The Price of Pessimism
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THE PRICE OF PESSIMISM

The Limits of Social Policy by Nathan Glazer

(Harvard University Press, 240 pp., $22.95)

Its intellectual influence remains, but neoconservatism has virtually disappeared as a political phenomenon. As Seymour Martin Lipset recently pointed out, neoconservatism in the United States was never a movement, but a "tendency." Indeed, it became at least two tendencies, which have now turned away from, and even against, each other.

The original neoconservatism drew its coherence from a common reaction to currents of change in the 1960s that could be summed up in one word: Stop. Neoconservatives called for a reassertion of bourgeois virtues, and they opposed the newer egalitarian demands of the left. Unlike traditional conservatives, however, they were not against modernism in the arts, nor were they opposed to the New Deal. Rather than despising the social sciences, they drew heavily upon them. Though they prized traditional values, they did so less out of religious faith than from a belief in their positive social effects. Perhaps because many were Jews and former socialists, they appeared to bring conservativism a new set of intellectual resources. Peter Steinfels, in a 1979 book called *The Neoconservatives,* credited them with creating the intellectually serious conservativism that America, according to Lionel Trilling, had always lacked.

Until the mid-1970s, neoconservatives had emphasized caution and complexities, and were primarily concerned with domestic issues. But a second tendency, led by Norman Podhoretz and Jeane Kirkpatrick, became increasingly concerned with foreign policy and took an intensely ideological, highly polarized view of the world. Irving Kristol may have been unique in bridging the two wings (it was he who first accepted the term "neoconservatism" and sought to present it as a complete public philosophy), but the two tendencies have split irreparably in the last decade.

For whatever unity neoconservatism had in the face of the radical challenge of the '60s and '70s, it lost in the ascendancy of the '80s. Some of its leaders, especially from the foreign policy wing, threw in their lot with the larger conservative movement and joined the Reagan administration. Thereupon they sacrificed some of their distinctiveness, and the line between the old conservatism and the new became a blur. Moreover, not all neoconservatives, especially on the domestic side, could go from saying "no" to radicalism to saying "yes" to Reaganism. A few, like Daniel Patrick Moynihan, repositioned themselves in the mainstream of the Democratic Party. Podhoretz, by contrast, passed Reagan on the right, when East-West relations began to thaw and the president decided the Soviet Union was no longer an "evil empire." Neither events nor arguments discredited neoconservatism. It simply lost any clarity of definition as the preoccupations of one decade gave way to those of the next.

The triumph of Thatcher and Reagan also stirred general confusion about the concept of neoconservatism. In the '80s some observers began to use the term "neoconservative" to describe the resurgent devotion to the free market. That usage makes sense in Great Britain, since Thatcher represents something genuinely "neo" among British conservatives. But the older lines of American conservatism did not recently become converted to faith in the marketplace. Moreover, the original American neoconservatives, though skeptical about government, did not celebrate Friedrich von Hayek or Milton Friedman as patron saints. Their social science was primarily sociology, not economics; and they approved of welfare state measures that Friedmanites abhor. Increasingly, however, some putative neoconservatives exhibit many of the familiar peeves and reflexes of the old American right, and only connoisseurs can appreciate the vintages of conservative whine. Neoconservativism appears now to be not the mature American conservativism that Steinfels thought it was, but a transitional moment in the emergence of a larger, rather varied conservative movement that has overtaken American politics and social thought.

And yet there is Nathan Glazer. A dove on foreign policy, Glazer has little in common with the Podhoretz wing, and unlike Kristol he has not, to my knowledge, embraced neoconservatism as a description of his ideas. But if anything remains of the first phase of neoconservatism as a distinctive frame of thought about public policy, it can be found in Glazer's work and the pages of *The Public Interest*, the journal that he and Kristol edit. In the last decade Glazer has maintained the same complex balance of views that he began to develop out of the experience of the '60s. He rejects the liberal vision of an expanding system of social rights and proposes another in its place that relies more on the traditional structures of society to relieve distress. He does not, however, repudiate the welfare state. Indeed, he endorses some measures that would extend it.

