

A Critical Essay on Lawrence Mead's *Beyond Entitlement - The Social Obligations of Citizenship*

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1. Introduction

The welfare state can be seen as the most significant recent political development in the West. There has been the disagreement over the scale of government between conservatives and liberals. Unlike liberals, conservatives assert that government welfare programs have facilitated dependent behavior and unable to get ahead on their own.

However, liberals, moderates, and conservatives generally agree about what is wrong with the current welfare system and what general directions reform should take.¹⁾ The consensus involves five broad themes: the concepts of

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1) Robert D. Reischauer, "Welfare Reform: Will Consensus Be Enough?," *The Brookings Review*(Summer, 1987), p.4.

responsibility, work, family, education, and state discretion.²⁾ Among these five themes, Mead emphasizes reciprocal responsibilities, in which society's obligation to help those in need is balanced by recipients obligations to society. The lack of a federally defined standard of social behavioral guidelines, sanctions for non-compliance and proper implementation of a welfare programs at grassroots level have tolerated fraud, abuse and a non-work ethic by local agencies and some beneficiaries. Charles Murray argued that American welfare policies had diminished the well-being of the 'responsible poor' by contributing to declines in safety, the quality of education, and the social status of working men and women.

Mead therefore suggests a neo approach consisting in the adoption of behavioral obligation for those "truly deserving" of governmental support. Further, after he points out that the welfare state has become a kind of hole in the polity through which millions have dropped out of active involvement in American society, he contends that the main goal of welfare policy should be to integrate the disadvantaged into mainstream society.

2. The Method and Argument

a. The Method

In his book, *Beyond Entitlement. The Social Obligations of Citizenship*, Lawrence Mead presents a well-integrated normative and empirical assessment of existing welfare policy resulting in his call for workfare as the basis for welfare reform.³⁾ He cites a lot of literature in ways that support his argument. However, because he basically denies the relevance of studies,

2) Robert D. Reischauer, p.4.

3) Kathleen Morrison and David J. Webber, "Review Essay: Welfare Reform and Policy Analysis," *Policy Studies Review*, p.3.

Mead often relies on stereotypes. Actually, the only unequivocal support for his claim stems from citations of an occasional newspaper article or other essay by "authorities" who, without much evidence, claim that there are enough jobs out there if only the poor would want to take them.⁴⁾ His argument is usually cogently presented and very convincing.⁵⁾ However, the more one either follows up on the relevant literature, studies Mead's own research, or refers to scholarly work on the issues, the more dubious Mead's argument becomes.⁶⁾

Mead presents recommendations and conclusions drawn from the perspective of his particular discipline. To do good policy analysis, policy analyst should exert super-human effort to broaden his base of knowledge in this area, utilizing the expertise from every applicable discipline, and discard those which proceed from personal bias.⁷⁾ Mead's normative analysis is premised on a great admiration for orderliness, stating that "civility is essential to a humane society."⁸⁾ He argues that orderliness is something society must achieve, in part through public authority. However, Mead fails to explore the full range of policy implications. He does not consider policies that try to modify the functioning of the economy and the labor market in ways that would increase the supply and accessibility of 'good' jobs that provide security and opportunities for mobility.⁹⁾

According to Mead, to improve the welfare state, we must look at it from a juridical and not simply economic point of view. For that reason, Mead

4) Michael R. Sosin, "Book Reviews: *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship*," *Social Science Review* (Vol. 61) (March 1987), p. 159.

5) Michael R. Sosin, "Book Reviews : *Beyond Entitlement : The Social Obligations of Citizenship*," *Social Science Review* (Vol. 61) (March 1987), p. 157.

6) Michael R. Sosin, p. 157.

7) Kathleen Morrison and David J. Webber, p. 12.

8) Kathleen Morrison and David J. Webber, p. 3.

9) Margaret Weir, "Book Reviews: *Beyond Entitlement - The Social Obligations of Citizenship*," *American Journal of Sociology*, (Vol. 93) (September, 1987), p. 496.

oversimplified the causes of the problems which the disadvantaged experienced and neglected remedies that focus on economy. Mead, like the Great Society policy makers he criticizes, instead focuses on the behavioral problems of the poor, relying heavily on culture- of- poverty arguments. Yet, his evidence for the centrality of these cultural factors is thin indeed.¹⁰ Examining a much debated topic in American politics, welfare policy, in his book, *Beyond Entitlement-The Social Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), Lawrence Mead assesses welfare policy from its beginnings in the "New Deal," to the expansion of benefits in the "Great Society" period of the 1960s, to present welfare policy.

