

A normative theory concerning the welfare state and its inherent dilemmas¹

Jørn Henrik Petersen²

The classic Danish welfare state

The classic Danish welfare state was a half post-Christian, half social-democratic but wholly moral project that developed in a duty-culture. What was of common concern was at its heart – defined in a not always equally unambiguous cross field between a number of old, popular maxims:

- The broadest shoulders must bear the greatest burdens.
- No one may unnecessarily be a burden on anyone else.
- The fortunate support the less fortunate.
- Contribute first, enjoy afterwards.
- The strong must help the weak.
- The individual sees himself as part of a whole.
- Taking account of ‘the other person’ and the institutional structure precedes personal advantage.
- The rules of society are enshrined in the common culture.

The values of the utopia were love of one’s neighbour, solidarity, equality, justice, community, security and trust as a basis for popular unity. These were

¹ A lecture given at the 22nd Annual Conference of the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education: “Responding to challenges for European higher education: Lifelong learning and the Welfare Society”.

² Professor, dr.phil. & lic.oecon., Centre for Welfare State Research, Department of Political Science, University of Southern Denmark, Campusvej 55, 5230 Odense M, Denmark. jhp@sam.sdu.dk.

not created by the welfare state, but are the underlying prerequisites that keep selfish impulses in check.

It was a society where redistribution took place from the healthy to the sick, from the employed to the unemployed, from those engaged in active employment to the old, from those without children to those with many children, from the fortunate to the less fortunate, from the fit to the disabled, from the rich to the poor, etc. It was a society based on the idea of the full and equal membership of the individual – an equality of status that ensured social solidarity and cultural fellowship, that assumed the shared view that today it is your turn and tomorrow my turn to be exposed to this or that, that we live in a risk-filled community, and that we exchange roles. Sometimes the individual will belong to the group that is paying, at other times the group that is receiving.

The normative basis of the welfare state

The welfare-state mind-set originates in a conception that life is lived in a state of dependence on others, that human lives are interdependent in such a way that there is a moral obligation to take care of ‘the other person’ – exclusively for that person’s sake and regardless of whether that person has merited this in some way or other; but at the same time we know that this ethical demand is fundamentally at variance with our own self-assertion, desire for power and acquisitiveness.

For that reason, we constantly seek to infringe the demand and to fight back: ‘There must surely be limits to such madness. If I am to concern myself with another person, that person must first have shown he has deserved it.’

We have, of course, an intuitive understanding of what we owe ‘the other person’, but at the same time an ungovernable temptation to stray from the narrow path of virtue. All of us, when the temptation arises, are prepared to sell three-uddered cows in Jesu’s name, as we say in the part of Denmark where I was born. The question then is if we can make a common effort to restrain the temptation to follow our selfish urges.

We know very well what we ought to do in a given situation, but as things develop we allow ourselves to whittle away at the demands – and when others do the same, the whole foundation starts to slip; but precisely because we know that we find it so hard to act as we should, we lash ourselves – as that

magnificent hero Ulysses – to the mast and via legislation ensure a welfare state as an institutionalised surrogate for the love of our neighbour we find so hard to realise. We develop institutions that serve as a surrogate for the lack of such love.

A full-blown health service, efficient care of the elderly and disabled are institutions of compassion – quite independently of the role of compassion in the daily life of the institutions.

The welfare state as a utopia reflects the love of one's neighbour as an unobtrusively reduced idea that is embedded in our culture – a political arrangement that considers the basic needs of all without taking a sidelong glance at what he or she has been, is or will be in the future. The spontaneously consummated love has been reduced to a practicable idea that finds expression in our organising society as if we felt sympathy for each other – while being well aware of the fact that this is not the case. No one runs around and 'loves his neighbour', but there are many people who are forced to behave as if they did. That is the normative basis of the welfare state.

The normative basis as implemented in the Danish welfare state

At the practical level, the normative basis in Denmark is implemented in a system where social benefits are financed through taxes. Taxes are imposed based on principles different from the principles governing the distribution of benefits. There is therefore no connection between the two. It is not the contribution that determines what the individual is to get. To contribute and to enjoy are disconnected from each other. In principle, it is thus possible to give 'something for nothing'.

