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*Can social and economic inequality
be explained by a «culture of dependency»?*
Welfare State and New Right Thought

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1. Preliminary Remark

“Our inner cities are filled with children having children ...
with people who are dependent on drugs and on the narcotic of welfare”

Dan Quayle in May 1992 (then Vice-President of the United States)¹

This quotation of a high-rank U.S. politician offers a first lively illustration of what the debate in New Right circles focuses at. ‘Dependency’ in terms of New Right thought is inextricably linked with two issues: public welfare and moral decay. Besides, the statement accidentally points out the notion’s very place of origin. The term arose in the American social-scientific and political debate of the 1970s which asked for the causes of recent massive disturbances and riots in the inner-cities of some of the nation’s largest towns. The evaluation of census data and (macro-) sociological surveys revealed certain aggregate characteristics and patterns of behaviour which soon gave birth to the expression of an “urban underclass”². The impoverished inner-city residents were predominantly black; many males and most of the women were either long-term unemployed or with an unstable and irregular working biography, and out-of-wedlock birth rates were significantly higher than the average of the total population average.³

In this essay, I address the question if a ‘culture of dependency’ may explain social and economic inequalities. This thesis follows the so-called ‘cultural approach’ in the debate. According to this, collective deviant behaviour may be explained by the incentives of welfare (generally conceived in an absolutely narrow sense of public assistance programmes only) that lead people to the (subjectively rational) decisions of dropping out of their (menial) jobs (or, as for the young, not to pick up any regular work at all), of keeping sexual relationships without marriage, and of (subsequently) engaging in criminal offences more and more habitually.

The alternative ‘structural’ approach is more complex. It seeks to explain the existence of (socially and economically) marginalised strata by a “structured inequality”⁴ within society: groups of people in the lower sectors of employment who are already socially disadvantaged are least able to respond to profound local changes in distribution and character of available labour.

The two explanatory approaches are not necessarily incompatible with each other, as they stress qualitatively different aspects.⁵ One possible approach may therefore be to bring to-

¹ Quoted in Fraser/ Gordon 1994, p. 327.

² Peterson 1991.

³ Cf. Peterson 1991; Wilson 1987.

⁴ Morris 1994, p. 81.

⁵ Cf. Morris 1994, pp. 80-81, 93.

gether the two theories with statistical analysis of aggregate empirical data. By this, one could consider strengths and weaknesses in explanatory power and the respective explanatory reach.

However, I will not do this here, namely for two reasons. First, a serious examination of macro-sociological data would be – in many respects – beyond my possibilities and the scope of this paper. Secondly, and more importantly, doing so implicates that one (tacitly) accepts the assumptions of either approach.

As I shall argue, there are sound reasons to doubt (and even reject) the theory of “behavioural dependency”⁶ in the way it is presented by New Right proponents. It is thus necessary to critically evaluate the ideas and notions underlying the thesis of a ‘culture of dependency’. This is what I want to do in this essay, and as I will show, there are a lot of reasons for not accepting the New Right thesis of ‘dependency’ hastily and uncritically.

In section two, I will shortly summarize the basic principles of New Right thought and indicate its inherent inconsistency that evolves of the combination of libertarianism and conservatism.⁷ After that, I will (in section three) deal with the two crucial terms in this context, ‘dependency’ and ‘underclass’ respectively. I will indicate the implicit connotations and hidden underlying ideas of either and shall argue that both are blurred, and deliberately kept this way by advocates of the New Right who use them as ‘Trojan horses’ to transport implicit moral ideas of what a ‘bad’ (and consequently also: ‘good’) conduct of life is about.

In section four, I will, in brief, consider the arguments of the New Right for family, local community and charity as alternatives of public welfare supply that are (allegedly) superior. I will present liberal counter-arguments that are in the position to question the New Right claim of an superior concept of a free society seriously. Then, I shall briefly draw attention to a ‘debate within the debate’ that asks whether the ‘underclass’ should be obliged to labour in return of welfare benefits. The American Lawrence Mead certainly is outstanding as proponent of this genuinely conservative approach. As we shall see, his reasoning is more subtle than much of the New Right, and thus deserves closer examination.

I will conclude the essay by arguing that the radical New Right is so one-sided and unsound in their argumentation and inflammatory rather than scientific in their language that it is difficult to take them for serious in a discussion *sine ira et studio*. At the same time, this propa-

⁶ Deacon 1994, p. 56.

⁷ In order to keep clearness, I will henceforth refer to the liberal element in New Right thought as ‘libertarianism’ to demarcate it from the egalitarian-liberal line I will use for counter-arguments, and which I shall refer to as ‘liberalism’. This differentiation has solely pragmatic reasons; I do acknowledge the noteworthy variances in both the degree of extrem-liberal elements and their emphasis/ rating in the works of different New Right thinkers, and that probably not all of them would appreciate to be referred to as ‘libertarians’.

gandistic impetus has – wholly unnecessarily – brought disrepute on what might contribute to the explanation of the problem of the long-run socio-economically marginalised.

