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**THE WELFARE SOCIETY IN TRANSITION
PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF THE WELFARE MODEL**

By Mark Chesler

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THE PROGRAM ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT ALTERNATIVES

The Program on Conflict Management Alternatives was established in January, 1986 by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and additional funds from the University of Michigan. These basic grants were renewed in July, 1988 and again in July, 1991. The Program supports an agenda of research, application, and theory development. PCMA also establishes links among other university research and teaching efforts relevant to conflict management alternatives, and maintains liaison and collaboration with similar efforts in other Universities and Practitioner agencies. The Program staffers own work focuses explicitly on the relationship between social justice and social conflict, specifically: (a) the use of innovative settlement procedures and roles for disputants and third parties; (b) the institutionalization of innovative mechanisms and the adoption of organizational and community structures that permanently alter the way conflicts are managed; and (c) the fundamental differences and inequalities between parties that often create conflict and threaten its stable resolution.

We examine these issues primarily in United States' settings, in conflicts arising within and between families, organizations and communities, and between different racial, gender, and economic constituencies. These specific efforts are supported by a variety of research and action grants/contracts with governmental agencies, foundations, and private and public organizations/agencies.

The Program in Conflict Management Alternatives is housed within the Center for Research on Social Organization, College of Literature, Science and the Arts, Room 4016 LS&A Building, Telephone: (313) 763-0472.

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The Danish Cultural Institute

*The Welfare Society
in Transition*

*Problems and Prospects
of the Welfare Model*

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Dealing with Social Conflict and Justice-making in the Welfare State

by Mark Chesler

The focus of this paper is on some of the practical options available to deal with social conflict in the welfare state. In particular, I examine such options in terms of their probable contribution to increased social justice, and to the management, resolution or utilization of social conflict in the interest of justice-making. First, the groundwork is laid for such considerations. Then, the roles of social conflict in the historic and contemporary forms of the welfare state are examined – briefly. Then a series of practical activities are presented for conflict-managers, change-makers, and/or justice-seekers.

Group Conflict as an Inherent and Natural Feature of Human Society

One of the characteristics of organized human society is the formation of more or less self-conscious interest groups. These groupings, typically based on commonality and similarity of life experiences, such as cultural background, social stratification or labelling, and access to societal resources, seek their relative advantage visavis other groupings. Thus, there is constant conflict between social groups with regard to these cherished resources and related cultural symbols.

However, this group conflict, which is inherent and normal in society, does not mean we are always faced with the Hobbesian dilemma of an ongoing war of “all against all”. It is clear, however, that although such anarchy and constant civil war seldom prevail, societies do not hold together on the basis of good will and history

alone. Superior power, in the form of economic coercion or the police organs of the state, often hold conflict – and social change – in check. There is constant effort on the part of the more powerful to establish dominance and hegemony, and on the part of others to counter this hegemonic effort. As a result of this constant dialectic or struggle between these forces, interests or parties, we should always expect conflict (class, race, gender, ethnic, values) to occur. There also is constant struggle among groups that have different visions and values about the proper constitution of the society, about justice and a just society, and about their roles and rewards in the society, and thus about needed changes and the ways to pursue these changes.

At the same time as open conflict, there is a variety of other relationships existing among different social groups. There are other social contracts, exchanges and arrangements we can and do make to order, mute or otherwise deal with such conflict, including friendships, marriages, cooperative tasks and task groupings, consensus-based organizations, coalitions, and commitments to maintaining the social order itself. Even when conflict is overt, it is not necessarily or always noisy or violent; many different struggles endure – at least temporarily – and others end in compliance, dialogue, compromise, mutual understanding of difference and quiet agreements. Clearly, conflict and conflict management mean different things in different societies, and different societies or cultures have different tolerances for conflict, different views of its value or utility, and different preferences about how to respond to it.

The core question for us must not be how to avoid or suppress conflict, but how we can make current forms of conflict less destructive and even how to use them constructively...for purposes of social equality and justice.

The Welfare State as a Conflict Management Endeavor

Historically, the welfare state, at least in the form of providing resources and a “safety net” to the lower classes, was itself established in order to alleviate the strains of capitalist ventures, and to ward off class conflict. In more contemporary times, the welfare state has itself become a source of conflict.