The individual is seen as a citizen who, in a dialogue with his fellow-citizens, defines the good society, which is realised with 'the governmental system' as a political institution. Social benefits are comprehensive and universal. They are therefore not solely directed towards the poor and badly off. Equality is seen as a prerequisite for liberty and community.

The schizophrenic Danes

Several years ago, a survey was carried out as to how Danes regarded their own society. Of those asked, 79% primarily viewed the welfare society as a community to which one was morally obliged to contribute, and then it did not

matter all that much if there was a balance between contribution and enjoyment. There was, one may assume, support for the normative basis; but when different questions were asked, one can clearly sense that the first answer – the 79% – perhaps more reflected how people felt things ought to be. For a majority of the respondents later on in the survey felt that it was important for there to be a balance in a person's lifetime between what one contributed and what one got in return. No less than 72% felt that far too many people – and by that they of course meant the others – only thought of what they could lay their hands on and not of what they could contribute with. The answers reflect the inherent dilemmas of the welfare state.

The first dilemma. The difficulty of switching roles

If it is the same people who day out and day in are dependent on income transfers, if there is a feeling that 'the others' are not contributing to the same extent as oneself, if they are the ones who stand out because of, for example, ethnic background or religious demonisation, if it is people with whose situation we cannot empathise, the idea of our switching roles is bound to founder – and the foundation of the welfare state will start to show cracks. More and more people will end up in the basement of the welfare state.

Irrespective of whether 'the other person' has done anything for me or not, I am still obliged to accept the dictates of role-switching. There is no yardstick for the value of the individual human being. For that reason, no one's importance can depend on what contribution to the community that person has made, is making or will make in the future. That would make cruelty towards those in need the guideline for how society is to be organised. That is why the insistence on non-reciprocity has to be made – 'something for nothing' – but it is precisely this that we find hard to accept as human beings.

The second dilemma. The weakening of responsibility

When 'the governmental system' has taken over a responsibility that otherwise should be mine, I no longer feel myself with an actual obligation as regards 'the other person'. Problems are something that 'someone' will have to deal with. That is why there is a paradoxical co-existence between formalised humanitarianism – as expressed in the social legislation – and the

absence of spontaneous humanitarianism. ‘The others’ become impersonal, faceless, anonymous.

The individual does not see himself as interacting with other people, but with ‘the system’: ‘I’ve paid my taxes, so I have a right to all this.’ The well-off person cancels his responsibilities, while directing those ‘in need’ in his own family towards the public coffers. This is runaway rights-egoism.

The third dilemma. The order of being of the welfare state vs. private-economic rationality

Each one of us is to contribute to the community. We must pay the taxes demanded of us, and help to ensure a suitably high level of work on offer. At the same time, we must refrain from elbowing our way to the trough in order to siphon off as much as possible from the large public coffers.

In Norse mythology, one encounters the story of the pig Særimner, which every day was slaughtered and eaten, but which subsequently became whole and alive again for the following evening. The public sector is not such a pig, nor is it an inexhaustible well, but all of us are brought up to believe that it is a question of getting as much as possible out of a given effort, or of obtaining a given result with as little effort as possible

So there is a fundamental dilemma between, on the one hand, the (ethical) demands made by the welfare state (the order of being of the welfare state), ones which it cannot itself guarantee, and, on the other hand, the private-economic, rational impulses we learn at our mother’s knee. In actual fact, a functional welfare state that lives up to its normative standards requires people to behave in a private-economically irrational way.

The fourth dilemma. Incentives to work

It is often emphasised that ‘it must pay to work’. Arguments advanced either state that work income must lie at a sufficiently higher level so that there is an incentive to work, or that not working displays a lack of solidarity. The arguments reflect the same tension as that mentioned under the third dilemma. The first argument expresses the private-economic rationale, while the second is based on the idea that it is ultimately the work on offer that underpins the welfare state. The first and frequently used argument only makes sense if the other argument does not hold water. If most people unselfishly worked in

order to support the welfare of others, one would not need to operate with explicit economic incentives to work.