2. Basic Ideas of New Right Thought

Put very briefly, one may say that New Right thought consists of economic libertarianism and social conservatism. As many scholars note⁸, the core principles of these two social theories are at odds with each other: Libertarians, most emphatically von Hayek⁹, stress the absolute superiority of the free market as mechanism of socio-economic interaction, compared to which state intervention will always be suboptimal. Usually, many supporting arguments are presented¹⁰, but the emphasis on individual freedom is certainly outstanding. State intervention is a threat to this freedom (and consequentially the (liberal) concept of ‘social justice’ that implies exactly this).¹¹ As Hayek argues, the reproach of the free market as being ‘unjust’ cannot be maintained, for ‘justice’ is always procedural and individual only. On the contrary, the free market represents a wondrous order that is beyond any human’s responsibility, and, according to this conception, irresponsible to any claim of justice.¹²

Conservatives, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of a ‘strong state’. Like all communitarians, they believe that every society has common, shared values (which are constituent for one’s citizen status) which are expressed in “organic communal activities”¹³. Therefore, communitarians inevitably have to reject a universalistic approach of social justice (like the liberal one). The only possibility is social justice within respective social context, therefore dependent on the shared self-image of the citizens of one society (i.e. relativism of social justice).¹⁴ Conservatives attached to the New Right reject the existence of ‘rights’ to any sort of public welfare (at least in Western industrialized countries). Instead, they refer to ‘mediating structures’ in society, most notably the family and local community or government respectively. If, for any reasons, these institutions fail to maintain one’s wellbeing, all members of society have the moral duty to help, i.e. this aid is and can by no means be (made) legally binding. Hence, help of this kind represents a charitable act, a kindness founded in humanity.

Both approaches are incommensurable as they conceive the idea of citizenship differently: for libertarians (as well as for all liberals) citizenship derives from basic rights that are prior to

⁸ Cf. Gamble 1994, p. 36; Holmwood 1993, pp. 100-101.

⁹ Cf. Hewitt 1992, pp. 38-42; Jesenitschnig 2004, p. 6, fn 28; Pierson 1991, pp.44-45.

¹⁰ For a catchword-like summary see Pierson 1991, p. 48.

¹¹ I have dealt with the universalistic principles of (egalitarian-) liberal social justice in detail elsewhere (Jesenitschnig 2004, pp. 3-11).

¹² Cf. Jesenitschnig 2004, pp. 5-6; Pierson 1991, p. 45.

¹³ Taylor-Gooby 1991, p. 190.

¹⁴ Cf. Jesenitschnig 2004, p. 6.

membership in any particular society (this is what Taylor-Gooby calls the “substantial approach”), whereas conservatives (as well as all communitarians) argue that citizenship derives from the embeddedness in a certain society, its values and perceptions of ‘good life’ (labelled the “procedural approach” by Taylor-Gooby¹⁵).

It is therefore quite remarkable that these two distinct social theories managed to converge in form of New Right thought. As Andrew Gamble points out, it was the “common enemy” of social democracy that brought together libertarian market-believers and conservatives and lead to this “strange partnership”.¹⁶ Despite all differences, there are some salient correspondences as well: both libertarians and conservatives consider private property as crucial, even if for different reasons.¹⁷ Similarly, both share the opinion that a ‘strong state’ is necessary since nothing else can maintain and enforce the laws that are needed in order to ensure the smooth and undisturbed functioning of the free market. Eventually, conservatives might prefer the free market to state intervention. The former rewards labour efforts while the latter, based on some allegedly flawed ideas of ‘rights’, tends to lift responsibility from the individual and consequently leads to moral corrosion. Or, in the words of British sociologist (and New Right radical) David Marsland: “Its [state welfare, C.J.] piratical seizure of moral control abandons the people to purposeless drifting, [and] subservient dependency.”¹⁸

There are only two reasons that might justify the combination of libertarianism in the economic arena and moral conservatism in the social sphere. One may assume that both areas are separate and have no influence whatsoever on the respective other. Obviously, this idea is too absurd to be considered seriously. The only alternative left (which therefore has to be adopted by any New Right proponent) is that both areas are interrelated but that best outcomes in either sphere are reached precisely *because* (these) different principles are applied. There are two serious objections which question that any such distinction – here libertarian, there conservative principles – can ever be made. First, the libertarian idea of the market as an “ideologically free zone where human actions are guided by the price system [...] without favouring any one individual”¹⁹ is naïve. Different human talents face different price assessments at the market because of varying (societal) ideas of what is to be considered valuable.