Given that functioning can be taught and is desirable, Mead surveyed the development of American welfare and unemployment policy for the past 20 years to see if they have achieved the social integration of the disadvantaged, focusing on the Great Society program and the current WIN program in New York state. According to Mead, the Aid for Dependent Children program (AFDC) creates disincentives in that welfare mothers don't want to risk losing benefits to accept low-paying jobs. They may wish to work but feel no social obligation to do so. Mead uses testimony from a welfare hearing to back up this claim. A welfare mother states that recipients do not want inadequate jobs with low pay and little opportunity for advancement and as a result, reject many of the opportunities available to them. This is where government should step in to enforce that obligation. The expansion of benefits and abuse of work requirements in the unemployment and disability insurance programs are viewed as another weakness of the current welfare system. Mead's studies of WIN offices, in New York state, helps demonstrate that work test for welfare benefits can succeed, if they are implemented in a proper fashion. The Work Incentive program established work tests for AFDC recipients. After evaluating these policies from the viewpoint of policy intentions, outputs and implementation, he proposes modifying welfare

10) Margaret Weir, p.496.

policy by adopting a mandatory workfare requirement.¹¹

Examining rates of job placement in 20 offices of New York programs, Mead presents various correlations and then largely relies on regression that relates measures of successful job placement to five factors that summarize about 20 indicators. Using above empirical data, Mead maintains that policy implementation is the key to a successful program, thus stressing the importance of the authority of the caseworker to the success of a program.¹²

Further, Mead claims that more individuals obtain jobs when "administrative will" to assert the priority of work is emphasized in WIN. However, the factor that measures "will" is put together using a statistical technique that is not used for the others and explains more of the variance in the included items than do the other factors.¹³ At the same time, using evidence from congressional testimony on President Nixon's Family Assistance Plan as background, Mead discusses the politics of welfare.¹⁴

However, one of the problems of Mead's approach is that he over-addresses 'Aid to Families with Dependent Children'(AFDC) and does not look at other aspect. His analysis is limited in that he focuses on only one aspect into the cause of poverty and that ignores several other possible causes that may exist. The weakest point in his analysis is his unexamined use of general social trends to support his assumption that the rise in the number of welfare recipients is the single determinant of the increase in other social pathologies.¹⁵ He fails to show conclusively that AFDC recipient number is the independent variable, rather than merely a variable driven by other forces.¹⁶

In many equations, Mead throws out one or two cases that are outliers, claiming that the statistical indicators are inaccurate for these cases and

11) Kathleen Morrison and David J. Webber, p.4.

12) Kathleen Morrison and David J. Webber, p.4.

13) Michael R. Sosin, p.157.

14) Michael R. Sosin, p.158.

15) Michael R. Sosin, p.157.

16) Kathleen Morrison and David J. Webber, p.4.

that including them reduces the statistical significance of the results.¹⁷ His analysis has many technical problems. Coefficients are rarely statistically significant and then only at the .10 level. And coefficient are severely biased because virtually all independent and dependent variables are divided by the size of the problem.¹⁸ Further, most important, the key relation is a tautology. Mead's key relations do not indicate that will to place relates to the number of placements but simply relate various measures of the process to each other.¹⁹

b. The Argument

Mead considers the crisis of the welfare state as disintegration. The federal government has tried to overcome the economic aspect of the disadvantaged, in part because these were the aspects government could most directly control, and it has succeeded in removing many deficiencies in income and opportunity. But the behavioral aspect of the disadvantaged has not been solved. Crime, family instability, learning problems in the schools—all are worse in low-income areas today than they were before the disadvantaged became an object of federal policy. Difficulties in getting through school, obeying the law, and keeping their families together are in turn traceable to an unstable family life, marked by absent fathers, erratic parenting, and low self-esteem and aspiration. Nowadays, more than any other economic resource, the disadvantaged need a more secure sense of order in themselves and the neighborhoods around them. Their problem is now more a moral one than an economic one, and so is the challenge facing the welfare state.

While discussing the problems associated with past and present welfare policy, Mead makes a strong argument for reform of the existing system by

17) Michael R. Sosin, pp.157-58.

18) Michael R. Sosin, p.158.

19) Michael R. Sosin, p.158.

requiring that recipients work in return for benefits. His suggestion has come to be called "workfare" and has been implemented by certain states in reform of their welfare systems, as well as by the federal government in its recent welfare reform package.