Maintaining the welfare state requires a dual commitment. First, it

requires a commitment to the welfare of those portions of the population who are not faring well in the normal operations of the state and the economy. When there is an erosion of commitment to needy or "strange" populations, or to others' welfare, the welfare state erodes and class conflict resumes. When we make the "other", those less fortunate or resourceful, those on whose behalf the primary rhetoric of the welfare state exists, an enemy or a threat to our personal or collective welfare, we erode the common good and social welfare. Second, it requires a commitment to the state. When there is erosion of commitment to a stable state, the welfare state erodes and class and tribal conflict resumes. When we define the "other" as not part of the state, or as not worthy – by blood or color or culture or resources – we erode our common statehood and citizenship.

In the operation of the welfare state, at the level of local community or organizational operations, there are constant efforts to control emergent and continuing conflict that arises between various social groupings or classes. This is accomplished via police actions against disturbances, and especially against protests directed at the state and its functions itself – in this case the suppression or repression of apparent rebellions. In this effort the very maintainers and prime beneficiaries of the social conditions underlying conflict (those who would maintain power and privilege for the few and less for the many) seek to recontrol the situation. Suppression of conflict and protest also occurs more subtly, via the use of mystification and media manipulation, as state leaders and ruling elites cast these conflicts in certain terms rather than others – as rebellions rather than quests for justice, as unjustified disruptions rather than justified resentments, etc.

Thus, it is important to acknowledge that in modern "democracies" (more or less) and welfare states (more or less) elites often rule not by outright force (or police action), but by manipulating and escalating class and ethnic conflict, so to divide and conquer potential challengers while maintaining their own apparent legitimacy as protectors of the stable democratic order. In so doing elites must obscure the real and material origins of such conflict. One common obscuration, in our time, is the effort to blame the welfare state itself for our contemporary problems; in such efforts, public commitments to the welfare state are eroded and so are challenges to ruling classes' and groups' superior cultural or financial or political power.

In the US we have seen the social construction of the "welfare mother" (ignorant and impotent), the "absent welfare father" (irresponsible) and the "welfare family" (on drugs and not wishing to work) as the main causes of a large social services budget, entitlements that strangle the nation's productive capacity, and an erosion of moral values. These phenomena are all seen as the result of the welfare state: not as a result of political and economic oppression, but of the dependent client population created by the welfare state. Moreover, it is argued that rather than seeing economic and racial and gender discrimination as the source of moral decay, public malaise, distrust of one another and the state, "reverse discrimination" policies and practices, by which oppressed peoples are seen as gaining privileges and extra benefits that give them now advantaged positions and preferences over white men, is our major problem.

In Western Europe, in particular, much the same language is beginning to prevail; although it is often directed at "immigrants" and other non-members of the "legitimate" national citizenry, race and class distinctions still are primary.

Thus, the conservative argument is made that we must dismantle the welfare state to recreate responsibility and competence. Moreover, this argument takes our attention away from challenging forms of oppression that exist within the welfare state. These tactics divide and conquer the populace and keep pressure off ruling elites. They have been used to polarize publics around shibboleths that escalate conflict and help control oppressed groups, such as anti-immigrationism, anti-communism, anti-multiculturalism, anti-blackism, anti-Asianism (and in other nations anti-Africanism, anti-Pakistanism, anti-Turkism, etc.).

When conflicts are dealt with relatively openly in the conservatively-ruled welfare state, they typically are "managed" by diversionary and allegedly neutral or universalistic tactics that appear to promise reform and peace – or the absence of conflict – such as endless policy dialogues, company unions and solidarismo, mandatory arbitration or negotiation without accompanying balances of power (= charity and unimpeded power). And if basic rights of citizenship (immigration), survival (non-assassination or domestic harassment and terrorism) and security (employment) are at stake, what is there to negotiate? Life? One can negotiate distribution, or redistribution, but not survival.

The issue for us is to respond to these conflicts, within and without the welfare state, and to use conflict, in ways that lead us toward justice, not simply the reestablishment of order. For only with justice is there any hope for peace (rather than just the temporary calm of suppression or weariness).

Practical Suggestions for Working with Conflict and Justice-making in the Welfare State

What are some concrete options then? What are some realistic actions or strategies we can utilize in the effort to deal with emerging as well as inherent conflicts in our human societies, and especially within the framework of the welfare state?

One tactic is to gather information and conduct analyses of the nature of conflict in general and in specific circumstances. This work would help neutralize the mythic explanations typically offered by the state and its ruling groups. It requires analysis of the real bases of current conflicts, their bases in disputes of fact, style, value or resources. Moreover, it involves analyses of the level of conflict, whether it is at the level of warfare, a fight, a debate or contest, a disagreement, or whether it is cast as a problem to solve or a dialogue among different groups. Such efforts to develop tactical intelligence or action research can help sharpen real conflicts, reduce unrealistic or illusory conflicts, identify resources, identify targets of change, and help inform strategies of conflict-management and change-making that deal with underlying conflicts, and not only with surface or presenting issues. Depending on one's preferences and situational opportunities, this work may be done on behalf of relatively enlightened ruling groups of policy-makers (often called "policy research") or on behalf of traditionally oppressed and excluded groups planning policy-changes (often called "participatory action research").