Secondly, one libertarian claim in favour of the free market (and beside individual freedom) is what might be called the ‘efficiency argument’: free market principles are considered to be

¹⁵ Taylor-Gooby 1991, pp. 190-191.

¹⁶ Cf. Gamble 1994, pp. 62-63 (quotations: pp. 62; 44).

¹⁷ For libertarians, the invulnerability of legally gained private property naturally derives from the idea of the free market (they would accept only marginal taxes to uphold the state’s legislative und judicative forces who ensure the adherence of ‘law and order’. On the other hand, conservatives stress the importance of private property as “one of the central foundations of authority and order.” (Gamble 1994, p. 62). – For the following, cf. Gamble 1994, pp. 44, 62-63; George/ Wilding 1994, p. 24; Marsland 1996, p. 38.

¹⁸ Marsland 1996, p. 3.

¹⁹ Hewitt 1992, p. 39.

the best guarantee against any form of economic inefficiency, and this is due to competition among the potential sellers. However, it is not difficult to imagine that different competitors are members of the same local community (or even of one family) which means that exactly those people who are imagined to have the closest human relations with each other (and who are therefore supposed to be the first ones helping each other through the vicissitudes of life) may be ardent economic competitors in one way or another.

Several New Right exponents have noticed these discrepancies, particularly more moderate ones with conservative emphasis. They are (reluctantly) willing to accept some restrictions with regards to the free economy.²⁰ As the equilibrium between the two philosophical lines remains all but stable and safe, so is New Right thought. There are many academic disputes and divisions between its proponents. Yet, it were the most radical thinkers of the New Right (radical with regards to both economy and society) who initiated and decisively shaped the debate of welfare dependency. It is them, authors like Charles Murray and David Marsland, we shall turn to in the next two sections.

3. ‘Welfare Dependency’ and the ‘Underclass’

It is due to the American social scientist Charles Murray and his book ‘Losing Ground’ of 1984 that the term ‘welfare dependency’ has become prominent in the academic debate on the welfare state, and has been so ever since. Still, Murray’s oeuvre is probably the one most often referred to in the context of the (extreme) New Right.²¹

The core of the ‘dependency’ train of thought is quite simple: The New Right believes that advocates of public welfare have a far too optimistic view on human nature. Actually, people are self-centred and egoistic, and therefore need the driving power of the free market whose insecurities and uncertainties force them to strain and work as hard as possible.²² On the contrary, public welfare provides a seductive incentive for the (supposedly rationally calculating) individual to drop out of the labour process and live off welfare. Accordingly, the security of public welfare perversely generates widespread inertia, idleness and lethargy and is made responsible for the development of “an entirely new dimension of moral deterioration which may make the nation inoperable and indefensible [!]”, and during which people lose their “ca-

²⁰ John Gray (1993; see particularly p. 60) is a good example.

²¹ I suggest this is because he was the first one to pose New Right policy proposals in the most radical way imaginable (written in a catchy, equally radical language). In either respect, Murray has not changed in his more recent works (cf. Murray 1994). – Of all the authors included in my bibliography, the following refer to Murray: Barry 1997, p. 338-339; Deacon 1994, p. 55-56; Fraser/ Gordon 1994, p. 328; George/ Wilding 1994, p. 29; Holmwood 1993, p. 110; Mann 1992: p. 106-107, 128-129; Mead 1997, p. 218; Morris 1994, p. 81 and passim; Nolan/ Whelan 1996, p. 152-153; Peterson 1991, p. 14; Wilson 1987, pp. 16-17 and passim.

²² Cf. George/ Wilding 1994, p. 23.

capacity to make rational moral choices as a basis of independent action.”²³ Along with this wicked influence on the single individual comes the erosion of mutual social responsibility, thus the decay of mediating structures and institutions such as the family: public welfare, it is contended, ‘atomises’ society and turns people into irresponsible beings.²⁴ As stated by the New Right, this development is then likely to spread across generations and deepen with subsequent time. The eventual outcome to be observed is said to be a “dependency culture”²⁵, a phrase that implies much more than mere economic dependence on welfare benefits (as I shall point out below). It has some nearness to the older phrase of a ‘culture of poverty’ that was introduced into sociological debate during the 1960s.²⁶

Rephrased in the strong language of the radical New Right, it is “antiquated socialist theorizing” with its “false promises of fictitious rights” that has, like “corrosive acid”, led to a “welfare sclerosis” because of “continually generating more and more dependency”.²⁷ Unfortunately, they present very little evidence for their case. Rather, it seems that the connection between public welfare, dependency and moral decay is considered self-evident, although the stubborn majority of political scholars has not yet noticed how completely flawed their ideas about the welfare state really are:

“The opponents of welfare reform remain implacably blind to the evidence about welfare dependency and the role of state welfare in creating the underclass.”²⁸

From their point of view, obviously nothing less is needed than a sort of Kuhnian shift of paradigm in social theory. One might even get the uncomfortable impression that some New Right radicals deem it to be a fight of ‘right’ (or ‘good’) versus ‘wrong’ (or ‘evil’) with a distinctively Darwinian race theoretical connotation.²⁹ Some New Right scholars harshly accuse academic opponents (i.e. virtually all sorts of welfare state advocates) to be unscientific by using deceptive arguments at the best, and stubborn dogmatism at the worst.³⁰ Regrettably, they do not seem to do better in turn, as the example of their criticism of ‘rights to welfare’ exposes. For example, Marsland’s comprehension of the idea of ‘welfare rights’ ignores that

²³ Segalman/ Marsland 1989, p. 37 (first quotation); Marsland 1996, p. 110 (second quotation). – In fact, both burst books with passages emphasizing the abjection and wicked consequences of public welfare (cf. the following selection: Marsland 1996, pp. 24, 29, 220; Segalman/ Marsland 1989, pp. 6, 56).

²⁴ Cf. Georg/ Wilding 1994, pp. 30-31; Marsland 1996, p. 39.

²⁵ Gray 1993, p. 53. Cf. also Barry 1997, p. 334; George/ Wilding 1994, pp. 32-33; Morris 1994, p. 102; Segalman/ Marsland 1989, pp. 45, 118.

²⁶ See section five for details.

²⁷ In order of quotations: Marsland 1996, p. 10; *ibid.*, p. 220; *ibid.*, p. 39; Segalman/ Marsland 1996, p. 118; *ibid.*, p. 117.

²⁸ Marsland 1996, p. 120. – Elsewhere (*ibid.* p. 116), he actually claims: “If it is once admitted that there are grave and unacknowledged [...] problems with British society, it would seem foolish or worse to refuse to admit that the person [Charles Murray, C.J.] who has managed to identify a problem that escaped the rest of us might also be right to some significant extent in his account of the nature of that problem and of its causes.” [!]

²⁹ Marsland (1996, p. 11-12) speaks of currently predominant “nonsensical theories” whose “shoddy thinking” must be replaced by “better thinking” (cf. also *ibid.*, pp. 196, 199, 203, 210-218).

³⁰ In this respect, Marsland (1996; see particularly the passages pointed out in fn 29) and Murray (1994) are outstanding.

there might be diverse concepts of 'rights' (implicating different extents of justified redistribution). As a consequence, his account of 'the' concept of welfare rights can only be judged as completely distorted (probably from several philosophical-theoretical lines but certainly) from the egalitarian-liberal position.³¹

Likewise, the terms of (welfare) 'dependency' and the 'underclass' – as stratum of those people who account for the (sub-) cultural dependent – deserve closer examination. As Fraser and Gordon in their instructive article indicate, there are two levels to approach the term 'dependency'.³² One may focus on the linguistic meaning of the word, i.e. the general subtext transported with the expression (which may change over time and vary between different civilizations). In their genealogical pursuit of the word, Fraser and Gordon convincingly argue that the American conception of dependency is somewhat different from the (Western) European one, as the United States did not experience historical institutions such as feudalism in which dependence was actually conceived as mutual (or: inter-) dependence. Additionally, they argue, 'dependence' gained a further pejorative and even stigmatizing connotation during and after the American Revolution with its emphasis on independence.³³ Incidentally, this line of argument may well explain why the debate about 'welfare dependency' has its origins in the USA.

On a more specific level, we can concentrate on 'dependency' as a term within the discussion on the welfare state. The question to raise is twofold: why was this phrase introduced into debate, and what do those who did so mean by using it? The explanation to the latter question may well reveal the answer to the former one. First of all, New Right proponents disclose a very narrow understanding of 'welfare' in the way they criticize the welfare state. Their criticism neither particularly targets social insurance schemes nor any inclusive citizen welfare supply following the Scandinavian pattern in particular. Instead, their harsh criticism centres at (usually American or British respectively) means-tested public assistance programmes that have, ironically, the smallest share of all public welfare spending.³⁴ Although the New Right pretends to condemn any sort of public welfare, their core criticism hits only those areas aimed at the very poor, and misses universal and middle-class targeted benefits.

³¹ Marsland 1996, p. 24: „The concept of rights [...] is [...] incorporating absolutely anything that the user of the term happens personally to define as desirable.” Cf. also Segalman/ Marsland 1989, p. 6. – More generally, Marsland's (1996, chap. 2) account of the (allegedly) flawed philosophical concepts in favour of (any sort of) welfare state lacks any necessary distinction between a theoretical and an empirical level, stating that empirically perceptible failures are “falsifications of fundamental elements of welfare state theory.” (ibid., pp. 39-40).

