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Social Welfare in the Emerging World Culture[1]

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The end of the cold war brought with it a new period of globalization and an emerging world cultural consensus in which social welfare values of the welfare state figure importantly. An essential element of this development has been indigenization in which universal social welfare values, like those on display at various United Nations agencies and in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights are adapted and fitted to the unique demands and requirements of individual cultures.

The bi-polar political division of the world since 1945 (and the continuing bi-polar division of the Korean peninsula) obscured the gradual emergence of other aspects of international order which in the face of events in the past two years are becoming clear for the first time. This paper is about one such trend -- the emergence of a truly international world culture in which welfare values hold pride of place.

The extraordinary events of 1989 and 1990 throughout Eastern Europe, as well as world reaction to the tragic events in Tien Amin Square are further evidence of the essential correctness of the "political convergence" thesis which argues that capitalist and socialist economies are slowly adopting one another's best features and converging toward a common consensus. It may easily escape notice that whatever momentary turns these social developments take, humanistic values like peace, freedom and human dignity, upon which social science and social work were founded will be important components of that future.

It is a widely shared view in the United States today that we are witnessed the sunset of the Atlantic age, with the declining world influence of the communities of the Atlantic rim, and the dawn of a new Pacific age. Such an historic shift is one of many taking place in the world today with important implications for social welfare. One of the most dramatic impacts of the new Pacific age upon the United States has been the recent upsurge of immigration, which has nearly reached the all-time high of European immigration in the early 1900's (Arocha, 1988, 31). Another important dimension is that six of the ten largest countries in the world, by population, border the Pacific. Together, these six – China, India, the United States, Mexico, Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh – account for approximately half of the total human population on planet earth. It is perhaps important

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also that four of them – India, the U.S., Pakistan and Bangladesh – were also once part of the British Empire from which modern welfare state ideals – as well, regrettably, as a good deal of white racism – arose.

Welfare Values

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet empire, we are currently entering a new and unprecedented phase in the emergence of an international community. One aspect of this is the emergence of a world-wide universal pluralistic culture, in which it appears that a core of humanitarian values will eventually be institutionalized in the major institutions of each society in ways which are consistent with the unique historical, cultural, economic and political context of that society. This process of adaptation of universal, or at least transcultural, values to the unique circumstances of individual cultures can be called "indigenization".

Without attempting to identify them in detail, we can point to a cluster of distinctive beliefs and values which can be termed "welfare values". Welfare values are found in many, if not all, of the contemporary societies of the world today. Among these values are a belief in the inherent dignity of human life; commitment to human rights and personal freedom; commitment to personal and social development; concern for improving the condition of the poor and disadvantaged; a general desire to diminish pain and suffering; and tolerance of individual and group diversity. The creation of the United Nations, and such departments as UNESCO and UNICEF and the 1948 adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights represent important landmarks in this development. While it would be dangerously naive to suggest that societies and governments everywhere operate consistently on the basis of these values, there is a growing community of nations devoted to their observance, and that in the international community major departures from these values are matters of worldwide concern. It is not too much of a stretch to suggest that even rogue states are increasingly judged against this emerging concensus.

It is generally accepted that many of these values arose out of the Jewish, Christian and Moslem religious traditions; that they were secularized into the "humanism" and "humanitarianism" of Western Europe in the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment; that they have been widely disseminated throughout the world in the 19th and 20th centuries; and that institutionalization of these values in government constitutes what we term a welfare state (Morris, 1986). As mentioned previously, the globe-spanning British Empire played an important role in this. That there is great institutional variation in welfare states, each of which has adapted to the unique demands and constraints of an indigenous political culture is also easy to confirm.

If this is so, it is likely that distinctive subsets of welfare values, some of which have yet to be identified as such, undergird the social welfare institutions growing up independently outside the West. The centuries-old meritocratic recruitment procedures of Confucian bureaucracy, for example, perhaps should be seen as a successful case of the long-term practice of opportunity theory in human history. (Opportunity theory in social welfare usually refers specifically to the social policy of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which sought to deliberately create opportunities for social and economic advancement for the poor. More generally, the term is also applicable to any meritocratic policies which create opportunities for upward mobility and what the Italian economist Wilfredo Pareto called "the circulation of the elites."

