

## *States of Welfare: A Conceptual Challenge*

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### **Abstract**

*A major problem hindering rigorous analysis in social policy is the diverse and imprecise meanings attached to the term "welfare state". In widespread usage the term has become emptied of all explanatory meaning and is used as a synonym for modern industrial states, all of which provide welfare for some of their inhabitants. The converse of the term (what modern industrial state is not a welfare state?) is rarely if ever addressed. In an attempt to encourage debate on the development of productive theory, the paper therefore discusses issues surrounding a discriminating definition of "welfare states" and points to former assumptions that they "ensure a minimum real income for all", to distinguish them from unwelfare states which benefit some but not all. It suggests a research agenda to provide empirical data which would enable welfare states to be identified and classified in terms of the effectiveness of their policies and provisions.*

### **Keywords**

*Welfare state; Theory; Classification; Poverty*

### **Introduction**

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all." (Carroll, 1872)

This paper attempts to open debate on an unanswered question: what criteria distinguish welfare states from non-welfare states, or why does anyone bother with the adjective "welfare" if it is common to all modern industrialized states? Or to pose the question from another angle, if it is wrong to use the adjective "democratic" to describe a state which fails to give votes to women (even if other citizens have it), how can it be right to use the adjective "welfare" to

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describe a state which fails to give welfare to the poor (even if other citizens have it)? How can a rigorous analysis of welfare states be offered if it is not even rigorous about its adjective?

The semantic problem may be peculiar to English usage, though this usage has become globalized. In other languages the counterpart terms may not necessarily convey similar ambiguities, but the English term “welfare state” is used throughout the world to describe those states whose governments offer “a basic modicum of welfare” (an expression used by Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990) to define “welfare states”: see below). Since all modern states throughout the world do provide a modicum of welfare to some of their inhabitants in many direct and indirect ways, the adjective “welfare” has become devoid of all explanatory or discriminatory meaning. It becomes interchangeable with any word referring to modern industrial states. It would even seem applicable to “third world” states which offer a modicum of welfare to their elites. At the same time, many states, including the USA and the UK, do not offer any welfare benefits at all to some of the poorest of their citizens. All these states have large proportions of their populations suffering an enforced lack of necessary social and material resources, which can be labelled as poverty or social exclusion and which their governments have failed to abolish—if they have even tried.

The problem is, of course, not merely a semantic one but one of substantial human suffering in the absence of welfare. Even if the non-fulfilment of Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being) has not been taken up in all welfare states as a political or scholarly issue, it remains a social problem in most of them (Eide 1997: 118). It reflects on governments’ economic and labour market policies, as well as their income maintenance and welfare policies, and on national public moral and ideological values. How have each of these governments resolved the contradiction between residents’ (or at least citizens’) rights to welfare and the realities of human suffering created by government toleration of poverty and exclusion? These analytical problems face the whole spectrum of humanistic ideological persuasions from the Christian-Democrat or Christian-Socialist right to the Social-Democratic or socialist left, though perhaps not the asocially individualistic neo-liberals.

This paper omits rehearsing the familiar facts of suffering but instead questions how to add rigour to what ought to be an analytical instead of a redundant term. Space prevents a critical review of the whole corpus of argument about the meaning of “welfare”—except to emphasize that this paper uses the term in the broadest sense, not narrowly meaning social assistance alone—or a pursuit of the origins of the term “welfare state” beyond what is needed here to outline the case that current international usage in English is devoid of meaning, and that analytical rigour requires a discriminating definition. To do this, the paper first expands on the current problems of semantics, confusion about projects and entities being classified. It shows that the problem is not new, but earlier attempts at classification of approaches did find some agreement on potential discriminators worth

consideration and adaptation. The paper concludes by proposing research agendas which could provide empirical foundations for discriminating definitions of welfare states and invites further debate to develop a rigorous analysis.

## **The Problem**

There is no generally accepted definition of the welfare state. After a lifetime of study, the pre-eminent commentator on postwar welfare policy, Richard Titmuss, concluded rather lamely: "I am no more enamoured of the indefinable abstraction the 'Welfare State' than I was some twenty years ago . . . Generalized slogans rarely induce concentration of thought: more often they prevent us from asking significant questions about reality." (Titmuss 1987: 141) However, if analysts in different disciplines and countries are to talk to rather than past one another on these "significant questions", a working definition is required. (Lowe 1999: 2)

So many scholars writing in English (wherever they are) focus on analysing, classifying and prognosticating about "the welfare state" that one may speak of a whole academic welfare state industry. But as the historian Rodney Lowe has noted above, there is no agreement on definitions: current scholars treat all states offering some welfare to some inhabitants as welfare states. As Gøsta Esping-Andersen noted in his analysis of "What is the Welfare State?", "social scientists have been too quick to accept nations' self-proclaimed welfare-state status. They have also been too quick to conclude that if the standard social programs have been introduced, the welfare state has been born" (Esping-Andersen 1990: 20). Much of the analysis focuses on more or less welfare, often measuring income inequalities, or methodologically sophisticated classifications discussed in terms of, for instance, the history or ideology influencing their chief welfare institutions or of the degree to which they appear to affect the distribution of some kinds of resources or experiences according to different kinds of rules. Some people speculate about the future of the welfare state in the face of economic or political crises and globalization.

This undifferentiated global use of the term "welfare state" leaves no discriminating concept for analytical use. If all definitions of welfare state are merged into a mass, either undifferentiated and homogeneous or of some equally valid postmodernist pluralistic types, then how can the following analytical distinctions be made:

1. between all modern industrial states and welfare states? If there is no distinction, then the term "welfare" becomes redundant and mystifying noise.
2. between those states which offer welfare to all and those which offer it only to some? If the latter are equally welfare states, then all states are welfare states since without exception all modern industrial states offer welfare to some inhabitants, even if only to their elites. Again, the term "welfare" becomes redundant noise.
3. between welfare states which are better at welfare and those which are worse? If anything goes in defining and identifying welfare states, then

- how can any agreed specific criteria of effectiveness or unitary scale of achievement be constructed? For those who claim that the relief of poverty is not the sole object of a welfare state, measuring only the reduction of income inequality must be too crude as a guide to welfare state effectiveness.
4. between the institutions of the state based on embedded national cultures, values and procedures, and the ephemeral activities of shortlived and changeable governments?

*Misuse of the term "welfare state": some examples*

The major theoretical work *Contradictions of the Welfare State* by Claus Offe (1984) is a leading example of an apparent disregard of fundamental welfare issues and thus of the total redundancy of the term. His book's editor and translator commented that "Offe's critique of the welfare state does not take sides in the growing philosophical controversies about social justice, needs, rights and the state's responsibility for the welfare of the community" (Keane in Offe 1984: 11). Offe's further comments on the theory of the state suggest that the term "welfare" in Offe's usage is either redundant noise or adds so little to his argument that it could have been omitted throughout the book. "Modern" would have been a more appropriate adjective. This entire nonchalance about the meaninglessness of such an overworked adjective is puzzling and ought to arouse the interest of other scholars.<sup>1</sup>

Most other authors are not as nonchalant, but they too have trouble in locating the "welfare" issues in their uses of the term. Many give some sort of brief nod to the need to define terms, usually following Humpty Dumpty, the patron genius of stipulative definitions. Among the stipulative and totally non-discriminating definitions of "welfare states" a well-known author<sup>2</sup> offered the following in an unpublished paper of 1989:

Welfare states are social systems of human reproduction. They consist of state institutions and state arrangements for the simple and the expanded reproduction of a given state population. As such, the welfare state expresses an *encounter* of state politics and the life pursuits of a whole human population.