His new collection, *The Limits of Social Policy*, presents these views in ten well-turned essays that provide a history, a critique, and a justification—a history of the development of social policy over the last two decades; a critique of the grand designs of reform; and a justification for the limits of social provision in the United States. Unlike many collections, these essays make up a coherent whole, and they invite us to reflect on whether this more moderate vein of neoconservative thinking presents, at its best, a persuasive view.

I should make my bias clear. I count Glazer as a friend; he was my teacher and my colleague. I admire his wisdom, his breadth of interests, his fair-mindedness. His contributions to sociology and public thought, especially his thinking about ethnicity, have been extraordinary, from *The Lonely Crowd* (with David Riesman and Reuel Denney) and *Beyond the Melting Pot* (with Moynihan) to his more recent books, *Affirmative Discrimination* and *Ethnic Dilemmas*. Both personally and in his writing, Glazer shows not only a tolerance for opposing views, but an appreciation of them, which makes it difficult to raise objections that Glazer himself has not already acknowledged. Still, for all my respect, I have never shared the mood and the assumptions of his work on social policy that lead him to be deeply pessimistic about the capacities of government. Much of this disagreement stems from what I see as a tendency to overgeneralize the failings of welfare and welfare reform to the entire sphere of social policy.

In his new book's title essay, which originally appeared in 1971, Glazer builds his argument around a contrast between a liberal model of policy and his own alternative. Liberals, he says, see policy as progressively correcting conditions of misery and distress, for which they blame society as a whole and vested interests in particular. Glazer summarizes his perspective in two propositions. First, that in social policy we are "trying to deal with the breakdown of traditional ways of handling distress" that have been located in ethnic groups, neighborhoods, churches, and families. Second, that social policy is actually weakening these traditional structures: "We are making no steady headway. . . . Our efforts to deal with distress are themselves increasing distress."

SEVERAL THINGS are wrong here. Social policy does not seek only to compensate for the weakening of traditional structures. Through our expenditures for health care, housing, nutrition, and income security, we have been attempting to create a far higher standard of living than those traditional institutions were ever able to reach. By any objective standard, we have made significant headway. The case for success is especially strong in the areas where social expenditures have expanded most: spending for the elderly (including higher real incomes from Social Security) and spending on medical care, which together have significantly improved the quality of life, as well as extending its length. It is simply not true to say, in regard to material well-being, that "efforts to deal with distress are themselves increasing distress."

Moreover, if the traditional structures of society have deteriorated (and I am not certain that all of them have), the principal causes lie in the economic and political freedoms that we revere, and in the forces that they have unleashed. The contribution of social policy to the erosion of tradition seems rather slight by comparison with the impact of what Joseph Schumpeter called our economy's gales of "creative destruction." Capitalism necessarily destroys old industries and occupations and uproots the communities and families that have grown up around them; and the rationalistic outlook that capitalism promotes undercuts the authority of tradition. Laments about "the world we have lost" are centuries old. While the lament has some foundation, it is premised on a vastly exaggerated view of the harmony of traditional life, and of its success in relieving pain and preventing misfortune. Indeed, much evidence suggests that voluntary

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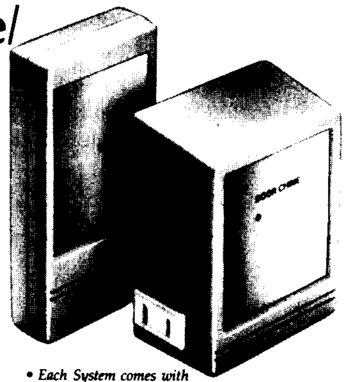

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a) 1,012,317 **b)** 649,119 **c)** 0 **d)** No one knows

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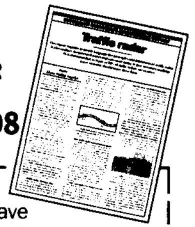

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Though sometimes, by the end, the form becomes your own
completely. Monet: the last of the lilies

splurge, like dyes in water: furring, tentacling.
Probably so did light in his milkclot eyes.

