

Michigan Law Review

Volume 88 | Issue 6

1990

The Limits of Social Policy

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Recommended Citation

Cary Coglianese, *The Limits of Social Policy*, 88 MICH. L. REV. 1759 (1990).

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mlr/vol88/iss6/29>

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THE LIMITS OF SOCIAL POLICY. By *Nathan Glazer*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1988. Pp. i, 215. \$22.50.

In *The Limits of Social Policy*, Nathan Glazer¹ challenges the belief that laws and government programs can solve society's problems. The essays in this book, written by Glazer at various times during the past twenty years, are linked by the concern that federal social programs can create new problems at the same time that they address old ones. Glazer believes that the effectiveness of social policy² is limited by our incomplete knowledge about the complex problems facing society and by the inherent tendency for government programs to replace, and thereby weaken, the traditional social structures of family, church, and ethnic or neighborhood group. Glazer's analysis, although it unfortunately neglects to emphasize the political and institutional constraints on social policy, otherwise provides a healthy reminder of the difficulties government can face in shoring up the parts of society that are breaking down.

Glazer's main target is what he calls the "social engineering" (p. 42) or "liberal" view of social policy (p. 3). The liberal view, according to Glazer, holds that government possesses the capacity to understand and resolve the causes of social strife, and that for every social problem there exists a government policy that will solve it (p. 3). This perspective, which Glazer believes dominated government and academic circles in the 1960s and early 1970s (pp. 2, 42), presupposes that with proper government policies, human behavior can be changed and the human condition improved (p. 42). Glazer rejects, however, this "optimistic evaluation of human and social scientific capacities," and argues that the liberal view fails to account for the limitations inherent in social policy (p. 42).

One of these inherent limits is a lack of knowledge and competence (pp. 6-7, 147-49). Although today we know much more about social problems than ever before (p. 6), Glazer argues that we are now paradoxically more uncertain about social policy:

More knowledge should permit us to take more confident and effective

1. Nathan Glazer is a Professor of Education and Sociology at Harvard University, and is the author of numerous articles and books, including *AFFIRMATIVE DISCRIMINATION: ETHNIC INEQUALITY AND PUBLIC POLICY* (2d ed. 1987); *THE URBAN PREDICAMENT* (W. Gorham & N. Glazer eds. 1976); and *Should Judges Administer Social Services?*, *PUB. INTEREST*, Winter 1978, at 64. Professor Glazer also served as an urban sociologist in the Housing and Home Finance Agency during the Kennedy Administration. P. 1.

2. Glazer never clearly or discretely defines the term "social policy," but throughout *The Limits of Social Policy* he uses the term broadly to mean any law or governmental program intended to alleviate a social problem. Although much of Glazer's attention in this book is given to policies dealing with poverty, social policy also encompasses such matters as housing, education, health care, crime, families, the elderly, and drug abuse.

action. But it also appears that whatever great actions we undertake today involve such an increase in complexity that we act generally with less knowledge than we would like to have, even if with more than we once had. [p. 7].

Though far from original,³ Glazer's general point seems correct. Developing effective public policies can require a considerable body of knowledge about complex social behavior. We do not yet have the information or the cognitive tools needed to make completely accurate predictions about this behavior, and until we do our social policy will remain, at least in this sense, limited.

A second limit on social policy, according to Glazer, is the inherent tendency of government social programs to replace "traditional" ways of coping through the family, church, ethnic group, neighborhood, and voluntary organization (pp. 7, 91, 103, 114, 139, 141-43). Social policy "weakens the position of these traditional agents and further encourages needy people to depend on the government for help rather than on the traditional structures" (p. 7). Glazer argues that the strength of these traditional structures is essential in today's society (pp. 140-46) and that social policy can, at best, achieve only limited success because it displaces these structures. Although Glazer unfortunately leaves unexplored many questions about these traditional structures,⁴ he is surely right to acknowledge that government social policies affect — often in unintended and undesirable ways — preexisting social relationships.