According to Mead, "the fatal weakness of federal programs is that they award benefits essentially as entitlements, expecting next to nothing from beneficiaries in return."²⁰ In other words, the main problem of federal welfare policy is its permissiveness, not its size. The permissiveness of federal programs has not enabled them to handle many of the social problems that have arisen in American society. The great social welfare reform proposals of the Nixon and Carter administration failed in helping the disadvantaged enter mainstream society because of its entitlement policies. In such context Mead argues that the current social isolation and stigma attached to them are the product of an overly permissive social policy. According to Mead, such programs undercut the functioning of the disadvantaged and make it impossible for them to be accepted as equals. Mead, however, fails to pursue his own point that permissiveness in European social programs has not led to the scale of social problems experienced by the United States.

Mead discusses the concept of freedom and incorporates it into his argument. He contends that existing social welfare programs may make individuals less free and equal instead of more, as was their intention. Government welfare recipients who can not function on their own in society have their lives somewhat governed by those policies and result in a reduction of individual freedom. Equality is also not achieved through dependency because "those who only make claims can never be equal, in the nature of things, with those on whom the claims are made."²¹ Individuals may gain monetary support equal to another who works but because he is dependent

20) Lawrence M. Mead, *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), p.2.

21) *Ibid.*, p.43.

on government for his livelihood, he will not have the respect or be seen as an equal in the eyes of others. Such respect can come only when he functions on his own in society and provide for himself and his family.

Mead thinks that there exist, in today's society, lots of individuals who would rather accept government welfare rather than take a low-paying job that may be available to them. In such context, Charles Murray also asserts in his book, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980*, that the programs funded by social welfare expenditures have promoted behaviors that reduce the probability that recipients will become self-supporting. The disadvantaged prefer living off welfare to having poorly paid, menial, and relatively unpleasant low-skilled jobs. Mead asserts that current government welfare policies allow, and may even encourage, this to take place because they do not require recipients to work for receiving benefits. He claims that there are enough jobs for everyone and that welfare basically serves moral degenerates that work requirements can save. As a proof of the availability of enough jobs, he cites the large number of illegal aliens working in such low-paying jobs. Many welfare recipients are just unwilling to accept jobs that are "beneath" them or regarded as "dirty" because of the existence of welfare benefits. Mead examines specific governmental programs such as AFDC to argue his case. The Aid for Dependent Children program(AFDC) was mainly intended to help female-headed households but has been expanded over the years. This program creates disincentives in that welfare mothers don't want to risk losing benefits to accept low-paying, dead-end jobs.

But I think Mead overlooks that in fact they are prevented from finding work because they are trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty by an economic system that isolates the disadvantaged from the rest of society.²²⁾ They are not also satisfied to exist on welfare, but wish to succeed. In fact, they have strong need of self esteem and self-realization. He ignores rigid barriers in the labor market such as class, racial barriers. Furthermore, it

22) Kathleen Morrison† and David J. Webber, p.9.

is unclear how enforcing low-wage work as a condition for receiving welfare will remove the stigma of receiving public aid; in fact it seems more likely to increase the stigma by reinforcing the idea that poverty is the result of personal failings.²³

Mead does not reject the involvement of government in welfare policy or call for a reduction of government's role. Rather, he calls for the implementation of more authoritative programs, requiring that individuals fulfill certain social obligations in return for benefits. These obligations include learning, working, supporting one's family, obeying the laws, and respecting the rights of others in society. For Mead, individuals that fulfill these social obligations are able to function well in society while those that are not able to lack the ability to function. This inability to function is the major factor, according to Mead, for the large number of poor, underclass people in America today.

The inability to function, or cope, within mainstream society, along with the permissiveness of current welfare policy, has resulted in these people becoming dependent upon government welfare programs for their support. Individuals may not be able to overcome dependency on welfare on their own, so government should be there to help and guide them towards independence, making them functioning members of society. Mead argues that the government's authoritative policy to enforce mandatory work and a display of public competence by the poor and to accept offered jobs in welfare programs will go a long way in reducing dependency, leading a true equality for the poor, integrating the disadvantaged into the mainstream of society, and perhaps even in reversing such other problems as falling SAT scores and high crime rates.²⁴ Throughout the book, Mead argues that the relationship between governments and its citizens should be reciprocal, that is government should expect its citizens to fulfill certain obligations as well as the other way around. Mead's studies of WIN offices, in New York state, demonstrate that

23) Margaret Weir, p. 496.

24) Michael R. Sosin, p. 156.

work test for welfare benefits can succeed in helping individuals break free of their dependency on welfare. Mead found that the enthusiasm for implementing the policy varied from office to office, with those office more willing to use their authority achieving the highest success rate in placing individuals in jobs. Those successful offices also had a stronger view of the work obligation, forcing recipients to accept a low-paying job if it was the only available for which they were qualified, while other offices viewed it as unfair to force an unacceptable job upon the recipient. If all offices utilized their authority and stressed the work obligation, it would be possible for work tests to succeed in helping individuals break free of their dependency on welfare.