³² Fraser/ Gordon 1994.

³³ Fraser/ Gordon 1994, p. 321.

³⁴ Cf. Barry 1997, p. 339; Fraser/ Gordon 1994, pp. 322-323; Holmwood 1993, p. 111; Mann 1992, p. 107; Mead 1997, p. 201.

The silent implication is that those people who rely on public assistance are probably ‘undeserving’,³⁵ contrastingly to those who are ‘deserving’ (and who should usually be cared for by their family, community, and voluntary organizations³⁶). Evidently, it is not far from here to the reproach for stigmatizing and degrading poor welfare recipients. The answer of the New Right seems ambiguous: they emphasize that they want nothing less than ‘blaming the victim’. At the same time, Marsland asserts that the “decay of shame as a mechanism of social control and positive motivation” was a “major reason” for the expansion of ‘welfare dependency’.³⁷

On the other hand, it is quite educational of what the New Right does not subsume in their conception of ‘dependency’. For example, the traditional idea of family (consisting of a male sole earner and his wife being responsible for running the household and raising the children) is completely disregarded in this context.³⁸ On the contrary, this social structure is considered to be desirable, and even ideal (as we shall see in the next section).

Finally, one aspect of the meaning of ‘dependency’ – on the general linguistic level – shows close affinity with the term ‘addiction’ (as the term of ‘drug dependency’ may demonstrate). In the debate on ‘welfare dependency’, this nearness is not coincidental but serves the purpose to move public assistance recipients close to pathological addicts, sometimes rather undisguised.³⁹ As Marsland’s phrase of a “festering underclass of welfare dependants”⁴⁰ proves, it is just one step to the even more obscure term of the ‘underclass’. Many scholars use it thoughtlessly and without any (explicit) definition⁴¹; others offer definitions guided by moral judgement that are thus empirically imprecise.⁴² For instance, Murray defines crime, illegitimacy and economic inactivity among working-aged men as the three ‘symptoms’ of the underclass.⁴³ As critics have indicated, this procedure of defining is acutely exposed to the danger of the economic fallacy.⁴⁴

This examination shows that both the terms of ‘welfare dependency’ (or a ‘dependency culture’ respectively) and the ‘underclass’ are profoundly ideological and loaded with subjective,

³⁵ Marsland’s (1996, p.20) moral judgement is quite explicit in this respect.

³⁶ Since not even the most radicals among the New Right might seriously believe that these social institutions can cover any possible individual predicament (that arose through no fault of one’s own, of course), they occasionally suggest the installation of ‘commercial agencies’ contracted by the state which may grant loans if absolutely necessary (cf. Marsland 1996, p. 206).

³⁷ Marsland 1996, pp. 206-207. – For the objection of the ‘blaming-the-victim’ reproach see *ibid.*, p. 115.

³⁸ Cf. Holmwood 1993, p. 117.

³⁹ For instance, Segalman/ Marsland (1989, p. 45) speak of a “ghetto social pathology”. Cf. also my initial citation on p. 1, and Fraser’s/ Gordon’s (1994, p. 326) notes.

⁴⁰ Marsland 1996, p. 20.

⁴¹ Cf. Gray 1993, p. 33; Marsland 1996, *passim*.

⁴² Ken Auletta’s work (quoted in Morris 1994, p. 81) is a good example for this.

⁴³ Murray 1994, p. 2.

⁴⁴ Cf. Nolan/ Whelan 1996, pp. 153-154. – According to the economic fallacy, aggregated data is used to draw conclusions upon individual characteristics or individual interactions.

genuinely moral ideas of decent life and deviant behaviour but superficially pretend to be objective scientific concepts.

4. Family, Community, Charity: The False Panacea of the New Right

“Anything the family and community can do, the mass government can do *less* effectively and *more* expensively.” (Segalman/ Marsland)⁴⁵

This axiom is supported by more conservative and rather libertarian New Right advocates alike. Conservatives stress the importance of the family and intact local communities in order to sustain both a common identity and the moral duty to help each other through the vicissitudes of life. Here, the overlapping with communitarian thought is evident.⁴⁶ Others with a more libertarian emphasis agree because they see the family (as well as voluntary aid and charity) as natural source of welfare provision through which the flawed idea of public welfare would be totally avoidable. Nevertheless, they are at odds with the conservatives when it comes to the question whether these ‘mediating structures’ should be stimulated (or even ‘institutionalized’) by state coercion, as some conservative scholars suggest.⁴⁷

However, there are (from a liberal point of view) at least two serious objections, one concerning the idea of local community and charity, the other about the ideal of traditional familyhood. I shall deal with the former one first.