The author stressed that this total "encounter" was a new and neglected approach by comparison with the older traditions which defined "welfare states" in terms of institutions such as social services. Indeed it is, and probably most scholars would not want to return to those barren traditions. But this new approach does not confront the issues about discrimination raised above. If "welfare states" can be described in such all-embracing terms (since all states have these functions), how could this author imagine any counterfactual *unwelfare* states and what would they look like? Would he, and all those who think like him, see all modern industrial states (and perhaps earlier and non-industrial ones as well) as "welfare states"? Would it not be more productive to move beyond uses and descriptions which do not discriminate between the phenomenon at issue and the absence of the phenomenon?

Some members of the welfare state industry start by agreeing, but then seem to lose their way or their courage to pursue it. If Esping-Andersen is not the most frequently cited author on “welfare states”, he must be a close contender, and thus no paper on the topic can overlook his dominating position in driving the current discourse. In his most-cited book, the opening response to the question, what is the “welfare state”, was:

Every theoretical paradigm must somehow define the welfare state. How do we know when and if a state responds functionally to the needs of industrialism, or to capitalist reproduction and legitimacy? And how do we identify a welfare state that corresponds to the demands a mobilized working class might have? *We cannot test contending arguments unless we have a commonly shared conception of the phenomenon to be explained.* (Esping-Andersen 1990: 18; emphasis added)

Esping-Andersen went on to observe that “a remarkable attribute of the entire literature is its lack of much genuine interest in the welfare state as such”. Studies have been driven by other theoretical interests and have not asked the conceptual question “. . . when, indeed, is a state a welfare state?” Oddly enough for such a promising start, he seems to have offered no answer to this question, beyond the bland and indiscriminating remark that “A common textbook definition is that it involves state responsibility for securing some basic modicum of welfare for its citizens” (Esping-Andersen 1990: 18–19). Yes, but how much and for whom, the rich or the poor, is to define the distinction between welfare and unwelfare states?

In a paper on “Freedom and the welfare state: theoretical foundations”, Robert Goodin similarly addressed the question of definition:

It might at first seem pedantic and needlessly contentious to try to specify defining features of the “welfare state”. For most purposes it is enough to say, as the American Supreme Court justice did of pornography, “I know it when I see it.” But for philosophical purposes a simple list of paradigm cases—Sweden, Germany, Britain,<sup>3</sup> etc.—will not suffice. It is not enough to know what recognizably welfare states *happen* to have in common. We need to know what they *must* have in common . . . For philosophical purposes . . . we need to abstract from social practice an “ideal type” of the phenomenon. (Goodin 1982: 150; emphasis in original)

Goodin proceeded to review Briggs’s functional definition (1961) based on what a “welfare state” does rather than what the governments in it intended to do. Neither of these authors dismissed as fatuous the question of trying to find a discriminating definition of a “welfare state”.

In her critique of Esping-Andersen’s work, Deborah Mitchell (1992) posed a key relevant question: whether different types of “welfare state” lead to different welfare outcomes. However, she treated all modern states as welfare states and answered in terms of evidence offered by the Luxembourg Income Survey

(LIS) methods: that is, the degree of statistical income inequality in a country. Unequal personal incomes occur in all countries, and the inequality of incomes may be the result of many diverse factors other than state institutions for their reduction. But apart from this, the coverage of welfare state institutions and their effectiveness in addressing poverty is a different question from income inequalities. LIS methods tell us nothing about the realities of poverty: the claim that a percentile on a statistical income distribution is to be taken as the poverty line is a simple example of a Humpty Dumpty stipulation, unsupported by empirical data about socially defined deprivations and exclusions.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, while Mitchell reported Esping-Andersen's decommmodification index, the question of the degree to which rights are commodified or not is independent of the question of whether and how far the poorest are protected at all.

The issue of coverage was raised in Bonoli's attempt to base classification on more complex dimensions. Coverage is independent of quantity, and quantity is independent of source; each can be separately analysed and rated (Bonoli 1997: 356). But this development was offered within an approach which made no distinction between welfare and any other kind of states. Coverage was not used as the key discriminator between them.

*What is the welfare entity—state or government?*

Mitchell's remarks on other authors' classificatory models, and the fact that the UK "appears to have migrated much closer to the neo-conservative model" (1992: 53) in recent years, touched on another major problem: the common confusion between the underlying long-lasting institutions of states and the volatile motives and activities of governments. She concluded that what she saw as others' misclassification arose because they "focused on the style rather than the substance of social policy of the British Conservative Party under Thatcher" (Mitchell 1992: 64). Perhaps it would be more accurate to talk about welfare governments, since such a government may be and often has been followed by a non-welfare government, a point emphasized by Joan Higgins in her approach to comparative analysis. She criticized statist classifications for their lack of precision and noted that "... there is also the problem that the general orientation of a country's social policies can change quite dramatically within a very short space of time" (Higgins 1981: 44–5). New Zealand after the change of government in 1990 is a good example of a rapid move from a mature welfare state to a neo-liberal testbed.

Another confusing problem is that discourses of "the state" vary incompatibly between states. This is not a question merely of English usage and British preoccupations with poverty rather than with other social problems such as inequality. Nor is it British academic imperialism; judging by the corpus of publications the welfare state industry is already global. It cannot be reduced to matters of translation: in what ways does the German *Sozialstaat* or *Wohlfahrtsstaat* or French *état providence* differ from "welfare state"? The different answers to the questions of *whose* state it is and in *whose* interests it is run are most clearly seen in the Nordic countries where they are perceived

and expressed in a distinct mode unlike that elsewhere. The term that Swedes originally used was not *välfärdsstaten* but *Folkhemmet*, hard to translate but literally meaning “the people’s home”. “It’s *our* state”, not an entity *against* the people, was a view often expressed in conversation and interview,<sup>5</sup> a discourse profoundly rejecting the commonplace Anglo-Saxon version which emphasizes that opposition. In the Nordic countries it leads at times to an uncritical stance towards the institutions of the state and mystifies the causes of dissatisfaction with their operations, as Jorma Sipilä reported.<sup>6</sup> He continued:

In Finland the state is the result of the relatively recent nationalistic movement this century, so the belief has a firm historical basis. The welfare state is not the result of class conflict, and people do not think in terms of “us” and “them” in welfare state administration. It is a very new phenomenon for Finns to think of the masses as “taxpayers”—but the right wing government has made 80 per cent of the Finns very angry. (Sipilä, interview 1993)

The Finns were evidently able to distinguish between state and government in ways which would vitiate “welfare state” classification if it were based on government activity.