Likewise, what might be called mental health values of contemplation borrowed from Buddhism (and no doubt markedly transformed in the process), and the "holistic health" values borrowed from Asian medicine have recently had much impact on American health care practice. It is important that the international social welfare community begin to identify and recognize the circulation of these values for what they are.

The world-wide dissemination of these and other welfare values--in such highly diverse forms as multinational efforts in the face of drought and other natural or man-made disasters, abhorrence to abuse of political prisoners, and international support for literacy--are components of what appears now to be the long-term emergence of a world culture. In the west, we have spoken of *mankind* and *the human community* at least since the Enlightenment, even when the term actually applied only to white European males of the middle and upper classes. In the future, the notion of a culturally, if not politically, unified human community appears likely to become more than a vague abstraction.

The emergence of a single, uniform world culture incorporating welfare values would be one of the truly momentous events in human history, fully comparable with the agricultural, urban and industrial revolutions. We are still far from such an occurrence. However, throughout much of the current century, and particularly since 1945, we have seen the global spread of increasingly familiar international cultural patterns.

The processes of change which have occurred in the world during the past four decades are multiple and complex, and a full analysis of these changes would be a daunting task. However, we can easily note some of the most obvious changes: the end of the vast European colonial empires in Africa and Asia, together with the growth of airport, skyscraper and shantytown urbanism in virtually every major city on earth, the collapse of an enormous number of traditional cultures and ways of life together with an almost universal embrace of mass consumer culture; astonishing advances in transportation and communication, including most recently electronic

computing. Taken together, these changes have brought virtually every surviving human culture into proximity with all others in an unprecedented juxtaposition which gives entirely new meaning to the term diversity.

A critically important question in this brave new corporate world of Coke, Pan Am, Siemens, Sony and Hyundai, is what may be the proper place for universal welfare values and what is the proper role for the distinctiveness and traditions of nations, cultures and subcultures? The issue is certainly a cause for concern for thoughtful persons everywhere. Because of the sensitivity of social problems and social problem-solving techniques to cultural and subcultural influence, the issue is also of major importance for the internationalization of social work practice.

Indigenization

The process of indigenization runs counter to cultural homogenization or blending. It is the cultural process most likely to impact upon universal social welfare values and ideals in the short-term future. It has already been clearly established that culture contact does not lead directly to homogeneity (sameness). For example, even after three centuries of African, European and Asian immigration to the United States where the idea of the "melting pot" originated, major ethnic and subcultural diversities remain. It is likely that contact between stable, non-immigrant cultures may contribute instead to cultural diversity and pluralism, political pluralism and a gradual, long term adjustment process as established truths and cherished folkways and mores from each culture are fitted to new circumstances and other different, but similarly deep beliefs and values. Such adjustments has always been part of the immigrant experience. What is different about the world today is that the marvels of transportation and communications are imposing the same requirements for adaptation and adjustment on those who stayed at home as well.

The Emerging World Culture?

Although many aspects of post-industrialization have been criticized by cultural high-brows, romantics and latter day Jeremiahs, the onslaught of prefabricated clothing, refrigerators and appliances, automobiles, electricity, radio, television, pop culture and other "consumer goods" which characterize and mark the advance of this revolution has been universally and warmly embraced by most peoples everywhere. From a social welfare standpoint, many of these developments (such as refrigeration) have also brought with them major improvements in public health and social welfare. It is only later, if at all, that associated problems of overcrowding, pollution, and new epedemics become evident.

The cycle is much the same everywhere: Formerly rural, isolated peoples regret deeply the loss of traditional ways of life and fear for the loss of cherished cultural heritages of beliefs, rituals, ceremonies and other folkways. However, they are also unwilling to abandon pickup trucks, indoor plumbing, electricity and refrigeration and other accoutrements of "modern" life and return to the old ways. This is as true in rural Appalachia as it is in Nigeria or Korea.

The force of tradition in a given culture may not always go gently into the night. Anti-modernist movements as diverse as the English Luddites, the European Counter-Reformation, the Iranian Revolution, Quebec Nationalism, the American Indian Movement, the Northern Irish, Basques, Kurds, Sikhs, and American evangelical Christians attest to this. There even are cases of successful long-term holdouts against modernization, such as the Shakers, Amish, Mennonites, and the Navaho, for example. There would appear to be no cases in the world today of major cultures which have completely and successfully turned their backs on modernization for any length of time, however.

