Social History and Social Policy

Edited by

David J. Rothman
Stanton Wheeler

ACADEMIC PRESS A Subsidiary of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers

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ACADEMIC PRESS
A Subsidiary of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers
New York London Toronto Sydney San Francisco

ACADEMIC PRESS, INC.
111 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10003

United Kingdom Edition published by
ACADEMIC PRESS, INC. (LONDON) LTD.
24/28 Oval Road, London NW1 7DX

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Main entry under title:

Social history and social policy.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. History--Addresses, essays, lectures.
2. Social policy--Addresses, essays, lectures.
3. United States--Social conditions--Addresses, essays, lectures. 4. Social problems--History--Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Rothman, David J.
II. Wheeler, Stanton, 1930–
HM36.S63 973 80–1772
ISBN 0–12–598680–7

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

81 82 83 84 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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PREFACE

This collection of chapters represents a pioneering effort to explore the links between social history and social policy, to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of this collaboration. It performs this task not through exhortation but through exemplification. Here are efforts by a group of historians concerned with the origins and structure of health systems, criminal justice, urban planning, pension programs, and schooling to contribute to the formation of social policy.

The chapters demonstrate the variety of perspectives that historians may bring to this assignment. Their work provides a vital sense of options and opportunities available to the decision makers. They also reveal how history can demystify a subject by challenging the notion that since an institution has always been with us it must always be with us. The historians are well suited to explaining the dynamics that have shaped policies. They can work at the microlevel, whether the subject be pensions or hospitals or prisons; in this way, they have much to tell those concerned with policy about the players, the strategies, and the rules of the game.

Historians, too, can correct the often misconceived ideas that policymakers carry about history, ideas that do deeply affect their programs. At the least, historians can help ensure that policymakers are using an accurate history. At best, they can suggest new ways of thinking about problems that break out of standard molds.

Each of these contributions reorients policymakers and analysts to their fields. Few disciplines are better suited than history to challenge inherited wisdoms and received truths.

The substantive chapters in this volume were prepared by social historians. However, our interest in ensuring that the chapters be relevant to those working more closely in social policy led us to hold a conference at Seven Springs Center, Mount Kisco, New York, at which the chapters were discussed and critiqued by reviewers who are closer to the world of policy than most of the authors. We wish to thank all of those reviewers and discussants: Judith Blake, Milton Burdman, Kenneth B. Clark, Eliot Freidson, Bernard R. Gifford, Mitchell I. Ginsberg, Geoffrey C. Hazard, Jr., Gilbert Y. Steiner, Robert Tilove, and Robert C. Wood.

The work reported in this volume was initiated with the support of a grant from the Russell Sage Foundation. We wish to acknowledge the support of the foundation and its then president, Hugh F. Cline, for their interest in examining the relationship between history and social policy.

Finally, we owe a special debt of gratitude to Bern Fasse, whose help at all stages of the project is gratefully acknowledged.

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INTRODUCTION

DAVID J. ROTHMAN
STANTON WHEELER

The attempt to make historical studies relevant to the concerns of social policy often provokes two contradictory types of response. To some, a latitudinarian spirit ought to prevail. Social policy analysis and implementation seem to be so open-ended and freewheeling an enterprise that it would be presumptuous to rule out the potential contribution of the historian. Indeed, given the morass that now permeates public policy in so many areas, any and all attempts to bring some guidance to a beleaguered official, from whatever quarter, should be welcomed. But others adopt a far more restricted view. They compare a decision maker to a ship's captain who is trying to dock his boat in a swirling current. He has an immediate need to know which way to steer, and, hence, some rule of parsimony must, and appropriately does, prevail. History, then, is something of a luxury if not a distraction. It may offer some interesting background information. But when it comes down to the core of issues, to the hard process of reaching a decision, the historian has no central role to play.