The more *they* failed, the vaster the beauty
succeeded. Nobody ever saw

such flowers before. Even he didn't
"see" them. It was only after he didn't

we could. Everywhere, suddenly—everywhere!

POEM WITH 2 LINES FROM A CATALOGUE

There is no color inside the body.
Color requires light.

When we peer into the people we love,
when we take our voyeur-stares

past the sills their various
intimate openings offer,

puckering gill, greased x, all labial pouches,
we bring light the way an artist brings a brush

—the strokes
make burgundy, tulip, ruby, kumquat, oxblood, anemone-pink.

DESERT SONG

They tongued my mons—the animals; and
the dank crenellations between my toes. Once
one climbed the rump of another, starting my nipples;
it was very common after that. So over centuries I
was smoothed. To see how much of us gives us our little
individuation, see me then: a crystal
lumpishness, the features gone to creatures' soft, salival
repetitions. Twice a year it rained. By the time
the boy found me, I was the size of a herder's crook,
a thing to twirl, or play at being a spear, and
finally to hurl in the waters. They were also salt.
I've entered air. I've entered you. And when *you* leave,
and if *you* weep, you'll taste what the animals yearned
for; and Lot before them, before I turned.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

organizations are actually stronger today than they were a century ago, not least of all because of the support they receive from government.

GLAZER'S VISION of an accelerating decline, of eroding traditional structures eroded further by social policy, appears accurate only when focusing on one development: the failure of welfare policy with respect to the black family. As he correctly points out, the growth of Social Security and other programs was supposed to produce two benefits for the public at large: a withering away of welfare and an improvement in the "environment" (reduced crime and civil disorder). Instead, the public saw increases in the welfare rolls, crime, teenage pregnancies, and family break-ups (though these changes were not, by any means, all results of welfare assistance). Furthermore, the remedy favored by reformers, the negative income tax or family assistance plan as it came to be called, proved illusory; it even seemed to increase family break-ups when put to a large, controlled social experiment (or so the early evaluations held).

Welfare is scarcely the pride of reform. But neither is it the paradigmatic case, the sum, or the essence. To say that social policy and "social engineering" faced, and failed, a decisive test in welfare is to make three sacrifices of complexity that might be called the "welfare compression." First, you must reduce social policy to welfare policy—and ignore the other elements that in fiscal terms are far larger (Social Security, health care, and education). Second, you must reduce welfare itself to the experience of long-term welfare recipients—and ignore the larger number of beneficiaries, white and black, for whom welfare provides support during temporary reverses of fortune. Third, you must say that the test of welfare's effects is the development of inner-city black communities over the last 30 years—and ignore the turnover in the inner-city population from the out-migration of millions of upwardly mobile blacks to better neighborhoods and the in-migration of millions more who came from the rural South. If Glazer is prepared to take all the steps in welfare compression, he can draw the conclusion "We are making no steady headway," but it is not a verdict that applies to all social policy, nor to all anti-poverty efforts.

Glazer seems to me entirely right, however, in the criticism that he levels against the family assistance plan. The heart of his argument involves a contrast between incentives and the "teaching effects" of programs. Economists thought that by constructing an incentive system that rewarded work, they would induce recipients to get off welfare. (Instead of losing assistance entirely, recipients would collect a diminishing amount as their incomes rose.) But this model neglected the "teaching effect" of a policy that guarantees a minimum income regardless of work or family responsibility. During the last decade, as Glazer points out, welfare policy has been moving from inducements to expectations of work. While indicating his approval for this shift, Glazer does not reject the idea of publicly financed work incentives, as long as the incentives have the right teaching effects. He notes that the earned income tax credit (an existing provision of the federal tax code) creates, like the negative income tax, an incentive for work, but the teaching effect is altogether different, since the credit comes only to those with earnings.