The historian Keith Middlemas reminded any writer on this issue to:

... remember that Hegel pointed out that the state is not an omnipresent, omniscient abstraction: “It stands on earth and therefore in the dimension of caprice, chance and error.” He must allow for the competing interests, not only the many-layered links between government and powerful interests, but also the public as a player, or congeries of players in its own right, and the local or regional state. For my part, I find it necessary to see the state as having an independent existence; but insofar as it conceives aims and tries to implement them, it is itself a player in a very elaborate and perpetual game, and that game is not immutable but changes across time and according to the political and economic context. But what is the state? Literally, it has its own physical geography, distinct and apart from its primary element—whichever government has been elected to control it. (Middlemas 1991)

While this paper would not uncritically endorse these anthropomorphic views, they are evidence of an analytical distinction which is salutary for academics who fail to recognize or observe it. What welfare activities are such scholars classifying: the state’s (in the Nordic sense) or the current temporary government’s (in the experience of Anglo-Saxon states such as the UK after 1979 or New Zealand after 1990)?

The distinction between state and government also highlights the dynamic element usually missing from static classifications: this may have been the welfare position at one time but what is it now, with a different government pursuing different ends with different means? Only those with an optimistic Whiggish conception of history could classify “welfare states” as if there were



some sort of welfare ratchet preventing any backsliding to restricted or non-welfare states; pessimistic followers of Toynbee or Spengler might be more sceptical of such static judgements.

#### *A conceptual muddle about projects*

Part of the problem arises because some authors do not explain what project they have in mind when they engage with the concept of the “welfare state”. What emerges from the literature is that much argument between authors might be explained by their apparent unawareness that they are pursuing disparate projects and doing so in incompatible discourses.<sup>7</sup> Since at least six distinct projects can be identified (there may be more) it is hardly surprising that readers may be confused. The projects are, in no particular order of importance:

- to *define* types of “welfare states”. This is the abstract stipulative project with which this paper started. It requires discriminating criteria.
- to describe the *characteristics* of “welfare states” as defined. This is an empirical project.
- to classify the welfare *functions* of states. Here the project becomes more analytical than mere description.
- to *prescribe* what states should do about welfare. A programmatic, normative project.
- to *explain* how states came to be involved in welfare. This project involves historical analysis.
- to *evaluate* how effectively states carry out their welfare functions. This project requires criteria by which to discriminate and grade functional effectiveness.

Obviously this list is simply an ideal typology, and authors’ real projects may draw on more than one type in various combinations. The question is, does the combination of types fit the purpose of any author’s overall project? And in any exchange of views in debate, are all sides using the same intellectual discourse? Even if they are “talking the same language”, do they have the same projects in mind? Are they referring to the same set of classificatory types, or are they arguing at cross-purposes?

#### *Are discriminating approaches feasible?*

In the face of these problems, this paper suggests that both scholarship and social policy would benefit by using criteria and agreed terms to allow those states which provide welfare for only some (usually middling to better-off) inhabitants to be categorically distinguished from those which provide welfare for all, and to facilitate the evaluation of their effectiveness as welfare states. At the same time, it must be stressed that the paper is not implying that states which provide welfare for large sections of their population in many ways are not providing welfare, nor that the only relevant form is welfare for the poorest. *It is simply questioning the explanatory value of the English term “welfare state” when all states do in fact provide a modicum of welfare for some. It*



may be that the historical or current usage in other languages and discourses—a vast topic in itself—is more analytically productive than the industry’s globalized *English* usage, but it is criticism of the latter which this paper focuses on.

Four decades ago there seemed to have been an agreed position among scholars writing in English, distinguishing between those states which provided welfare for some and those which provided it for all, meaning inclusively the poor. The means ranged from universal benefits in kind as well as cash intended to provide minimum standards of living for all, to those which at least offered social assistance at a minimally adequate level (to provide less does not meet international human rights criteria). Such writers were probably not thinking of states which provide welfare only to low-income groups, if such states exist (since “welfare” accounts for much more than targeted income maintenance systems alone), but would have included them among the “welfare for all” states if the poor were adequately covered.

Why should the revival of an old discriminating definition to facilitate the accurate identification of welfare as against non-welfare states matter? Isn’t any mention of semantics likely to attract the accusation of Humpty-Dumptyism? Criticizing those who set themselves up as “masters”, the sociologist Stanislaw Andreski wrote on a similar theme:

So long as authority inspires awe, confusion and absurdity enhance conservative tendencies in society. Firstly, because clear and logical thinking leads to a cumulation of knowledge . . . and the advance of knowledge sooner or later undermines the traditional order. Confused thinking, on the other hand, leads nowhere in particular and can be indulged indefinitely without producing any impact on the world. (Andreski 1972: 90)<sup>8</sup>

Andreski’s criticism of confusion applies forcibly to the current use of the adjective “welfare” in the phrase “welfare state”. The case for any clear and logical distinctions should not need defence in academia, but since the welfare state industry currently lacks one, it should urgently acquire a discriminating definition as an indispensable scholarly tool for rigorous analytical thought. But scholarly tidiness is only a dry and unimportant reason for suggesting that a discriminator is overdue; others are more important. To describe states where welfare is offered to all except the poor as “welfare states” is a classical example of mystification and discourse closure on experienced reality. If scholars who use the term so loosely tell the poor that they are living in a “welfare state”—where by implication the legitimate needs of the poor are met—then logically the suffering caused by the unmet needs must be only an illegitimate personal trouble (in Wright Mills’ sense, 1970: 14–15), probably caused by false consciousness, and not a shared and real social problem (as in the example of the clients of Finnish social work mentioned above). This is a serious *trahison des clercs* (as the medieval churchmen put it) by the intellectuals. Playing intellectual games with words and concepts (*homo ludens*) is of course fun, but when through closure it allows governments to get away with exploiting the poor by saying they are only doing what is normal for governments in a “welfare state”, then it is no longer just

an academic game but a political oppression as well. Failure to clarify the distinction between welfare states and *unwelfare states* in a discriminating manner could thus be seen as a serious scholarly and moral fault and semantic concern as not just a banal juvenile disorder. As Andreski pointed out, confusion is essentially conservative and, in this instance, oppressive.

## Approaches to the Problem of Meaning

The problem of imprecise meaning is not new. The pioneer of social policy theory, Richard Titmuss, writing on “The welfare state: images and realities” nearly forty years ago commented that “since 1951, the term has apparently come to mean all things to all men”. He considered the term so contentiously problematic that it ought to appear in inverted commas. He added that “The critics of the ‘welfare state’ have been as much at fault in failing to define the concept and in confusing ends and means as its defenders” (Titmuss 1963: 3). In 1967 he added the comment cited above by Lowe, also including the acid reflection that “. . . the term acquired an international as well as a national popularity. The consequences have not all been intellectually stimulating” (Titmuss 1987: 141). He pointed out that classification by types of welfare measure (means) were not “necessarily a distinctive feature of the welfare state. Such measures are now accepted as a commitment of government in most advanced Western countries” (1963: 6). But the ends which welfare policies are intended to serve range widely from social integration and investment through to increasing the personal incomes of some (but by no means necessarily all) of the population. Since all modern industrial states pursue several of these ends to varying degrees, the industry has lazily and simplistically labelled them all as “welfare states”.