Glazer illustrates the limitations on social policy by examining the history of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, commonly known as "welfare." In focusing on welfare, however, Glazer may be seen as picking apart a straw man. After all, almost nobody is satisfied with welfare.⁵ Conservatives think it breeds depen-

3. Robert Merton, for example, pointed out the knowledge-based limitation on social policy in 1936. Merton, *The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action*, 1 AM. SOC. REV. 894 (1936).

4. Considering just one example of a "traditional structure" — the family — a number of questions arise which Glazer neglects to address. The first set of questions are definitional ones. Since the family as a social institution has changed dramatically throughout history, in what sense does Glazer use the term "traditional"? Is the "traditional" family merely an economic unit? A source of emotional support and identity? Two parents living with their children? Is a single-parent family a "traditional structure" for Glazer? Even if we can resolve these definitional questions, another, more evaluative, set of questions emerges. Might not a given social policy be worth adopting even though it might affect the "traditional structure" of the family? Although welfare support for single mothers, for instance, is often cited as encouraging families to break up, might many of these families already have been near the breaking point? Although Glazer may very well answer these last two questions in the negative, by not responding to such sorts of questions he fails to justify as adequately as he could his claim that social policy is inherently limited because it affects "traditional structures."

5. See, e.g., D. ELLWOOD, POOR SUPPORT 4 (1988) (describing why "[e]veryone hates welfare"); Shapiro, Patterson, Russell & Young, *The Polls: Public Assistance*, 51 PUB. OPINION Q. 120 (1987) (explaining that "[p]ublic assistance programs for the poor are the most controversial social welfare issues in the United States.").

dency. Liberals think it is inadequately funded. And welfare recipients find that it fosters stigmatization and humiliation. Glazer therefore finds that welfare quite easily supports his contention about the limited nature of social policy.⁶ For Glazer's purposes, though, welfare serves less as a straw man and more as a worst-case scenario of the liberal view of social policy. Despite "heady hopes" in the 1960s that government and social science could win the War on Poverty, the number of poor in the United States, for whatever reason,⁷ actually increased as government programs expanded.

The best way to deal with poverty or any other social problem, Glazer urges, is to strengthen the "traditional," or "fine," structures of society.⁸ However, it is not at all clear from *The Limits of Social Policy* how we can do this. Glazer himself admits that "[d]espite every effort to adapt social policy to the needs of the fine structure[s] of society, one senses, with some gloom, that it is not an easy task. It is easier to recognize these needs symbolically than to do something about them in concrete policy" (p. 146).

One way to begin to do something about them, says Glazer, is to "think of ways to meet needs with a lesser degree of dependence on public action" (p. 139). Toward this end, Glazer advocates market-oriented policies such as education or housing vouchers (pp. 109-11), privatization of social services (pp. 125-26), and reliance on voluntary and private philanthropic efforts (p. 139). Glazer does not, though, call for a complete dismantling of government programs. Indeed, he finds attractive a variety of proposals for new government programs, including income allowances for children (p. 92), free health care for children (p. 92), universal catastrophic medical insurance (p. 93), and health insurance and disability benefits for all workers (pp. 34, 96).

Glazer steers clear, however, of supporting any one single public program that claims to solve all or most social maladies. This is one of

6. Glazer would have had a much harder time demonstrating his thesis had he chosen to focus on Social Security. Although Social Security has had problems of its own, it has succeeded in providing for many retired and disabled workers and their families and is widely supported by the public. See, e.g., Shapiro & Smith, *The Polls: Social Security*, 49 PUB. OPINION Q. 561 (1985); Sherman, *Attitudes of the American Public Toward Social Security*, SOC. SEC. BULL., Nov. 1985, at 22. In fact, owing largely to Social Security, poverty among the elderly has dropped from 35.2% in 1959 to 12.4% in 1984. D. ELLWOOD, *supra* note 5, at 41-42; see also Wessel, *Benefits Beat Taxes as Income Equalizer*, Wall St. J., Dec. 28, 1988, at A2, col. 1 (According to a Census Bureau study, "Social Security benefits were three times more important than anti-poverty programs in reducing income inequality.")