It is also the expression of an inherent dilemma to emphasise the economic incentive to work in a welfare state that otherwise rejects the connection between the foregoing income and the size of social benefits.

Hal Koch's point of view

Hal Koch was a theologian and professor of church history. During the German Occupation, he was chairman of the representative assembly of the Union of Danish Youth and, in that capacity, he sought to strengthen popular unity in resisting the occupying power. During his ten years as principal of Krogerup Folk High School, he strongly emphasised the popular element. He is best-known for his small book 'What is Democracy?' For him, the crucial thing is not harmonisation but dialogue. Together, one must come to an agreement on the nature of the good society.

Koch thus stands as a representative of a republican world view. Central to the republican view is the idea that liberty depends on sharing in self-government, but also involves something more. It means deliberating with fellow citizens about the common good and helping to shape the destiny of the political community. This in turn requires a knowledge of public affairs and also a sense of belonging, a concern for the whole, a moral bond with the community whose fate is at stake. Citizens must possess, or come to acquire, certain civic virtues. Republican policies cannot be neutral toward the values and ends its citizens espouse. Republican freedom requires an educative policy that cultivates in citizens the qualities of character self-government requires.

This is a view which opposes the idea that government should be neutral towards the moral views its citizens espouse. This view asserts the priority of fair procedures over particular ends – the procedural society.

For Hal Koch, a polity with particular focus on supporting the weak was a lawful and popular prerequisite for democracy. Being educated for democracy therefore played a decisive role in Koch's way of thinking.

He spoke of Krogerup Folk High School as a 'citizens' school' for those who were interested in the common cause – *res publica* – who were prepared to assume co-responsibility for how interpersonal life came to be in families, neighbourhoods, workplaces, parishes, municipalities – and the entire country.

People had to be educated to become involved in common issues, to have an understanding of society and to develop their own characters. Citizenship was a vital prerequisite for democracy, and it in turn presupposed a common responsibility that enabled the individual to live in accordance with the order of being of the welfare state.

Far too many people, Koch emphasised, regarded the state as an enemy and acted and thought asocially – milked the state for all it was worth and cheated as best they could with their taxes. For him this revealed the political immaturity of society, which indeed called for the citizens to be educated to political thinking and development of their own social character. Danes acted as ‘private individuals’ while the demands of ‘members of society’ were toned down.

The fundamental dilemma of the welfare state

The medieval historian Brian Patrick McGuire wrote in 2008:

As soon as the main task of the clergy was to serve the entire parish and not only the family of the nobleman, the ground was laid for the modern welfare society. This did not arise in the wake of Social Democratic policy but as a result of observance by the Christian church of Christ’s commandment ‘For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcome me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me’.³

If we, along with McGuire, see the welfare state as an attempt to realise a Christian universe of values in a modern society that is based on the separation of religion and politics, the fundamental dilemma of the welfare state comes sharply into focus.

For the Christian, there is an instance outside the world and outside history to refer to. When you are told to lay aside your own interests, God’s acts are your model. The ideological basis of the welfare state, on the other hand, can only be justified by referring to itself. If the individual asks why he or she must display solidarity and act non-selfishly when this is not going to benefit

³ Brian Patrick McGuire 2008, *Da himmelen kom nærmere. Fortællinger om Danmarks kristning 700-1300* [When heaven came closer. Accounts of the christianisation of Denmark 700-1300], Copenhagen.

the individual in question, this is precisely the question for which the welfare state can find no answer. It is, in a certain sense, dependent on a religious foundation that it has put behind it in the process of secularisation. It is vulnerable, because no ideology can make absolute demands if it only can refer to itself.

Ultimately, the problem of the welfare state is the inherent tension between the person who wishes to live in accordance with the order of being of the welfare state and the person who is prepared to let himself be governed by a private-economic rational ethos. To put it another way, the question is whether morality can control part of society while the other part is given over to being controlled on the basis of self-interest.