Forms of the welfare state term in other languages are older than the form in English, but they are not much more illuminating for this discussion. Lowe’s review of the term’s history refers to the generally pejorative meanings it held in both Germany and the USA before it was taken up in a positive sense during the postwar period of social legislation in the UK. The Weimar Republic’s *Wohlfahrtsstaat* was criticized by opponents for its profligacy; later, “the preferred description in Germany of a positive, yet realistic, commitment by government to advance individual welfare is *Sozialstaat*” (Lowe 1999: 3). Similarly, French debates over *l’état providence* were conducted in a very different discourse and thus the coincidence of meanings with all that may be embraced by “welfare state” in English cannot at all be taken for granted (just as French discourse of “poverty”, which in English means lack of income, refers to social exclusion virtually without reference to income levels). In the UK, publicity had been given to the English version of the term by Archbishop William Temple’s 1941 distinction between promoting human welfare and the notorious activities of “the power state”, or, as some would have it, the “warfare” state.<sup>9</sup> The idea was reflected in the Atlantic Charter and the Four Freedoms, one of which was Freedom from Want (quoted by Titmuss 1963: 2).<sup>10</sup>

At the same time as Titmuss was writing, some twenty years after the English term “welfare state” became popularized, the sociologist Dorothy

Wedderburn took the occasion of the election of a new Labour government to power in the UK in 1964 to write a paper on “Facts and theories of the welfare state” reviewing “the present state of the debate on the nature of the welfare state”. Like many others, Wedderburn concluded from her analysis of the many authors even then writing in English on the “welfare state” that “the various meanings given to the phrase would be worth an essay in themselves . . .”, but she continued:

There is, though, a central core of agreement that the welfare state implies *a state commitment* of some degree which modifies the play of market forces in order *to ensure a minimum real income for all*. (Wedderburn 1965: 127–8; emphasis added)

Quite which government activities should be included in securing “a minimum real income” was of course arguable. Income maintenance can be seen narrowly as the institutions determining wages and salaries, fiscal welfare, social security and social assistance. But it is more appropriate to see it more widely as the institutions which ensure economic development (labour market demand, prices and incomes policies), environmental protection and transportation, infrastructural policies for health, housing and education, as well as occupational welfare in its widest sense—indeed, anything which has the effect of preventing diswelfares as well as furthering the flow of real personal and collective incomes, irrespective of public or private channels. Thus the defining characteristics of a welfare state would include policies to prevent poverty arising for anyone as well as those providing relief for such poverty as occurs.

Wedderburn’s finding of a widely agreed definition cannot be taken as an isolated example. It differed little from the definition offered after analysis of “The welfare state in historical perspective” by the historian Asa Briggs in 1961. He started by setting out the problem in terms similar to those used by Titmuss soon afterwards:

The phrase “welfare state” is of recent origin. It was first used to describe Labour Britain after 1945. From Britain the phrase made its way round the world. It was freely employed, usually but not exclusively by politicians and journalists, in relation to diverse societies at diverse stages of development. Historians also took over the phrase. Attempts were made to re-write nineteenth and twentieth century history, particularly British history, in terms of the “origin” and “development” of a “welfare state”. Much of the political talk and the international journalism was loose and diffuse. The phrase “welfare state” was seldom defined. It was used to cover both social and economic changes. (Briggs 1961: 221)

Briggs felt that his historical review justified his attempt to define the uses of “welfare state” as being one in which “organised power is deliberately used (through politics and administration) in an effort to modify the play of market forces in at least three directions” (1961: 228). These comprised (1) a minimum income guarantee on what Esping-Andersen would now call a decommodified basis; (2) protection against income loss risk contingencies;

and (3) decommodified rights to the highest available standards *for all*. Briggs's three criteria expand on the "real" and not just cash income aspect of Wedderburn's definition, but hers has the advantage of brevity and precision. In each case the analysis of meanings concluded that in a welfare state everyone's welfare was covered to some minimum real extent, preventively or curatively.

It is this central core of agreement which is crucial here. No individual was acting Humpty Dumpty and imposing prescriptive mastery of meaning on a rabble: it was the common usage in English by contemporary scholars analysed by Wedderburn and Briggs which suggested an implicit understanding that there *was* a discriminating criterion of a welfare state. The key issue in their apparently consensual approaches was coverage, a minimum real income or the highest standards of provision *for all*. All modern states modify market forces for the benefit and welfare of *some* sections of their populations, for example land and property owners, agriculturalists, oil-well owners, peasants, employers, employees. But this old criterion would not justify calling them "welfare states". Wedderburn was emphasizing that her contemporaries' central core of agreement was the inclusion in state welfare of the poor, the socially excluded or marginalized, those wholly without decommodified rights or any recognition as functionally required. She acknowledged that "few people would use the term as widely" as the economist James Meade, whose definition included "the taxation of incomes of the rich to subsidize directly or indirectly the incomes of the poor" (quoted in Wedderburn 1965: 128).<sup>11</sup> Thus the inclusion of the poor in the essential criterion of "welfare for all" in the agreed definitions of her time meant that even a minimally effective residual welfare system for the poor could win the welfare title for an inequalitarian state based on a hierarchical integrative model, as on the European continent (such as Germany or France). By contrast, even the most generous provisions for large sections of the population but excluding some groups in an otherwise egalitarian state (such as the USA) would lose it.

### *Poverty, national discourse and universal coverage*

Both Wedderburn and Briggs studied British commentators and it is unsurprising that their boundary between welfare and unwelfare was based on the distributional aspects of income. A preoccupation with poverty as inadequate income is often noted as typical of British social policy. But the same problem can be approached from the direction of those whose discourse of welfare scorns material resources (paradoxically even in market-dominated societies) and focuses instead on the degree of people's *social exclusion*<sup>12</sup> or *integration*. The burden then falls on proponents of this relational criterion to offer a clear and discriminating operational definition which allows categorization of those states which do integrate *all* their inhabitants into society in such a way that they can take a full part in it, and those which fail to do so. Since exclusion/integration is intended to go beyond mere market participation through money, the degree of income inequality cannot be the sole criterion and such questions as the political integration of minorities must be included. Many affluent countries might fail this social integration criterion.

Universal coverage of real incomes for all (arguably a “Beveridge” view of a welfare state), or universal integration (a “Bismarck” view)—either of these is then the discriminating criterion of a “welfare state”. Not many states would count as welfare states by these discriminating definitions. Even fewer would be included if the definition of “real income” were to be widened to the whole range of resources needed at different stages of life to open opportunities to even the poorest to make choices about their lives and to achieve full social integration. If relief of the suffering of all the social divisions caused by discrimination on the grounds of, for instance, gender, age, ethnicity or ability were to be taken as criteria of a welfare state, there would be few, if any. Even the narrow criterion in a market-based society of a flow of cash income sufficient for minimally adequate socially-defined participation for all would exclude many. Universal coverage of “Poor Law” and social assistance regimes offering some minimal benefits would, however, include a number of modern states (Eardley *et al.* 1996). It is notable that Wedderburn explicitly queried whether the USA should be described as a welfare state because it failed to meet the basic criterion (1965: 135). The USA’s failure persists—but no current author omits the USA from his or her list.