The challenge for internationally minded persons in every society is to assure that universal welfare values are supported and advanced in the emerging world culture, without falling into any of the well-known traps of ethnocentrism. Although this may be a formidable challenge, it is not without precedent. In some respects, the task is not unlike that faced by social reformers in New York or Chicago in the early 1900's, when dozens of different ethnic, racial and language groups often lived on the same city blocks. It was in this environment that the social work commitments to respect for individual differences and personal uniqueness were first forged.

Today, the challenge for social work internationally is to translate those same approaches and that same sensitivity into international contexts. What may be needed today is the functional equivalent of the settlement house. It will be truly unfortunate if indigenous social work throughout the world remains what it all too often is today: Simple attempts to transfer American and European methods to different cultural contexts. People in the past may have not known any better; we no longer have the luxury of that excuse. A far more productive strategy for international social work would be to pursue vigorous programs of indigenization: *to begin at the level of basic universal values and to develop social technologies appropriate to the unique time and place characteristics of individual cultures.*

Yet how is this to be done? One major starting point would involve a research program of vast proportions: the identification of those elements in each culture which contribute to social welfare values and to an assessment of the likelihood of success in applying those values in other contexts. Certainly, basic knowledge in fields such as philosophy, anthropology and history will be very helpful in such an enterprise. The psychiatrist Harry

Stack Sullivan proposed just such an undertaking more than 50 years ago. According to Sullivan, "The thinking out of constructive, functionally coherent, revisions of any one of the major cultures of the world, so that the personal imperatives which derive from them--whether in the obscure, very early inculcated, patterns of conscience or the subsequently acquired, less recondite, patterns of acceptable rationalizations and potent verbalisms--shall be less restrictive on understanding and more permissive of social progress; that, truly is a task to which unnumbered groups of the skillful may well apply themselves." (Sullivan,1953, 383.)

A second major companion project might involve the promotion of special forms of cross-cultural education, in which the welfare values and practices of one society are systematically introduced to citizens of another. Certainly, this is what Christian missionaries attempted on a world-wide scale during the colonial era with the introduction of orphanages and schools. We know now that doing so in the future will require greater sensitivity to the cultural currents that Sullivan called attention to.

Welfare States

One of the issues which requires some examination in light of the phenomenon of post-modern conservatism in Great Britain, France, the United States, Canada, and elsewhere is our continued allegiance to the concept of the universal welfare state as the preferred provider of all major services as well as income maintenance programs. The dualistic theoretical positioning of the welfare state midway between the socialist state and the laissez faire state has been seriously disrupted, if not completely displaced, by the events of recent years.

In general, social workers and some sociologists tend to use the term welfare state to refer only to public, tax-supported transfer programs of social insurance, social assistance and social services. By contrast, political scientists and economists tend to extend the term to include a wider range of forms of regulatory activity, such as regulation of savings and loans or agricultural subsidy payments as well as transfer payments and public services. This latter approach depends in part on the distinction Richard Titmuss made between fiscal, occupational and social welfare (Titmuss, 1968). Unfortunately, international social work has all too often been preoccupied only with social welfare, completely ignoring fiscal and occupational welfare concerns.

Highly important for modern welfare state theory and the process of indigenization is the distinction between several types of modern states in relation to the people being governed. On this dimension, there are the states, like Japan and South Korea and many of the states of 19th century Europe, where the people compose a single racial, cultural and language group. In such cases, those who control the welfare state and those who

benefit from it are members of a common ethnic community. In one way or another, the struggle for adoption of social welfare policy and the building of social welfare institutions in such societies is a true community development effort and can be grounded in the mutuality, unity and fellow-feeling of the people.

By contrast, there are bi-cultural states, like South Africa, Israel, or the United States at the time of the Civil War, where the population is divided into distinct (and antagonistic) groups, one of whom controls the state apparatus, often to the disadvantage of the other. In such cases, the prospects of a universal welfare state with uniform coverage seem limited at best, and the problems of institution building is particularly difficult for the group out of power. The dominant group, of course, has a definite advantage in its control of the state, while welfare state institutions for the submissive group are either distinctly inferior or must be built indigenously outside the state without its obvious financial resources and means of social control.

Finally, there are the pluralistic states like the contemporary United States, the Soviet Union, China, Canada, the states of western Europe, and many of the emergent states of post-colonial Africa. Welfare institutions in these cases must either be group-specific or grounded in universal values with considerable political cogency, such as the French "universal rights of man" or the Universal Declaration. The political problem faced by welfare proponents in these societies--even when they are in the majority--is whether appeals to such universal values can be made sufficiently powerful and convincing to overcome traditional ethnic, tribal, racial and other cleavages. Far too often the answer has been negative. The American struggle with racism, ongoing for more than 200 years, offers a particularly sobering example of the difficulties involved.

