task is to gather allies and arguments and prepare one’s case, at least until “a window of opportunity opens.”
- Viewing all changes in expenditures and selected leaders on domestic programs as “political” in their goals – representing change in who benefits and is valued – not primarily as built on “evidence based” efforts to improve programs
- Arguments about the humanitarian value of differing programs are secondary, or must be linked with more political power goals, groups and alliances

If this political “reality” is primary, then the Biggest Questions are:

What are the prospects and possibilities for social programs being anything other than social maintenance?
Are there patterns across historical time that suggest economic and political realities more conducive to social program development than others

If a “welfare state” is a political instrument what does that mean for the kind of local, state and national government we can expect to emerge from different political regimes.

The political power struggle approach **Kington, lead thinker, reflected throughout the Danzinger/Cancion reader

4. The Communitarian Social Achievement Approach

The Social State is a better term for examining the welfare state as an achievement of Civil Society that enhances community the more it is participatory and the benefits and limits democratically transparent. Conflict regarding the questions to be addressed should be discussed with acceptable compromise the most desirable goal.

Such an approach means that

- Large state bureaucracy undermines the very notion of how we work together to help our society care for itself. It should be as diffused and limited as possible, but society still needs to help itself through public policies and funding
- Local community based efforts are the best means to deliver service and build civil society in all places. Volunteerism and non-profits are best, but will need public funding and boundaries
- The *process* of how the state delivers services is as critical as outcome, should be both inclusive and deliberative

For Communitarians, the Biggest Questions are:

If building community and creating mutual respect and social capacity are the major goals what happens to programs for vulnerable people who are outside of dominant norms?

What are the limits of democracy and participation in social projects and in society as a whole?

Who sets the standards and limits, how and why?

If local and private are better where and how does accountability apply?

The Communitarian achievement approach **Bellah, lead thinker

As a Human Services Professionals within a Master’s level program you should eventually be familiar enough with these broad categories to consider

how the authors you find useful use each approach to examining the welfare state and place themselves within and in conflict with it.

Also you should have some sense of how your own work and thinking and questions are themselves linked to differing approaches.

You might also think about how policies and programs you care about (negatively or positively) embody the arguments and values embodied within the differing approaches.