7. Some students of social policy blame welfare itself for the increase in poverty. See, e.g., G. GILDER, *WEALTH AND POVERTY* (1981); C. MURRAY, *LOSING GROUND* (1984). Others attribute the increase in poverty to changes in the economy and argue that the increase would have been much higher without welfare. See, e.g., Danziger & Gottschalk, *The Poverty of Losing Ground*, CHALLENGE, May-June 1985, at 32; Ellwood & Summers, *Is Welfare Really the Problem?*, PUB. INT., Spring 1986, at 57. Glazer's skeptical perspective undoubtedly belongs with the former view.

8. See *supra* note 4 and accompanying text.

his main points: social problems are too complex to expect that they will be solved by uniform, national programs. Instead, social policies should be diverse and decentralized if they are to address effectively the varied problems in society (p. 102). The problem of poverty illustrates this point well, for to speak of poverty in the United States is really to speak of many different social problems. Although many people associate poverty with the urban ghetto underclass, the underclass actually comprises only a small percentage of the poor in the United States.⁹ Poverty is actually a mixed bag. America has serious poverty in rural as well as urban areas; in two-parent as well as single-parent families; and among workers as well as the unemployed. It is unrealistic to believe that any one program could eliminate all these types of poverty. In demonstrating this fallacy, *The Limits of Social Policy* offers a useful reminder to adapt social policies to the varied conditions underlying social problems.

The main shortcoming of Glazer's book, however, lies in its failure to treat politics explicitly as a limitation on social policy. No list of the limits of social policy could be complete without including political factors, which undoubtedly act as a major constraint on social — and especially welfare — policy in the United States. After all, it took Congress until 1988 to reform a welfare system that had been developed twenty years ago and has had evident problems ever since.¹⁰ Moreover, even in this recent round of welfare reform which ultimately resulted in the Family Support Act of 1988,¹¹ Congress almost killed the legislation at the last minute.¹²

Although at various points throughout his book Glazer makes more or less oblique references to public opinion and other political aspects of the policymaking process, he fails to acknowledge the full importance of political and institutional constraints on policymaking.¹³ This failure results, at least partly, from Glazer's reaction

9. See, e.g., D. ELLWOOD, *supra* note 5, at 193 (dispelling myth that poverty is primarily concentrated in the urban underclass by noting that less than seven percent of the poor live in urban ghettos).

10. See, e.g., Tolchin, *Welfare Overhaul: Right Timing for a War Dance*, N.Y. Times, Oct. 3, 1988, at A18, col. 3.

11. Pub. L. No. 100-485, 1988 U.S. CODE CONG. & ADMIN. NEWS (102 Stat.) 2343.

12. Tolchin, *supra* note 10. Legislative politics, furthermore, are only one part of the policy process. Implementation of legislation introduces another level of politics that limits the effectiveness of social policy. See, e.g., Hinds, *Pulling Families Out of Welfare is Proving to Be an Elusive Goal*, N.Y. Times, Apr. 2, 1990, at A1, Col. 1.

13. *The Limits of Social Policy* does contain an essay in which Glazer discussed how he thinks social attitudes have influenced the shape of American social policy. Pp. 168-92. Broad social attitudes unquestionably form an important part of the environment in which social policy is crafted. However, even within the broad climate created by social attitudes, many potentially viable policy options are available for dealing with social problems. Glazer neglects to address the fact that the implementation of policy within this array of options is significantly constrained by various political and institutional aspects of the policymaking process, including such things as interest groups, legislative committee structures, budgetary constraints, and underlying motivations and interests of political actors.

against a view that blames the political system entirely for unresolved social ills (p. 3). Instead of indicting politicians for the failure to solve social problems, Glazer sees the failure as one that is inherent in social policy, owing to a lack of knowledge and to unintended impacts on the traditional structures of society. Glazer is certainly not incorrect in claiming that these are limits on social policy; however, in asserting that these are essentially the only limits, he falls victim to a false dichotomy between policy and politics.

