

education and welfare

there's no education without welfare and no welfare without education

01 September 2016

Education and welfare are entwined. The only teachers who feel free to neglect the well-being of their students are the competitive instructors. This article rejects that narrow position. It calls on Jeremy Seabrook's probing examination of how successive UK governments have dismantled the nation's welfare provision. At its creation the welfare state was among the greatest and most imitated achievements of any government. And Jeremy Seabrook is among the most wide-ranging voices on the significance of its loss. His work on poverty and wealth is said to be Britain's finest anatomy of social class. He displays a talent for prophecy, indignation and polemic favourably compared to George Orwell.

You can judge for yourself - the author's recent book, *Cut Out*, is abridged and lightly sub-edited in the following quotations. That account is interleaved with a commentary signposting practical action for replacing past damage to welfare with future repair. It argues...

... welfare volunteering and celebrity in 'big society' are not stable enough

... we need a civil society firmly embedded in locality, region and nation

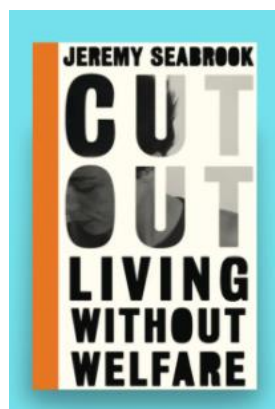
...welfare is not a commodity in a market place for customers to afford

...we need unconditional working and civil rights that all citizens claim

...welfare must not depend on an authority imposing its expectations

...we need education enabling independent, critical and creative thinking

It's an argument for a changing world. It starts with Jeremy Seabrook.



- **perspectives on poverty**

The rich and poor are ancient and inseparable opposites. They are antagonistic when the rich monopolise their own well-being at the expense of the poor. They are symbiotic when wealth creators fund needed social amenities.

It might be thought, in a country as rich as ours, that the poor would be treated with consideration, if not tenderness. This is far from being the case. The poor have been referred to as the great unwashed, the masses, the *hoi polloi*, the common people; and, more recently, the underclass, trailer-trash and losers.

The poor are crudely differentiated into deserving and undeserving. Everyone knows that widows and orphans, the lame, halt and blind may be thought of as poor though at no fault of their own. The idle and vicious, the feckless and addicted, the degenerate and welfare-cheats are thrown into the category of the perverse and wilful. There is something satisfying in the condemnation of those seen as excluded because unworthy...

'welfare cheats',

'scroungers', 'skivers', '

parasites', 'freeloaders' and 'beggars'.

Undeserving poverty must remain. It is a deterrent encouraging the respectable to remain so. Piety is, then, at war with condemnation.

commentary: *The so-called undeserving poor are seen as in conflict with majority cultural values. Indeed, some wayward poor are seen as deliberately defying convention. And that locates them as agents with agendas - holding to their own cultural beliefs and values. Furthermore, differently-located groups differently hold to different cultures. These cultures exclude themselves from the majority and exclude the majority from themselves - and they mean to do so. There is, then, little hope in seeing exclusion wholly as a form of weakness and passivity. There is more hope in finding starting-points for the reciprocal re-negotiation of proactive positions. It needs a listening-and-talking process.*

- **causes and consequences**

The causes of poverty may be sought primarily, not in the easy moral categories beloved of politicians, but in the profound inequalities that are part of the great diversity of human characteristics. It is difficult to ascribe individual responsibility to that - we tend to concentrate solely on behaviour to which everyone is expected to conform. And that is despite their differences in endowment, inheritance and capacity. Some cultures value

certain human attributes above others; but, in general, a particular set of observances, decencies and codes of conduct is exacted in all societies. Those which now prevail make it rare for people to make a virtue of restraint, frugality and abstention from consuming as much as human beings can bring their minds and money to it.

While researching this book I was struck by the factors which determine how much could be interpreted as deliberately wilful behaviour. Are people making a choice to sit in the rain or under a bridge stinking of piss, holding to a plastic cup to receive pennies from passers-by? It is a constant refrain of the successful that...

'if I could rise out of poverty and disadvantage

to be what I am today,

why can't he or she?'

The argument suggests that because some people have been able to make good in the world, despite the most horrific circumstances or birth and upbringing, it must follow that if others fail to do the same they are in some way guilty and must be stigmatised.