Many commentators have noted that “universalism” as an ideological objective was a characteristic of some of those described as welfare states, but they did not use it as a criterion, and the identification of the universalism often got confused with the modes of entitlement to specific benefits, often treating it in some way as synonymous with decommodification. Much academic effort went into the study of the variety of disparate reasons why states had developed welfare institutions, and an enormous classification industry developed on the basis of history and ideology. Yet when in the early 1980s Adrian Webb analysed ten authors’ classifications, he concluded that “this seems to illustrate an almost bizarre lack of agreement about the intellectual map required in a systematically theoretical approach to the study of state welfare and social policy formation” (Webb 1983: 111). Arguably, it has been a loss to theory that no one developed Wedderburn’s discriminating definition or even furthered her functional classification, both of which would have been fruitful in directing attention to the curiously stratified relationship between ideological rhetoric and institutional forms, where the cleavages cut across states by class, and not between states as the simplistic “welfare state industry” would have it.

But whose “welfare state” are we talking about? The inclusion of the poor is an issue for empirical research. As long ago as 1958 Brian Abel-Smith, reviewing the situation of the poor, posed the question “Whose welfare state?” (Abel-Smith 1958), since his LSE colleague Titmuss’s seminal work on “The social division of welfare” (1958) had pointed out that much of what governments do furthers the welfare of the better-off in society rather than that of the poor—but this is done covertly and those who benefit most refuse to admit that the state is not “concentrating help on the most needy”.<sup>13</sup> His insights and calculations continue to stimulate much productive research.

In most so-called welfare states, meeting the welfare needs of the poor is less politically salient than protecting the welfare of the non-poor electorate at the expense of the poor (“upside-down benefits”, as Sinfield has called them

[1993]). But while empirical evidence continues to reveal that states do not protect the welfare of the poor at all, or not as well as that of the non-poor (e.g. Kvist and Sinfield 1997), many welfare state scholars continue to assume that if a state provides welfare to any citizens, that is sufficient reason to focus only on the majority or average and to neglect the position of the poor, focusing on abstracted statistics of income inequality and treating poverty as peripheral. This recalls the story of the man who lost his key in the ditch but looked for it under the street lamp because the light was better. But it is not only a matter of available data and methodological elegance. Reviewing the relationship between welfare regimes and poverty, Graham Room wrote:

In surveying recent European studies of poverty one is struck by an apparent anomaly. This is the disjunction between the poverty literature on the one hand and, on the other, the debates which have been raging over analysis of the different types of "welfare regime" which are evident in different industrial societies. (1995a: 104)

Room commented with surprise that the cross-national literature on poverty was almost completely insulated from the debates about welfare states, though he mentioned the different role of Stephan Leibfried and his colleagues in "looking at the place of anti-poverty policy within different welfare regimes" (1995a: 105). However, Leibfried *et al.*'s focus seems to have been on the interesting question of European anti-poverty policy prospects rather than on the preliminary work of definition. But Room was pessimistic about the prospects for "a major re-absorption of these European poverty debates into the literature on welfare regimes" because "this literature is particularly un-receptive to this re-absorption . . . [It] rightly refuses to see welfare systems as a natural or an inevitable feature of a modern industrial society" (Room 1995a: 106). In this respect, Room seems to be asserting the converse to those who argue that welfare systems are inevitably inherent in all modern states, and all scholars need do is to classify the different types of regime. No doubt an examination of incompatible definitions of welfare system or welfare regime might clarify the apparent contradiction, but it remains curious.

What is it about this notion of "welfare states" which creates this paradox? Is it because the notion is so imprecise and "woolly" that it is empty of meaning and therefore analytically useless—in which case why do so many writers use it so constantly and loosely? Or is it because the use of such a diffuse notion itself functions to disguise an inability or even unwillingness to distinguish "welfare states" from any other kind of non-welfare state, those where cruel governments consider the suffering of the unemployed poor is a price worth paying<sup>14</sup> for the economic satisfaction of an elite or even the mass of the electorate? What is a "welfare state" when under the political pressure of economic events, "the crisis", they all cut the benefits of their poor before those of their rich? How have scholars addressed such questions? As they imply issues of personal morality as well as political ideology, perhaps an explanation of the neglect can be found in the sociology of silence about poverty:

So far this brief discussion of the failure of the “advanced” world to re-discover poverty has concentrated upon neglect, but there has also been considerable hostility and opposition to the rediscovery. This once again underlines the gulf growing up between most of society and those they see as poor. While opposition has come from many sides, including the professions and the churches, perhaps most has come from governments. In a piece subtitled “The other Yugoslavia”, Miroslav Radovanovic describes the study of poverty as part of the “sociology of silence—our best developed and richest sociological discipline”. (Sinfield 1975: 9, quoting Radovanovic’s undated mimeo of around 1970, “Social position of the Yugoslav poor”)

### **What Kind of Discriminating Criterion?**

Wedderburn’s study showed that many scholars found functionalist or integrationist justifications for the state protection of all, as much from the conservative (indeed feudal) hierarchical but one-nation right as from the egalitarian left. Even the anti-collectivist residual welfare statist allowed for temporary humane welfare for all. Total exclusion from minimal coverage for some, a state taking no responsibility for the welfare of all its inhabitants, implied an unwelfare state. Their reasons drew on a variety of ideological and other justifications.

But it can also be argued that the case justifying “inclusion of the poor” as the key discriminator between welfare and unwelfare states can be found in a philosophical position similar to that of John Rawls’s “Difference Principle” (1980), that justice demands that

all social primary goods—liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect—are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these is to the advantage of *the least favoured*. (Rawls 1980: 303; emphasis added)

Rawls emphasized that this vision of justice has nothing to do with the rights, claims or deserts of individuals (1980: 304), and noted that “many questions of social policy can also be considered from this position” (1980: 97). The extensive scholarly critiques of Rawls’s arguments are not relevant here, since the position offered is based on the implied categorical imperative that the state must address the suffering of its worst-placed members (thus inevitably including the resource-poor, though other excluded groups would also be relevant) on the grounds of their humanity alone. In this sense the concept is even more basic to meeting human needs than that of decommmodification, which Esping-Andersen describes as occurring “when a service is rendered as a matter of right, and when a person can maintain a livelihood without dependence on the market” (Esping-Andersen 1990: 22). What part does justice play if the poor have no recognized rights to welfare which they can exercise against others who have the reciprocal responsibility to supply welfare, whether in civil society, commercial markets or the state? Many approaches to defining the “welfare state” have remarked on its amendment of crude market inequalities, but



since all states modify such inequalities to some extent for someone, the only discriminator between them remains whether the modifications benefit the poorest. This objective is thus the most concrete discriminator to be found.