Policy cannot be divorced from politics because "the shape of a policy is influenced by the institutional context within which it is formed."¹⁴ Thus, even if we had perfect knowledge and could design a policy that we would be certain would strengthen society, our ability to implement that policy would be limited by the political process. Although Glazer may be correct, for example, in supporting a program of universal health insurance, adopting and implementing such a program will be constrained by a political environment that has resisted such proposals for many years.¹⁵

Good ideas simply do not become social policy all on their own. Political and institutional conditions not only can keep good ideas from becoming law, they can also keep them from ever reaching the national lawmaking agenda.¹⁶ Even when a fairly good idea does become law, political conditions may lead to its repeal, as has recently occurred with the catastrophic health insurance program for the elderly.¹⁷ Recognizing the political constraints on policymaking is not necessarily to "blame" the political system for social ills, but rather is to recognize the reality in which social policy must be formulated. To be complete, Glazer's book should have included an explicit and systematic discussion of political and institutional constraints.

Despite this shortcoming, *The Limits of Social Policy* belongs on the reading lists of lawyers, judges, and others involved in setting and implementing social policy. Glazer's skeptical perspective is healthy, even though not everyone will agree with his specific criticisms.¹⁸

14. Ferejohn, *Congress and Redistribution*, in *MAKING ECONOMIC POLICY IN CONGRESS* 131, 134 (A. Schick ed. 1983).

15. On the politics surrounding proposals for a universal health care system, see generally *COMPULSORY HEALTH INSURANCE* (R. Numbers ed. 1982), and Navarro, *Why Some Countries Have National Health Insurance, Others Have National Health Services, and the U.S. Has Neither*, 28 *SOC. SCI. MED.* 887 (1989).

16. See generally J. KINGDON, *AGENDAS, ALTERNATIVES, AND PUBLIC POLICY* (1984).

17. See, e.g., Cohn, *The Lessons of a Lost Law*, *Wash. Post*, Dec. 19, 1989, § 6 (Health), at 9, col. 1.

18. Indeed, at various points throughout *The Limits of Social Policy* Glazer himself seems to reject (at least tacitly) some of his own criticisms. For example, despite the fact that in the context of welfare Glazer faults incentive theory as being naïve (pp. 19-20), he elsewhere asserts that the government can provide incentives for private volunteerism (p. 138). Likewise, though Glazer contends that the United States has nearly exhausted the economic resources that it can devote to social programs (p. 99), he nevertheless supports such costly proposals as governmental income allowances for children (pp. 34, 92, 100), paid health care for children (p. 92), universal

Those who dispute Glazer's assertions about the exact limits of social policy, will undoubtedly agree that some limits do exist. The strength of *The Limits of Social Policy* lies in its well-argued reminder that our ability to shape social behavior and alleviate social strife is not unbounded. Policies have unintended and often unforeseen consequences. Society is continually changing, thus making any social knowledge tentative at best. These lessons from Glazer's book should make lawyers more circumspect about the capacity of law in general and courts in particular to effect positive social change. The fact that there are limits to our ability to solve social problems, however, should not lead to despair or inaction. Instead, by recognizing that there are limits to governmental policy, lawyers, judges, and legislators can better harness the possibilities that do exist for effective and worthwhile social policy.

— Cary Coglianese

catastrophic medical insurance (p. 93), and health and disability insurance for all workers (pp. 13, 34, 50, 96). Such inconsistencies are perhaps to be expected in a book comprised of essays spanning 20 years; yet they nevertheless demonstrate that one may agree that there are limits to social policy but still disagree about where those limits lie.