Yet if anything close to social justice were to be established, it would be necessary to inquire into the situation of those disadvantaged...

psychologically	loveless or bereavement, neglect or cruelty in childhood
intellectually	people endowed with a modest capacity for reasoning
socially	the inheritance of generations of servitude or slavery
mentally	the chance distribution of emotional and psychiatric disorders
linguistically	those in society they do not understand
culturally	people whose traditions and norms are at odds with the dominant social values
genetically	inherited diseases and health conditions, including some very common ailments
accidentally	victims of traffic or other accidents
traumatically	especially through war, crime, or natural catastrophe

randomly as in the distribution of characteristics, such as timidity, fear, anxiety or recklessness.

There are other readily-stigmatised human features...

idleness, promiscuity, irresponsibility, anger

And all take no account of the predictable trajectory of human lives...

*the dependency of childhood,
the ability to procure and sustain labour that will provide a living,
the process of ageing, decline and death.*

These complexities inform the basic premise of the welfare state - to answer need at the point where it is identified - irrespective of cause. Need is no more enhanced by virtue than it is cancelled by unworthiness.

commentary: *become more neglectful of the needs for the poor as they become more comfortable - needing less from welfare. There is also an easy-to-overlook back-story to this trend: a generation born after the 39-45 war have, over ensuing decades, benefitted from high levels of economic and cultural expansion. While impressions of neglected needs faded, interests in favoured wants prevailed. It is a loss of collective memory, permitting the replacement of the term 'need' with the term 'want' - they are confused and become interchangeable. The dynamics of neglect are allowed by a failure of memory and a corruption of language. If there is any way of reversing the consequential trends it will entail the strengthening and re-alignment of education.*

- **action and direction**

A majority does not foresee periods of dependency on state support. At the same time welfare costs are spiralling. Together these trends make possible a government assault on the well-being of poor people. There has been only modest resistance from the prosperous majority. Confident that they will not fall into want, they can feel distant from, and uninvolved in, the fate of the unfortunate.

It cannot be lack of recourses that prompts cuts in welfare in a country which, despite recession, has never been richer. Excess co-exists with misery. This nation, once virtually bankrupted by the second world-war, found the

wherewithal to institute a universal welfare system. So any claim - in a country now awash with luxury, ostentation and extravagance - that it can no longer afford to care for its less fortunate is so blatant untruthful as scarcely to need refutation. If public anger against government policy has been muted it is probably because it is government action.

There are two obvious tasks facing today's dissenters and radicals - though the fact that they are self-evident does not make their accomplishment any easier. They are not the overthrow of capitalism - of which there seem little chance. And they are certainly not acceptance of current reform - that resistance being a euphemism for the undermining of welfare. The first task is to strive for greater firmness. The wealthiest must make a just contribution to the well-being of those upon whose labour, acquiescence and powerlessness their fortunes are made. The second task is to embark on a genuine reform of welfare, providing those damaged and injured by capitalism with a decent subsistence that brings them into a full participation in the life of society - however eccentric that society's priorities may have become.

Assessing the needs of other human beings is not an ignoble undertaking - not the drudgery of ill-paid functionaries. That caring should be endowed with prestige and a sense of vocation - a calling, not necessarily from God, but from the heart and imagination of now atrophied organs, in a dust-dry system becoming void of compassion. A renewal and re-dedication of the welfare state is on few political agendas - probably because it is the first requirement of a re-generated humane society.

commentary: *Engaging with the needs of the poor would be an honoured feature of any society pursuing progressive ideas and humane principles. But what if those ideas and principles are overtaken by the politics of electoral appeal? Then only constituent demands matter - what people believe to be their needs and interests. It means that no reform agenda can be realised unless it aligns constituent attention to pressing facts - facts that electoral politics has side-lined or even repressed. Reform therefore needs to confront the realities of how neglect of the poor is costly to the whole electorate, and is also damaging to its own most entrenched interests. There is a massive demand on education here.*

- **interests and influences**

Although the focus of this book has been primarily on welfare, that is only one aspect of a wider project. The assault on well-being is made possible by the world-wide spread of a system initiated in Britain - with its empire - perfected in the USA, and exported to virtually every country on earth. It is globally instituted economic violence, setting the people of the whole planet in competition with each another. This, and the apparent extinction of alternatives, has led to the success of the powerful and the dismantling of protections against poverty, loss and want. This is a global race.