Esping-Andersen's concept of decommodification is of course valuable in distinguishing the motives behind many welfare provisions and their scope in reaching those in need of that kind of welfare. But in itself the concept, and classifications based on a graded index, do not address the question of whether the welfare being provided meets the most intense needs of the most deprived people. A country might have a wholly decommodified income maintenance system for the variable and problematic category of "citizens", based on Marshall's conception of social rights (quoted in Esping-Andersen 1990: 23), without making any provisions for the non-citizen poor. Whole population categories could be excluded from the entitlements of citizenship, even though their contribution to that nation through work might be extensive (as with guest workers and illegal immigrants in several countries). How should such a state then be described and rated if the criterion is to be based on decommodified human rights?

If the concept is to be taken to its logical conclusion based on the *a priori* value of humanity rather than acquired rights, measured contribution or economic functionality to others, then its use must take account of the degree to which humans in greatest need are treated as an end in themselves subject to this categorical imperative. This is clearly a value position, but the value is already inherent in the concept of decommodification (as it is in acceptance of universal human rights), and the case here is only that it should be expressed explicitly and implemented to the fullest degree. States could be graded on how far they implement their obligations under human rights agreements to offer decommodified welfare benefits at an adequate level, and the hypothesis that decommodified distributive modes were more effective in combating poverty could then be empirically tested.

### *The role of the state*

Wedderburn's analysis found broad agreement that a welfare state implied "a state commitment of some degree which modifies the play of market forces" (Wedderburn 1965: 127–8), while Briggs's analysis concluded that in a welfare state "organized power is deliberately used in an effort to modify the play of market forces" (Briggs 1961: 228). Both went on to say that this use of state power was to ensure or guarantee a minimum real income for all, but Briggs then emphasized the point that it was his third criterion, "that all citizens without distinction of status or class are offered the best standards available", which raised the previous "social service" state providing no more than a minimum to the idea of a welfare state offering an optimum, in the context of the "abatement of class differences" and equality of treatment. Considering the problems that this criterion would raise if the continental countries were to be judged by it, he doubted if "the term *Wohlfahrtsstaat* is the right translation of 'welfare state'", since the disparate British and German approaches to "the State" had led to so much argument. Briggs considered that

to describe Bismarck's social policies as creating a welfare state was "very misleading" since it "rested on a basic conservatism" which saw workers as subservient rather than equal citizens (Briggs 1961: 247–9). This egalitarian line of argument will not help us here. Whatever the justification for Briggs's opinions when he wrote, an approach which bases the primary discriminator on the universal human rights standard to which most states have acceded in principle is more likely to be operationally useful than one based on an egalitarianism which many reject.

At the same time, it is important not to lose sight of Briggs's emphasis on optimum standards as opposed to minima, written when minimum standards were equated with the Poor Law and asocial physiological minimum subsistence. The Poor Law or minimum subsistence standard was in principle to have been superseded by the welfare state; a state which provided for all at such low levels should thus not be called a welfare state. Today the focus on optimum standards could arguably be satisfied by equating it with the idea of a minimally adequate level of living for socially-defined and lasting inclusion or participation (the income measure of which may be called an empirical poverty line): that is, the best that the state can be expected to provide to everyone. Naturally the optimum seen from the perspective of a formerly highly paid person suffering loss of income would be at a higher level than this, and many states in practice ensure that such people have their relative deprivation alleviated, but they do not do so for everyone.

The criterion would then comprise the requirement that the state's welfare provisions covered all, and that whether one approaches the question from the point of view of combating exclusion or of combating financial poverty, the level of living to which the inclusion or the real income gives access must be compatible with whatever are the components of a human rights minimum decency standard.

What operational tools do we have available to assess this? In many countries there has so far been no social research to establish where an empirically testable poverty boundary lies in minimum inclusion or participation income terms. The LIS or other statistical measures of inequality are completely irrelevant to this question. Some research has been carried out in the UK on the income levels which public opinion associates with the United Nations' standards for absolute and overall poverty (Townsend *et al.* 1997). Some states have established Governmental Minimum Income Standards (MIS) as politically operational proxies for academic poverty measures which are non-existent or mistrusted (for a discussion of the distinction between empirical poverty measures and Governmental Minimum Income Standards, see Veit-Wilson 1998). Some of them (such as the USA) do not align their social assistance and other income maintenance benefits with the minimum standards they consider irreducible, a contradiction more striking in terms of political economy than the political expediency which rationalizes it. But in principle a state commitment to an MIS based on inclusion or participation principles, implemented through the body of social policies including income maintenance but not confined to it, would be a good criterion of a welfare state.

Some scholars have used the coverage of social assistance schemes as an indicator of state commitment to a minimum real income for all. Naturally it is no more than a proxy for all that one might wish to pack into this phrase, policies for inclusion or social wages as well as personal disposable incomes, whether by the feudalistic state integrating all into a hierarchically unequal society (as implicit in Germany and explicit in some current French provisions for the unemployed), or by broadly egalitarian or solidaristic state governments as in the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and in the UK from 1945 to 1979. But the fact that it is a state commitment makes the test of coverage and adequacy of payment a good starting point for developing a discriminating criterion.

The best available empirical survey for this purpose is the study of 18 OECD countries by Tony Eardley and his colleagues (1996). Their study is the closest to considering the substantive basis of a welfare state in Wedderburn's terms, since it focused on "the range of benefits and services available to guarantee a minimum (however defined) level of subsistence to people in need, based on a test of resources" (Eardley *et al.* 1996: 1). This team of scholars collected extensive and intensive material on the schemes extant at the time of their survey and analysed it in detail, not only for the government and OECD which sponsored the study, but also in terms of welfare state scholarship.

The findings of this empirical study raise major questions about previous classifications of welfare states. In attempting to classify the various social assistance regimes, the authors concluded that there were seven patterns, but that

it is evident that the social assistance regimes tentatively outlined here bear only a distant resemblance to Esping-Andersen's typology of welfare regimes . . . Though all countries in the English-speaking world exhibit extensive assistance regimes, they differ substantially in other respects. (Eardley *et al.* 1996: 170)

The study team considered that Esping-Andersen's "liberal" group "cannot provide a framework for understanding social assistance programmes", because social assistance played a qualitatively different role in different countries within this group including the non-English-speaking one (Switzerland), based on differing principles of selectivity, security, level and uniformity. Further, while Esping-Andersen's "social democratic world" was similar to their group, "employment regime may be as important as welfare regime in explaining their common features". Esping-Andersen's "corporatist" welfare did not exhibit any "single mode of assistance provision" (Eardley *et al.* 1996: 170). In short, adopting social assistance as a key criterion of welfare states radically alters the potential identification and classification.

This, too, was the conclusion of an earlier study by Ivar Lødemel and Bernd Schulte (1992). They reviewed and classified states in which the poor must be helped (poverty regimes), distinguished by whether there were legal rights to a minimum income. Contrary to several other writers who identified and classified welfare states in terms of their social security coverage (irrespective of

the Wedderburn test of some sort of income maintenance for all), Lødemel and Schulte suggested that “the old distinction between social assistance and social security is fading away, and social assistance is considered more and more as one of the techniques by which the Welfare State provides income security for all its citizens, i.e. as an element of ‘social citizenship’” (Lødemel and Schulte 1992: 18). They went on to make the Wedderburn point plainly:

A right to a minimum income is therefore not only the corner-stone of a modern system of social protection, but also of the modern European Welfare State. (1992: 18)

Every house needs cornerstones in some form, and whatever one’s choice of metaphor the implication is that Wedderburn’s minimum real income for all was indeed still to be taken as a prerequisite of a modern welfare state.