A second tactic is education and consciousness-raising activities. On the one hand, consciousness-raising and reeducation, and perhaps confrontation, must occur among the powerful and privileged to help them/us unlearn our narrow conception of our self-interest, and our own power and privilege, as the only or most important interest at stake. On the other hand, consciousness-raising and advocacy also must occur for oppressed groups to permit them/us to

overcome false consciousness and to develop strategies to “get to the table” for bargaining, negotiation and problem-solving through non-violent means (if at all possible – the burden of non-violence is not theirs alone, of course). Such work requires the development of greater self (personal and collective) awareness, and the interrogation of self-privilege and self-delusion or defense. It also requires the willingness to take action on the behalf of oppressed groups and cries for justice that involve risk (reasonable risk I hope). For those of us here, members of moderately privileged groups, such risk-taking action may erode our own power and privilege in the service of empowering others – and making room for them to empower themselves. This may or may not involve Paolo Friere’s notion of “class suicide”, but it certainly suggests use of bell hooks’ notion of using the “margin as leverage on the center”.

A third tactic involves the effort to organize and advocate the interests of oppressed groups. This requires the development of a mobilizable constituency of people, and their willingness to take action. Their efforts must be translated into power sufficient to force a response from more powerful groups, in essence, enough for them to at least “get to the table” where decisions, compromises, bargains and deals are made. Once at the table, formerly disempowered groups must be able to learn and practice “deal-making” and “deal-keeping” skills, skills which are quite different than mobilizing and organizing skills.

A fourth tactic, one that is especially relevant in the face of culturally-based conflicts occurring across the world, is the ability to engage in cross-cultural communication. This means learning how to establish dialogues, verbal and non-verbal encounters that seek to promote understanding. Dialogue goes far beyond mere talking, exchanging rhetoric, or engaging in the sort of mutual monologues that are involved in passive withdrawal, fights and debates. Dialogues as a listening activity may also improve learning and the ability to link to and work with culturally different groups. It may enhance our ability to understand others’ styles, and how others use “woofing”, eye contact, decisions about who goes first, etc., as key ingredients in conflict and conflict management. Such linkage may be institutionalized (on at least a temporary basis) in coalitions. They also may lead to more culture-centric models of intervention (often more wholistic, com-

munity oriented and informal than the Western linear-rational models of self-interested bargaining). Examples may include the actions of Russian women who respond to sexual harassment by forming a natural passive barrier between victimized women and victimizing men, without overt confrontation. Or, as in the example of ho'oponopono in Hawaii, "wasta" in Arabic cultures, and similar group consensus techniques by the native peoples of various cultures.

A fifth tactic involves institution building and rebuilding. This is especially important for people who are not in control or well-represented within the official organizations of the welfare state. They, especially, must attend to voluntary and third-sector development and organizations that work with conflict and justice issues.

A sixth tactic, more macro in its intention, requires us to go beyond the redistribution of welfare in ways that protect oppressed classes, to redistribute income in ways that equalize classes and class opportunities. Even further, the new welfare state must imagine and create ways to go beyond this agenda to challenge the class structure itself by redistributing authority and power in work (so as to fully involve people in their workplace stakes), by redistributing ownership (so as to equalize the stakes in the society), and by redistributing education and services (so as to provide equal access to the society). These latter versions of welfare go far beyond the original aims of the welfare state.

| A Range of Strategies for Conflict-management and Justice-making |
|---|
| Technical information and analysis |
| Public education and consciousness raising |
| Organizing and advocating |
| Cross-cultural communication |
| Institution-building |
| Economic and political reforms |
| Visions of new futures – and the energy and skill to attain them |
| Fig. 1 |

Many of these tactics rest on a seventh option, itself the development of visions and tactics of peaceful and just ways of working ... together. Democracy, pluralism and multiculturalism, and justice, not just Western or US versions of these notions, but any version, are fairly abstract notions, and they require experiences with things many people have little concrete knowledge of or encounters with: a fair judiciary, multicultural living and working relationships, responsive public policy makers, commitment to the welfare of others we do not know – or even may not like, openly and justly dealing with differences and disagreements. It is not easy work, and the state of the world around us provides plenty of evidence of just how difficult it is and how far we have to go.