Beside the communitarian argument for tight bonds within community, the New Right is united in the belief that a close community is the best precautionary measure to keep away from the flaws of public welfare, most notably the creation of ‘dependency’. Consequently, they advocate a highly decentralized structure of government, with remarkably comprehensive power on the local level.⁴⁸ Close mutual relations, it is contended, imply that charity donors, community (and the state) are better able to distinguish those in predicament through no fault of their own from “parasitical and subservient ‘free-riders’”⁴⁹. It is the idea of mutual obligations or the reciprocity between donors and recipients respectively, that was lost through granting unconditional public benefits, and which the New Right believes to re-install through their conception of community and charity.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Segalman/ Marsland 1989, p. 54 (their emphasis).

⁴⁶ Therefore, it is not surprising that many proponents of the New Right refer to genuinely communitarian thinkers such as Amitai Etzioni or Michael Walzer (cf. Barry 1997, p. 333; Holmwood 1993, p. 110; Marsland 1996, pp. 131-132).

⁴⁷ At first place, one has to mention Gray (1993, p. 52) who explicitly supports “policies of paternalism and moralism” (ibid.). See Barry (1997, p. 333) for determined opposition.

⁴⁸ Certainly, one of the ironies of history is that it was Margaret Thatcher’s government (probably the one closest to New Right thought Britain has ever experienced so far) which made the most serious and far-ranging efforts of state centralization in Great Britain of the 20th century (Wilding 1997, p. 721).

⁴⁹ Segalman/ Marsland 1989, p. 125. Cf. also Marsland 1996, pp. 123, 206.

⁵⁰ Cf. Barry 1997, p. 336.

Here, the liberal objection has already been expressed by Alexis de Tocqueville 170 years ago: it is what he calls the potential “despotism of majority” that threatens plurality in opinion and lifestyle, and subdues everyone to the majoritarian (moral) ideals.⁵¹ Moreover, help may be made conditional even on categories such as aesthetical opinion which are totally irrelevant even in moral respect.

This leads us to the New Right ideal of traditional familyhood. For the New Right (as well as for all sorts of conservatives), the family represents the “*indispensable seedbed of genuine freedom*” and is assumed to be the “most satisfying way to live a human life”⁵². More importantly, it is (only) through an intact family that a human being incorporates central values such as familial and community cooperation, diligence, modesty, thrift and, above all, resistance against (welfare) dependency if s/he can help her-/himself: No civilized society is able to exist without “the norm” of a two-parent family.⁵³ More specifically, it is a two-parent family with a strictly traditional division of labour I have mentioned earlier on.⁵⁴ Any other form of (married) cohabitation is ruled out on the basis of two (allegedly) existing ideal parental models in bringing up one’s children. Incidentally, all women are authoritatively (but without further explanation) told they “are happiest when the female roles of wife and mother are exalted.”⁵⁵ Consequently, everything that seems to be threatening to this is fiercely combated, and two issues are outstanding in this respect: liberal divorce laws and, of course, public welfare. The former are said to contribute to a diminution of the value of marriage and family and, in turn, encourage out-of-wedlock births. These children are brought up out of the appropriate family constellation and are consequently likely to lack of social behaviour.⁵⁶

Public welfare damages the cohesion of families in two ways: on the one hand, welfare benefits of different kinds weaken the (natural) position of the father as the family’s breadwinner. Also, public assistance schemes for poor mothers tend to encourage cohabitation and single motherhood rather than marriage.⁵⁷ There are serious empirical objections⁵⁸ to this sort of allegedly compelling, consequentialist-like conclusions but they pass over the New Right family ideal in the background. This ideal is a moral axiom and their assertions about social behaviour and moral decay in (any) deviating case are axiomatic derivations. Any other idea of how to conduct a decent life is inevitably flawed, and people living differently do not de-

⁵¹ Cf. Tocqueville 2001, particularly pp. 147-153.

⁵² Segalman/ Marsland 1989, p. 124 (first quotation; their emphasis), Murray 1994, p. 7 (second quotation).

⁵³ Murray 1994, p. 26. – For the family as source of firm values cf. Segalman/ Marsland 1989, pp. 38-40, 121.

⁵⁴ By ‘traditional’ I refer to the predominant form of family labour division between husband and wife in industrialised Western countries until the post-World War II era.

⁵⁵ Cf. Segalman/ Marsland 1989, pp. 40-49 (quotation: p. 49).

⁵⁶ Cf. Murray 1994, pp. 7, 16 and passim. – In fact, Murray’s book is a single indictment against divorce and children out-of-wedlock.

⁵⁷ Cf. Murray 1994, pp. 29-30 (and throughout); Segalman/ Marsland 1989, pp. 7-8 (and throughout).