When majorities fail to resist pressure on the weakest and most vulnerable there is nothing to prevent the further erosion of our hopes for a better life and our liberties in this imperfect one. To those who are comfortably but precariously situated the message will be...

'it will be your turn next'

...and to the currently secure...

'you will be future targets'

Only the super-rich will remain untouched - occupying an aerial topography above geographical borders. The intangible home country of the patriots of wealth.

commentary: *It may seem a given that the wealthiest help the poorest. But that belief requires the dismantling of globally-prevalent economics. The plight of the poor and the threat to the precarious are its products. It is competitive and austere neo-liberal capitalism. On a global scale It prevents the poor from inclusion as full members of their societies. Some political parties oppose it, most are acquiescent. Opposition comes from the young, and the still idealistic. That idealism is accused of moving to the left - which the idealists do not deny. Their accusers claim that left-wing idealism leads to electoral failure - which, in the past, it has. But the neo-liberal accusers fail to grasp the political shift. It's the well-connected who are too connected to the past. The reality is that the young and the idealistic no longer recognise the relevance of twentieth-century politics to the twenty-first-century experience of change. And they are becoming the electoral majority.*

- **knowing how and why**

in every experience of change it takes time to understand the rules of the game. In these times we have not yet fully recognised a world abuzz with an excitable future of technological innovation. It brings a knowingness of continuously upgraded communications systems, electronic contrivances and medical technologies - and the miracles they can deliver. Perhaps resistance will become possible only when the journey back from this ideological past, inflected by futuristic hi-tech iconography, is more fully understood.

If so it falls to today's reforming radicals to illuminate and reverse that perilous journey - and to assemble the majority against it. This requires more than a revival of the lapsed consciousness of an industrial labouring class. It involves an awakening from a somnambulist market-induced trance. It is a new alertness to the threat to humanity from the events which take place under the false colours of progress, freedom and reform. Then all social and political movement is backwards and involves a curtailment of opportunity, a cramping of the full flower of humanity, increased surveillance and a diminution of liberty - all on a planet where climate change is blamed upon anthropogenic activity. And that is a euphemism for the lifestyle of the rich.

commentary: *Theoretical neo-liberalism is out-of-touch with experienced reality. But it still strengthens its commercial leverage. It invites the self-congratulatory comfortable to attribute their well-being to their trade-business-and-investment good judgment. We see, in day-by-day reports from well-informed sources, how that favours the rich and penalises the poor. But there is little justification for self congratulation. The more likely explanation of this 'baby-boomer' success is that it enjoyed a long post-war period of favourable socio-economic expansion. The least likely to enjoy those gains and most likely to fall into poverty are the turn-of-century 'millennial' young people. But demographics change: and, while now ageing boomers are departing this life, millennials are joining it. Neo-liberalism can't change these trends. A progressive and reforming understanding of the how-and-why of change can.*

- **local and global**

More vibrant discussions of the future of humanity in a finite world are going on all around us. Organisations which contest the wretched nostalgias of western governments are everywhere. So are the equally abstruse theological exegesis of the scripture attributed to Karl Marx. Elevating debates are opening.

They may have been marginal until now, but they are today inescapable. They force themselves into the crumbling management of a system which is controlled and manipulated by those whose governance has brought impoverishment, social strife, war and relentless change. All of this is done in the name of conserving, not the planet, but the privileges of the rich.

commentary: *Globally, neo-liberal states are learning from necessity how to contain violent retaliation and thwart arbitrary demands. But they capture in defence of their own arbitrary containments. The necessity to reduce and outflank arbitrary containment is also a task for progressive reform. And it is a global task - the recovery of welfare is part of its wider purpose. Dealing with violence, capture, retaliation, containment and arbitrariness are learning tasks. They call for life-long education, enabling electorates to seize change and establish rights. This is not a call for schooling that fits students into the slots that neo-liberalism constructs. It is learning for the independence, critical thinking and creativity that realises progressive change. It reframes and reshapes a global conversation for schools and colleges. It confronts neo-liberals with awkward questions. This is a twenty-first-century agenda.*

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