The main focus of Mead's book is upon welfare policy instituted during and since the major reforms of the Great Society, with its emphasis on breaking down social and economic barriers that inhibited lower class members of society. The prevailing political assumption during this time, according to Mead, was that the poor were not responsible for their problems but rather society as a whole and government was responsible. Thus, programs were implemented to try to make up for past injustices incurred by the poor and try to break social and economic barriers that held them back. Mead finds major fault with this assumption and the policies that arise as a result. These programs were successful as removing social and economic barriers, resulting in the integration of large numbers of poor and disadvantaged into society, however, they did not address behavioral barriers, such as nonwork, irresponsibility, or illegitimacy. The unwillingness of American policy-makers to deal with behavioral issues is said to be a legacy of the progressive era. It is these behavioral barriers, Mead asserts, for which the individual is ultimately responsible, which account for the dependency of individuals on welfare today. Since current policies do not address these barriers adequately, Mead argues for reform and the implementation of policies that do.

To get rid of such behavioral barriers, Mead proposes a heavily

paternalistic role for the state in forcing the work ethic on its welfare recipients.²⁵ Mead argues that like duties to obey the law or pay taxes, obligations to function at school, at work, and in other social roles would wither to formalities unless noncompliance ultimately drew some kind of sanction.²⁶ Thus, government should create obligations, an administrative apparatus to implement them, and a surrounding climate of opinion that convinces people that the requirements are both legitimate and enforceable.

If we look at the results of recent studies, however, we can find that work might be successfully encouraged to some degree by general economic growth, or by specific types of training for certain individuals. Mead ignores or opposes all of these. Most scholars have agreed that some poverty is caused by factors other than behavioral problems. Research suggests that Mead's solution of enforcing rigid mandates in welfare programs generally goes in hand with low participation rates in welfare programs and high levels of unmet need.²⁷

Further, even if we should make a decision that work requirement in exchange for welfare benefits is a good idea, it is not obvious that enforcing such requirements is feasible. We can not deny that there are many barriers to imposing obligations. Jobs may not be available to the central-city poor, and migration into another places can be restricted by housing practices. Even if jobs are available, federal officials are ill-equipped to approach policy in juridical terms and have a difficulty in creating incentives to administer work requirements. Because many federal officials are trained to conceive and solve technically, they usually ignore issues of social obligation. Even if they understood the obligation problem, they would probably not have the intellectual resources to solve it.

Second, most opposition to social obligation rest on simple opposition to federal authority. Liberals would certainly resist any attempt to implement

25) Kathleen Morrison and David J. Webber, p.4.

26) Lawrence M. Mead, p.9.

27) Michael R. Sosin, p.159.

serious work requirements from Washington. Conservatives are inclined to eliminate most federal social programs, not use them to set clearer standards for the disadvantaged.

Third, the idea of social obligation is blocked by ethical assumptions stemming from the Jodo-Christian tradition. According to the Biblical tradition, our assistance to the poor must be unconditional. However, this tradition aggravates dependency and hinders individual's self-actualization.

Fourth criticism of Mead's argument is a Lockean political culture that readily admits claims by people against government but does not recognize claims by programs against people. Basically, Americans are inclined to think that individuals are self-reliant and responsible for their own actions.²⁸

In conclusion, his policy conclusions do not seem feasible in the light of existing literature. His implied claims to the contrary, research on WIN suggests that the program is not successful in improving the rate at which individuals find jobs. His suggestions would add to the cost with no payoff. The suggestion about the age at which AFDC mothers should work has obvious problems for children socialization and is not defended in the book in a systematic way; it will not find an audience.²⁹

Anyway, Mead's proposals will not take us to the good society he envisions. For the poor to develop the self-respect and competence that Mead finds so lacking today requires beyond cultural arguments that place the onus of failure on the poor alone.³⁰

3. Conclusion

28) Lawrence M. Mead, "Social programs and social obligations," *The Public Interest*, (Vol. 69)(Fall 1982), p. 31.

29) Michael R. Sosin, p. 157.

30) Margaret Weir, p. 497.

In his *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship* (1986), Mead asserts that the crisis of the welfare state is that integration has not been achieved. Mead maintains that we should look at it juridical point of view to improve welfare program and try to integrate the disadvantaged into mainstream of society. This, he contends that social policy should be made in a political way by politicians. For that reason, Mead oversimplified the causes of the problems the poor experience and ignored remedies that focused on the economy. Mead's concern for the broad and political implications of how we provide social welfare offers an important corrective to the technical approaches that usually dominate the discussion of welfare policy.