As such divergent positions suggest, the appropriate links between history and social policy have been neither well defined nor thoroughly explored. Not that historians are for the first time discovering their potential impact on social policy. At the opening of the twentieth century, many Progressive historians shared an explicit commitment to influencing public programs. To choose the most famous example, Charles

SOCIAL HISTORY AND SOCIAL POLICY

ISBN 0-12-598680-7

Beard clearly intended *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* to shake judges loose from a strick constructionist interpretation of the Constitution that was obstructing progressive social welfare legislation. Nevertheless, despite this tradition, the interaction of history and social policy—what history can and should do—has not been systematically examined. At this moment, a permissive attitude seems to prevail. Exhortations to historians to enter the arena of policy abound, perhaps because the discipline is undergoing a crisis of relevance or perhaps because of more mundane considerations: When graduate students cannot find jobs in universities, it is advantageous to place them in state or federal bureaucracies. In all events, exhortation cannot substitute for careful consideration, for presenting the advantages and disadvantages of such a collaboration.

To clarify the ways by which the following chapters address this issue, let us describe the origins of this project. For several years the two editors of this volume served together on a policy committee charged with investigating incarceration and its alternatives. In the course of that service, we often debated the respective policy roles of our disciplines, particularly whether historians could go beyond the concluding lines of many of their articles ("and these findings have implications for today") and actually detail the consequences of their findings. It has been said that contemporary novels begin where old-fashioned ones left off; we wondered whether contemporary histories too might begin where others left off. Accordingly, we invited a group of historians to address the problem and asked a group of people involved in social policy, either with day-to-day responsibilities for administration or with a concern for analysis, to comment on the result. We recognized that such a format had a built-in imbalance: The historians would present findings, and those from social policy would pass judgment. The imbalance, however, did fit with an important reality for us. Our question was not whether history might be useful in some abstract sense but whether those immersed in policy would find it so. Thus, despite some discomfort with the arrangement, we believed that it was a suitable way to test the potential contribution of history, a way to move from exhortation to exemplification.

The design of the project also reflected an initial optimism about the results. We were relatively confident that historians could do more than provide background music for social policy decisions. Yet, it should be clear from the outset that the enterprise has in many ways been chastening. Our initial optimism has by now been well qualified; we have a much sharper sense of the limits of the collaboration. By no means do we conclude that history has no significant contribution to make to social

policy. We are, however, more keenly aware of the barriers to cooperation and the difficulties of the enterprise. We remain convinced of the viability of uniting history and social policy, but we recognize how complicated and even discomforting it is to accomplish this task.

Let us present the darker side first, the major problems that emerged in the course of discussion between historians and social policy analysts and administrators. As might be expected, we had little difficulty in identifying historians whose work seemed relevant to social policy. As the Contents of this book makes immediately apparent, health systems, criminal justice, urban planning, pension programs, and schooling are all subjects with a high priority among historians. Indeed, the list could easily have been expanded to include science policies, agriculture, transportation, housing, and a variety of other topics. To locate common areas of concern to both groups was simple. However, the interest of the historian in these matters is not identical to or easily linked with the concerns of those in social policy. Diverse motives brought historians into one or another of these areas. Some were simply curious about the origins of a program, others were quite alert to the problematic state of public policy in a given area, and still others were frankly determined to exert a direct influence over social policy, at least to the extent of informing social policy analysts of strategies that an historical analysis might suggest. But none of the historians, it seems fair to say, were first and foremost concerned with *solving* a public policy problem. None of them took as their assignment the formulation of specific policy alternatives that would be immediately implemented.

This stance put the historian at odds with the social policy analysts and adminstrators. Some wanted the historian to assume that there was a client with a pressing need; they wanted the historian to imagine that the target audience was an official confronted with a series of alternatives and to design and carry out the research in such a way as to help policymakers decide among alternatives. In other words, those from the world of social policy anticipated an immediate pay-off from the historians in the form of answers to clients' questions of what should be done now. In fact, a few of the social policy analysts believed that historians could actually carry out this task. The past record did appear relevant to contemporary problems. But it soon became clear that the social policy analysts wanted to frame the questions to suit their particular agendas, which were not necessarily identical to those of the historians. In a sense, the historian was about to become the research assistant for the analysts.