⁵⁸ As indicated earlier, I will not engage in attempts of empirical challenge. William Wilson’s ‘The Truly Disadvantaged’ (1987) still remains outstanding in this context.

serve lenient support of others.⁵⁹ As Marsland confirms, a “cultural revolution” is necessary.⁶⁰ We might get the best impression of what this should be about when considering Segalman’s and Marsland’s suggestions for measures to be taken up in this purge:

“[...] Critical analysis of school and college text books and teaching which are prejudiced and subversive in relation to the family as an institution; serious attention to damaging role models in the media and public life in relation to promiscuity, adultery and homosexuality.”⁶¹

5. Lawrence Mead and the ‘Workfare’ Debate

Finally, I want to have a brief look at the argument that favours ‘workfare’ (i.e. work obligation through state coercion), and which is closely associated with the American scholar Lawrence Mead. He supports paternalistic social policy, and may thus be called a conservative, but he is definitely no advocate of the New Right.⁶²

The demand to oblige (long-term) unemployed, able-bodied people (on welfare) to work is no special feature of Mead’s writing but can similarly be found in communitarian and New Right thought.⁶³ Besides, Mead similarly identifies ‘dependency’ as single factor of the concentrated poverty in (American) inner-cities, and rules out any structural causes.⁶⁴ But his conception of ‘dependence’ is very much unlike the one of the New Right. While Murray or Marsland stress the people’s economic rationality when making a choice between a decent, diligent life and the immoral and wicked alternative (‘on public welfare’), Mead’s emphasis is on the psychological weakness of those being dependent. Although there would be enough adequate jobs within reach⁶⁵, the urban poor don’t work – but they do so not because they deliberately prefer the ‘hammock’ of public assistance. Rather, it is the subculture of the ghetto that creates the subjective impression of barriers and impediments which the poor perceive as insurmountable without external help. Thus, Mead’s argumentation follows the idea of a ‘culture of poverty’: the poor want to get work but they feel unable to make the necessary efforts, or, as Mead puts it: for them, work “is an aspiration but not an obligation.”⁶⁶

In a further step, the American scholar cleverly maintains that his rationale is preliminary in content to the debate on social justice and redistribution. Any position within this debate

⁵⁹ For instance, Murray (1994, pp. 29-30) seriously pleads for “eliminating benefits for unmarried women altogether”.

⁶⁰ Marsland 1996, p. 201.

⁶¹ Segalman/ Marsland 1989, p. 123.

⁶² Mead explicitly calls some of his suggestions ‘paternalistic’ (idem 1997, p. 230). For the New Right, he rejects the libertarian-economic criticism on public welfare provision as unpersuasive (cf. Mead 1997, pp. 218-220).

⁶³ However, Mead certainly is the one treating it most fully and emphatically. – For communitarian and New Right advocates cf. Barry 1997, p. 340; Gray 1993, p. 61; Segalman/ Marsland 1989, p. 119.

⁶⁴ Cf. Mead 1993, p. 178; idem 1997 pp. 211, 214.

⁶⁵ Of course, this allegation is open to empirical criticism (for such, cf. Deacon 1994, p. 60; Wilson 1987, pp. 161-162).

⁶⁶ Mead 1993, p. 179 (cf. also *ibid.*, p. 182; idem 1997, p. 215).

would make the “competence assumption” which means that each (non-disabled) adult is capable of organizing his (or her) life on his (or her) own. Instead, Mead challenges this idea by maintaining that the ‘ghetto poor’ must not be regarded as equal citizens since their disordered lifestyle does not allow them to fulfil their civil obligations, such as obeying the law and contributing taxes through labour.⁶⁷ Thus, the necessary debate is not (yet) one about social justice but social disorders. Mead does not question public welfare per se but criticizes its permissiveness: the state distributes welfare benefits regardless of actual civil obligations.⁶⁸ According to Mead, the state should oblige the dependent poor to work in exchange for benefits. However, this workfare should not be considered as state coercion that much; it is rather “public education [...] in the broadest sense”⁶⁹. The picture he draws of the preferable state is very much one of a strict but good-natured father who helps on his immature children. Mead does not expect that the implementation of his suggestion for workfare would lead to (immediate) resocialization but he claims that workfare is the best measure to close the gap of “the desires of the poor to work and their actual behavior”⁷⁰ and to press ahead with the process of re-integrating these dependent into society (and thus re-equalize them).

As we have seen, Lawrence Mead’s conception of ‘dependency’ is one of psychological barriers rather than deliberate idleness. The subjective feeling of being unable to (search for) work causes continuous unemployment. Like the account of the New Right (that the rational choice for unemployment arouses and enhances social irresponsibility), Mead’s explanation is, like all cultural approaches, vulnerable with regard to the tautological reproach: values that are said to explain a specific sort of behaviour cannot, in turn, be explained by precisely this behaviour.⁷¹

In a very subtle turn, the American scholar contends that his debate is prior to any discussion of redistribution because not all citizens may be judged as equals. At this point, Mead shares the New Right’s problem of an explicitly moral reasoning. He would have to define those ‘infected’ by the ‘culture of poverty’ accurately, but not surprisingly he fails to do so. Such an attempt would be as arbitrary as the New Right’s claim relating to traditional familyhood, because it would have to include a demarcation between competent citizens and incompetent dependent.