Lødemel and Schulte had not, however, adopted this discriminator and continued to describe all modern states as welfare states, though with reservations. In a parallel paper, Lødemel reviewed the poverty regimes of seven European countries, distinguishing the Latin tradition “in that the welfare state is less extensive and developed. This is particularly true for social assistance” (Lødemel 1992: 9). He therefore considered that poverty regimes were sub-regimes within Esping-Andersen’s welfare state regimes (1992: 17), and Lødemel and Schulte hypothesized that “poverty regimes . . . help us to distinguish differences that diverge from those resulting from the comparison of total welfare state variation”. In the Latin tradition, which Esping-Andersen had omitted as a welfare state classification, “. . . the absence of general assistance forces large groups to rely on the family and voluntary organizations for aid” (Lødemel and Schulte 1992: 22).

But while the existence of effective non-governmental poor relief may reduce income inequality and imply that “welfare” exists *in* a state, it cannot simultaneously be argued that it is welfare *by* the state. To take the extreme case: it is absurd to suggest that a nation in which the state makes no welfare provision but leaves it entirely to wholly-effective non-governmental volition should also be classified as a welfare state. For the term welfare state to have meaning it must remain crucial that it is the *statist* element in ensuring the minimum real income for all which is the discriminator (even if the state implements its welfare through non-governmental agencies).

## A Dynamic Research Agenda

Here, then, may be an indication of a productive research agenda. A dynamic operational approach to the classification of “welfare states” will have two dimensions: (1) a simple discriminating definition which measures whether or not they are “welfare states” at all; (2) a graded scale to measure the degree to which states achieve the defining “welfare state” dynamic objective of *ensuring a minimum real income for all* their inhabitants, or of *ensuring the social integration of all*, and do so at each stage throughout life’s journey. It requires accurate and reliable data on the extent and depth over time either of poverty or of social exclusion (measured in such a way that it could be overcome by integration) in

a country. If and when the necessary empirical evidence is available, states can then be located in/out and more/less, and the changes monitored as governments' activities and underlying social and cultural factors change the situation.

The object would be to distinguish states according to whether or not their policies and provisions aimed to ensure a minimum real income for all. Some do and justify their description as welfare states, and some do not. But this clear-cut either/or must not continue to be confused—as it frequently is—with questions different in both logic and application: (a) how to distinguish an ineffective welfare state from a non-welfare state, and (b) how far a welfare state is effective in combating poverty, whether through social inclusion or through minimum real incomes. Question (a) would require empirical data on the degree to which the defining policies and provisions achieved the universal coverage intended; perhaps there were barriers which prevented some eligible beneficiaries from claiming. Most scholars have concentrated on question (b), though as they have generally had access only to inappropriate data about inequality and not about poverty they have not come to useful conclusions about the effectiveness of the state's own provisions in how far it combats poverty or exclusion.

Before any classification can take place, a prior decision must be taken about what is being classified—the long-lasting institutions and values of national states or their more ephemeral government policies. Hard conceptual and empirical work is required to distinguish between (on the one hand) the deeply embedded values and discourses of a society about welfare issues,<sup>15</sup> which might well be worth classifying if sociologists could reliably identify them (as in the Nordic example), and (on the other) the assumed and imputed motivations of governments, abstracted from statutes and treated as if they were constituents of the deeper culture of the society in the state in question. It should then be possible to speak with greater confidence about “welfare states” as opposed to the past or current government policies which ornament them. Naturally it remains a matter for debate where and when this distinction is productive, since the evidence suggests that it varies between nations and within nations over time. Classifications of “welfare states” should not be static. The classificatory tools must make it possible to monitor change, whether this is at the deep levels of national values and state institutions or the superficial and ephemeral levels of government activities. Indeed, classificatory tools which fail to allow for change between categories, whether these are simple one-dimensional or complex multi-dimensional categories, cannot be considered sufficient for their purpose. Taking “welfare states” alone, a further categorization could then include the historico-ideological issues so commonly used for classification at present, relating these to the score on the “adequately combating poverty” axis.

The existing LIS data on income distribution cannot at present offer any usable information on the level of income required in order to be able to participate in any state's society at a minimally adequate and decent level and not to be socially excluded by lack of real income (including all relevant resources in that term)—in other words, not to be poor in any given country at any given time. The answer to those questions has to be empirical; it

cannot be read off statistical distributions. It follows that a welfare state cannot be defined simply by its capacity to ensure that the annual incomes of all its inhabitants fall above half the average, though that might be an interesting milestone on the way, one which none of the so-called welfare states have yet achieved. Instead, every country would require periodic empirical studies of at least three issues: (1) the public definition of what it means to be poor or to lack the necessities which every decent person should have if they want, over the whole life-span; (2) the level of annualized income required by each kind of equivalized household not to be poor as defined in that country and at that time; and (3) the proportion of the population whose incomes fell on or below the critical minimum, and how far below they fell. Similarly, those whose perspective is of social exclusion rather than financial poverty would have to develop parallel empirical studies to establish: (a) what the society defines as significant exclusion; (b) the resources required by individuals and groups not to be excluded, socially and economically; and (c) to identify those who lacked the resources or identify those policies which exacerbated the exclusion, so that the government commitment to combat them could be operationalized.

None of the so-called "welfare states" have yet put studies of poverty on to anything remotely like this basis, and therefore at this stage we cannot pursue the classification on the basis outlined in this paper. As to social exclusion and integration, both conceptualization and empirical evidence are in such confusion at present that not even a research agenda of this kind can yet be drawn up (Room 1995b).

The non-availability of relevant data is often put forward as an infeasible objection to such a project. If good data on the extent of poverty are lacking for most countries, that is no reason for rejecting the project; it is an incentive to find it. It is particularly perverse to stipulate that an arbitrary percentile on the income distribution is to be taken as defining poverty in the absence of any empirical evidence that it is so in that country and time (a typical Humpty Dumpty position), and then to describe as Humpty Dumpty those who contest the indefensible stipulation. The story of the emperor's new clothes would be a more appropriate literary analogy. His current absence of garments is no reason for suggesting that no clothes can be found for the emperor, nor that he cannot be clothed at all in the future. The question then is, how far can any changes in the extent of poverty or exclusion be ascribed to the effectiveness of the state's income maintenance system as a whole in the broadest sense, and in particular to the real incomes for all. They might, after all, have been caused not by the welfare state but by an upturn in employment and greater generosity by the non-governmental or informal sectors.

## **Conclusion**

What is the use of descriptions and definitions which fail to delimit their subject or to discriminate between the phenomenon at issue and its converse? This paper has deliberately avoided reviewing the vast output of the

academic “welfare state industry” over the past half century because most of it failed to meet this elementary test of *discrimination and usefulness*.<sup>16</sup> The industry’s output may have had many other valuable characteristics and these have not been at issue in this paper; to rehearse the achievement of other goals does not answer the challenge here, that the theoreticians of the welfare state have failed to develop a dynamically discriminating criterion of a “welfare state” and have ignored the clear and usable approach suggested by notable scholars over three decades ago.