The historians were immediately uneasy with this formulation and advanced all sorts of objections. Some of the policy questions were

poorly framed, others were based on misinformation. Moreover, since historians did not meet on a sustained basis with those in authority or those in policy departments, how could they ever come to know the needs of the field? An even more fundamental issue was emerging here: The historians were determined to set their own priorities. They had anticipated a collaboration between equals, not one group carrying out assignments given by the other. In the end, it became altogether apparent that historians were not by training or inclination client oriented. They were far more sensitive to disciplinary than to policy agendas. They were accustomed to a freedom of action that was not easily limited or even mildly constrained. This conflict might have reflected the idiosyncratic views of these particular historians. However, we think not. Despite the historians' exceptionally strong interest in social policy, only a few had actually devoted a significant amount of time to such efforts as serving on a task force addressing a major policy issue. If in the future historians' contributions to social policy become better recognized and more integral to policy making, this might change. Still, for the moment, the distance between disciplinary concerns and policy concerns remains substantial. The problem is not unknown in the relationship of other academic disciplines with social policy, but it is probably more acute in history than in political science or sociology.

The issue of who sets the questions was only one (and not the most important) of the divisions between the two groups. The social policy analysts were also uneasy with the scope and types of data that historians relied upon for their findings. They feared that historians selected their cases on the basis of accidents of survival. Because this institution kept meticulous records or that legislative history was particularly complete, historians decided to examine them—not because they were typical or directly relevant to the problems that social policy was confronting, but because the material was available. (There is a classic story worth telling here: One night a policeman encountered a drunk who was searching the pavement under a street lamp. He asked what the drunk was doing; the drunk replied that he was looking for his wallet. The policeman then asked where he lost it, to which the drunk replied, "One block away." "But then why are you looking here for it," the policeman demanded? To which the drunk responded: "Because this is where the light is.") And the doubts of the policy people were not without some basis. For historians to enter into an analysis that is sufficiently detailed and enlightening to meet their own standards of evidence and to be of immediate relevance, they must have access to an especially rich body of documentation. Certainly more than those work-

ing in most other social sciences, they are dependent upon the accidents of survival and cannot generate their own data.

Thus, again and again, the policy analysts wanted to be assured that these particular hospitals, or prisons, or congressional debates, or pension battles were truly representative of the class of institutions or controversies that were under discussion. Or, if not typical, could the historians specify the direction of the atypicality? These concerns emerged, for example, in Charles E. Rosenberg's study of hospitals in the late nineteenth century, which drew heavily on the experience of a few leading eastern institutions. Rosenberg argued that although these institutions were hardly representative of hospitals in other states or cities, they were the models, the exemplary cases, that others tried to emulate. Hence, their very unusualness gave them special importance. This discussion also took place around David Rothman's analysis of the experience of one Massachusetts prison in the 1930s. Rothman, like Rosenberg, contended that the very atypicality of the prison, its special effort to translate Progressive reform precepts into action, made it an important enterprise for policy analysts to understand. Thus, historians were prepared to defend the validity of their selections and their generalizations based upon them. Yet, it remained unclear whether the policy analysts were convinced. The historians were prepared to give such assurances, but the policy analysts may not have been persuaded.

The problem went even deeper. Those from the world of social policy were often doubtful whether the critical determinants of contemporary policies usually (or really ever) had much relationship to events that had occurred 20, 30, or 40 years ago. Their own sense of time was, at least to historians, narrow. If one wishes to debate and promote changes in health care today, is it important to know the history of the Sheppard–Towner Act in the 1920s (Chapter 6) or the organization of hospitals in the Progressive era (Chapter 2)? If one wishes to alter the present sentencing system, must one be informed about California's experiences of 1880–1920 (Chapter 7) or about Norfolk as a model institution established in the 1930s (Chapter 4)? If one wishes to change the structure of public schools, is the record of the Jacksonian period at all meaningful (Chapter 3)? To shape family policy today, is it important to rediscover the world of the plantation or the errors of the black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier (Chapter 8)? At times a tone of scepticism and impatience crept into the responses of the policy analysts and administrators. As one of them exclaimed in a moment of exasperation: "When I have a problem, I want it addressed; I want costs calculated, solutions proposed. Historians bleed too much!"