Structurally, the problem of welfare in an emergent world culture is not unlike that of the pluralist states, and the problems of the unitary states are not unlike the problems of distinct ethnic communities within those states. Each nation state which has embraced all, or part of the welfare state ideal has done so in its own way, and in light of its own unique history. Great Britain, the Netherlands, and other European welfare states have, in fact been slowly building welfare institutions for at least 500 years. In the United States the legacy of constitution, rugged individualism, federalism and social Darwinism have created what is sometimes referred to as a "reluctant welfare state" committed to gradualism and disjointed incrementalism in policy development, and also committed to the pluralism of coexisting public, nonprofit and commercial institutions.

Beyond the Welfare State

In discussing welfare in international context, we should not continue to be preoccupied exclusively with the state. Certainly, the coercive powers of

the modern state are formidable weapons in dealing with social problems such as family violence, economic exploitation, and dependency. Likewise, the ability of the democratic welfare states to peacefully redirect portions of the surplus production of their economies without undermining productive enterprise is still one of the strongest weapons available against the historic scourges of all societies: poverty, illiteracy, disease and violence.

We need to remember, however, that welfare values have their origins and take their strength from outside the state. In particular, Judaism and Christianity have been foremost among the world-religions in the promulgation of welfare values (Wilensky & LeBeaux, 1965). Likewise, it was religious missionaries, and not political vanguards, who carried welfare values outside the western civilization of the Mediterranean/ European community. This is as true for the United States, with its Quakers, Lutherans, and its embrace of the English Poor Law tradition, as it is of the rest of the Americas, Asia or Africa.

Likewise, we need to remind ourselves also that residual welfare values are also embedded in the mutual aid obligations of family, neighborhood and community members in most of the world's cultures. One of the first things which most immigrant populations did (and continue to do) upon arriving in the Americas, for example, is locate one another and form mutual benefit societies and associations.

Welfare Society?

Full indigenization of welfare values in any society, therefore, is not merely a matter of developing comprehensive welfare state coverage. It is a matter of attaining the welfare society. More than two decades ago, Wilensky and LeBeaux suggested the likelihood of a gradual transition from welfare state to welfare society (Wilensky & LeBeaux, 1965). However, much like the earlier suggestion by Marx of the eventual "withering away" of the state, their comment was little more than a passing remark, and no detailed analysis or argument in support of this development has since been offered. The notion of a welfare society deserves much greater attention than it has received to date. The belief that welfare is in some way the exclusive concern or preoccupation of the state is one of the most serious fallacies which has crept into recent social welfare thought.

It is the major thesis of this paper that the world-wide process of indigenization of welfare values is not exclusively a process of implementing pension, social insurance and other public transfer payment programs and regulatory mechanisms governing public health, and personal and economic security within the unique legal and political contexts of separate states. Nor is indigenization simply a process of integrating humanitarian values into the dominant political culture of each of the world's nation-states. The ultimate measure of the indigenization of social welfare values into any of the

world's cultures is the integration of welfare values into all of the major institutions of that culture. In the emerging welfare society, not only government, but also the family, religion, education, business, leisure, mass communication and all other social institutions will reflect the impact of welfare values.

One can see many diverse signs of this trend already in the developed countries, whether in the form of "social issue" movies, television, newspaper and magazine coverage, the growth of commercial health insurance, or religiously organized voluntary social services (Kramer, 1981). In this respect, the growing influence of "privatization" and the expansion of the private practice of social work in the United States represents the indigenous response of a business-oriented culture to universal welfare values, however much some American social workers may dislike or distrust this strategy.

Conclusion

American social work, because of its vast legacy of experience with pluralistic, multicultural communities is in a unique position to contribute to the emerging international welfare culture. Few other groups of social workers anywhere have had the range of experiences with cultural diversity, contact and conflict which have occupied social work for much of this century. One wonders, for example, about the vast range of possible applications of techniques forged in the settlement house movement, the labor movement, and the Civil Rights movement, and the war on poverty, to ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland, Israel, or the newly re-emergent mosaic of ethnic grievances in the Balkans.

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