Furthermore, Mead’s allegation (that the ‘workfare’ debate comes prior to the one about just redistribution) is (deliberately?) misleading. He says that workfare has to precede any justification of redistribution (and, of course, the libertarian arguments for non-redistribution as

⁶⁷ Cf. Mead 1997, pp. 203-204; 225-227.

⁶⁸ Cf. Mead 1993, p. 182.

⁶⁹ Mead 1993, p. 183.

⁷⁰ Mead 1993, p. 181.

⁷¹ Cf. Morris 1994, p. 86; Wilson 1987, p. 15.

well) because they would be “visions on behalf of *working* citizens”⁷². The underlying suggestion obviously is that all these philosophical lines would presuppose adults who are both willing to work and actually doing so. If reality is deviate, they are unable to address this problem properly. Thus the (morally justified) remedy of workfare is needed in order to allow any line of argument for redistributive justice.⁷³ I shall conclude this section by demonstrating briefly that this assumption is false, at least from a liberal point. The (egalitarian) liberalism justifies civil obligations but without falling back to moral rationale.

According to liberalism with its idea of equal freedom, all natural resources have to be shared equally among all citizens. As the working process involves both natural resources and one’s own manpower, a certain extent of redistribution (in the form of taxes etc.) is justified.⁷⁴

However, liberalism does not only involve rights (or entitlements respectively). By introducing the principle of reciprocity, liberals claim a corresponding obligation from those who enjoy economic benefits that derive from social cooperation.⁷⁵ Similar to the principle of equal opportunity, everyone has to contribute according to his possibilities: the principle of reciprocity is sensitive in regard to endowment but insensitive about intentions.

Suddenly, Mead’s assertion about the moral argument as the only one which can justify obligatory work becomes very questionable. Liberals may likewise argue for obligatory labour training and work, but they do so without depriving anyone of equal citizenship.

6. Conclusion

In this essay, I have (hopefully convincingly) tried to show that the terms of ‘dependency’ and the ‘underclass’ are disguised ideological expressions. They serve proponents of the New Right (as well as neo-liberals and conservatives) to transport certain ideas of a ‘good life’ while condemning all alternatives as highly indecent and socially threatening. Like Jean Jacques Rousseau’s idea of the ‘*volonté générale*’, this implies unprovable absoluteness. No one can argue against it due to its axiomatic nature which evades any rational argument. Therefore, at least the more radicals among the New Right actually propose a form of totalitarianism.

The New Right and conservatism both believe in a distinctly monocausalistic explanation of

⁷² Mead 1993, p. 186 (his emphasis).

⁷³ In addition, Mead seems to ignore that his argumentation in favour of workfare is based upon premises (namely the denial of human equality) that run counter to the assumption of all kinds of liberalism.

⁷⁴ This includes money and capital as equivalent of economic goods. Though, this share would not be high enough to provide a basic income allowing independency from labour. – This account is a succinct summary of more detailed reflections I have formulated elsewhere (Jesenitschnig 2004, pp. 7-11).

⁷⁵ Cf. White 1997, particularly pp. 317-318.

(cumulated) poverty. New Right scholars relentlessly repeat the allegation that public welfare inevitably leads to moral decay, crime and social atomisation, but they all fail to prove it.⁷⁶

Although Lawrence Mead does not share the general condemnation of public welfare and formulates more ingeniously than many of the New Right (whose language sometimes is scarily contemptuous and aggressive), he too considers a cultural explanation as solely decisive. His contention of a preliminary discussion on social (dis-) order is misleading. My attempt was to show that we do not need to rely on a moral position to justify civil obligations. Concerning this, we do not have to rule out cultural reasons altogether. Rather, we have to connect them with structural causes such as changes in local economy and social composition.⁷⁷ Structural poverty cannot be fought if founded on arbitrary moral judgements and a denial of equal citizenship. The liberal idea balances benefits and obligations without splitting society into decent 'citizens' and immoral 'dependants', and thus makes room for a new debate on promotion and demand. Certainly, the first step for this is to abandon the burdened terms of 'dependency' and the 'underclass'.

⁷⁶ Cf., for instance, all comments on Murray's book of 1994 (these are: Alcock, David, Phillips and Slipman, all 1994) for grave and convincing methodical criticism regarding Murray's 'statistical proofs'.

⁷⁷ See Greenstone 1991 for such an attempt.

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