As Kuhn, Popper and others have observed, science cannot communicate without agreement on paradigms, but they must be open to test, refutation and supersession. The problem faced by the academic “welfare state industry”, and indeed promoted by some parts of it, is that there is not even provisional agreement; there may even be disagreement over the correct discourse to use (historical, ideological, institutional, functional, and so on). All this must be clarified. This paper is therefore unapologetic in criticizing the industry’s confusion and in reminding it of a simple but dynamic definition which would facilitate scientific assessment of effectiveness and change among states in offering welfare to their inhabitants in terms of combating either poverty or social exclusion.

What are the objections? Those who find the discussion futile because scholars will always want to act Humpty Dumpty have thereby declared themselves to be uninterested even in the improvement of rigorous social science analytical methods or the development of dynamic social policy theory. To accuse this paper of Humpty-Dumptyism is to misunderstand its motives and argument: the validity of the case made here stands not on asserted authority but on whether it works as a better tool of social science theory in research focused on meeting social needs. Mastery over meaning derives from the collective agreement of the scholarly community, embodied in the common discourse, that a term offers a discriminating tool with greater analytical potency and significance for action than any other.

The question to those who prefer a different approach, the learned scholars whose usage of “welfare state” is totally devoid of explanatory meaning, must therefore be Humpty Dumpty’s: Who is to be master? Does their idiosyncratic use of the term “welfare state” offer a better and more effective conceptual tool which both is analytically discriminating and offers an agenda for dynamic research to improve social policy theory and practice? If so, that is how science advances. But if not, what is their use of the term “welfare” and their knowledge *for*? (as the American sociologist Robert S. Lynd asked (1939), noting the irrelevance of much US sociology in the face of severe social problems). In the same spirit, this paper has been written to challenge the welfare state industry to place the scientific measurement of changing human welfare firmly back at the centre of debate about what welfare states are and how well they work, and to restore its original meaning to the adjective. The term “welfare state”, instead of being conservative and oppressive, then becomes discriminating, emancipatory and dynamic, offering an agenda for social change and the relief of suffering, and *everyone’s* welfare again becomes the criterion of any “welfare state”.



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The title of this paper was suggested by Joan Higgins's book *States of Welfare: Comparative Analysis in Social Policy* (1981) which treats welfare state issues as conceptually problematic and not matters for mere morphological description. I am grateful to Charles Atherton, Michael Hill, Graham Room and Adrian Sinfield, and to participants in the 1997 Warsaw conference on "Theoretical problems of social policy science" for many helpful suggestions.

## Notes

1. It is two and a half thousand years since Confucius is said to have written: "When words lose their meanings, people lose their freedom," and the poor and others in society who lack welfare certainly have their freedom curtailed.
2. As the handwritten source states only "unpublished paper" and as the aim is to exemplify an approach, it would be unprofessional to identify the author.
3. At the time when Goodin wrote, before the Thatcher government's cuts in welfare for the poor, it was still accurate to describe the UK as a welfare state by Wedderburn's definition.
4. If this is a contentious point, it would need a further paper to set out the reasons for the assertion. They are summarized in Veit-Wilson (1998). Of course the Humpty Dumpty approach allows many economists to define poverty as half of average incomes or to use any other percentile as a poverty line, but no empirical justification has ever been offered for the arbitrary percentile approach. It is well known that the uniform 50 per cent of mean measure used by LIS was not based on any empirical evidence but was nothing more than a political compromise. That may be a justifiable reason for adopting the Humpty Dumpty approach, but cannot simultaneously be used to spurn better-founded approaches.
5. The author of this paper has been involved in research in the Nordic states since the 1950s and has often discussed these issues with people involved in social policy as academics or officials, formally in recorded interviews for research projects as well as informally. The Nordic approach is incompatible with the liberal notion of opposition between state and individual and the Marxian version of opposition between (capitalist) state and working masses. Some members of the welfare state industry seem ambivalent about which position they hold, and in what context.
6. In an interview on his research into social assistance appeals in Finland, Sipilä suggested that an explanation for the paucity of appeals was that appellants often seemed to say to themselves: if it's our state then what it does must be right, and if I am dissatisfied it must be my fault and not the inadequacies of the system. He reported that this respect for "our" state was even stronger in Sweden, which the author of this paper has also observed.
7. Several disparate discourses (in Foucault's sense) are used concurrently, competitively and unproductively in debating poverty and state welfare; for a discussion of some issues see Veit-Wilson (1998: ch. 3).
8. Andreski's defence of clarity is cited by Sokal and Bricmont in their critique of intellectual impostures (1998) and seems equally apposite in a critique of intellectual muddle and closure.
9. I am grateful to Charles Atherton for pointing out that Patrick Hennessy suggested that it was Alfred Zimmermann, Professor of International Relations at Oxford, who first used the term in England, possibly deriving it from the earlier German term *Wohlfahrtsstaat*. In the light of Lowe's comments quoted above, confirmed

- by others about the use of this term in Germany, this might not have been meant as positively as later assumed.
10. The other three Freedoms were of speech, of religion and from fear, none of which are specifically *welfare* state issues.
  11. Meade had been a Treasury official as well as an academic and his definition recognized the basic issue at stake.
  12. The choice of “social exclusion” as the preferred term for the problem was a deliberate political choice by European Union members to avoid any government having to admit to the existence of poverty (interview with European Commission official 1993). Stripped of redundant noise, this was a choice of politically acceptable terms, not between distinct concepts.
  13. This political phrase is used by all governments in Britain to distract attention from their generous tax benefits for the non-poor and instead to rationalize ungenerous means-tested provision for the poor.
  14. Norman Lamont, a Conservative government Chancellor of the Exchequer (Finance Minister) in the UK, stated on 16 May 1991 that “rising unemployment and the recession are the price we have had to pay to get inflation down”. The price was paid by those who lost their jobs and incomes as a result. Other policies to maintain employment while reducing consumer demand were feasible but were not considered acceptable by the government.
  15. The historian John Saville (in an essay on “The origins of the welfare state”) quoted the old Conservative prime minister Benjamin Disraeli remarking in 1881 to the future Labour politician H. M. Hyndman about the UK, “It is a very difficult country to move, a very difficult country indeed . . .” He was referring to these embedded values and beliefs, not simply to the scope for introducing legislation which depends on Parliamentary majorities.
  16. Other authors have critically reviewed some of this output, and some have reviewed others’ reviews—the “welfare state industry” feeds on its own products. However, to the extent that critical reviews of confusion are valuable in themselves as mapping the conceptual swamps to be avoided or drained, two as-yet unpublished papers offered to annual conferences in Britain of the Social Policy Association can be recommended: “Constructions and Creations: histories, myths and realities of welfare, social policy and the welfare state” by John Carrier and Ian Kendall in 1995, and “Something Happened: conflicting descriptions of the New Welfare State” by Martin Powell and Martin Hewitt in 1997.

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