MORE generally, Glazer would like to "reform work, not welfare" by ensuring that low-wage jobs carry fringe benefits, such as health insurance. Like his Harvard colleague David Ellwood, he wants to discourage reliance on welfare by making work pay better. "Reforming work, not welfare," however, is no small objective. It leads toward a substantial extension of the government's role in social provision; and I am not sure it is any less an example of the social engineering for which Glazer expresses a general distaste. Unfortunately, in these essays Glazer does not explain how he would add fringe benefits to low-wage jobs. Mandating private health benefits runs into numerous difficulties, as Massachusetts is discovering. (A universal health insurance system, on the other hand, might be more equitable and less costly, as it is in Canada, but Glazer's view of so large an undertaking is unclear.)

Glazer is generally content here to point in the direction of change he prefers, without working out the specifics. He favors social policies that emphasize decentralization and privatization, but he gives no sustained attention to the difficulties that those policies are likely to meet. For example, he is sympathetic to educational vouchers, he acknowledges some objections to them (such as church-state entanglements, increased racial segregation, and deterioration of the existing public schools), and then he leaves the topic without answering the objections or clarifying exactly what he would do.

So while the essays contain the outline of a positive program, these elements are far less developed than the book's negative, critical side. Indeed, the last several chapters of the book are entirely devoted to criticizing liberal efforts to rationalize and to extend social policy. Glazer's central message is that social policy in America reflects American institutions and beliefs, and no one should expect any fundamental change. In the very last words of the book, he says that the dominant mood in the United States opposes "a fully developed national system of social policy," and that this mood reflects "a considered judgment by many Americans that despite the cost in social disorder that prevails in their society, they prefer it that way." The ultimate limit on social policy, we are led to believe, is public approval for the system, warts and all.

That there are limits to social policy, including complacent opinion, no one need doubt. But some limits are only apparent, and can be overcome. Other limits need not be forbidding, depending on where they lie. In the midst of a glowing blurb on the back cover, Moynihan says: "Yes, there are limits, but they are well beyond our present horizons." Exactly. But the "dominant mood" of this book is that we ran up against the limits of policy 20 years ago. Moynihan adds that "Glazer summons us to try once more, and to do better this time." The book would have been more valuable had Glazer done so, instead of observing, with no apparent disapproval, that confidence in our ability to design effective social policy for the nation has vanished and is unlikely to return soon.

What makes this book neoconservative is its preoccupation with deflating the grand aspirations of the '60s. But if a balloon has burst, there is no fun to be had in deflating it. Neoconservatism seems to have exhausted its original impetus and entertainment. In addition, the record of reform no longer seems so grim. In an essay first published in 1986 and included here, Glazer remarks that the early evaluations of education and training programs for the poor tended to find no impact, whereas the more recent ones have more often shown positive effects. The same is true of evaluations of the impact of health programs. *The Limits of Social Policy* takes its framework from that early period of dispute and disillusionment, when nothing seemed to work, but the book itself contains ingredients of a more positive alternative. Without too much difficulty, those ingredients could be recombined and amplified into a vision that would encourage us, as Moynihan says, "to try once more, and to do better this time." That is very much what we need: the chastened wisdom about the limits of policy that Nathan Glazer has taught, but also the political imagination to see the possibilities of productive reform that lie within our reach.

PAUL STARR

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THE WAR OF THE WORDS

In Defense of Rhetoric by Brian Vickers

(Oxford University Press, 528 pp., $79)

The disappearance of rhetoric from the European intellectual scene is bound to surprise anyone who is curious about our history. This is a body of knowledge concerning the human activity par excellence: the art of speaking (and writing). It enjoyed great prestige for 2,000 years, and then disappeared without apparent trace in the course of the 19th century, at the very time when its object, smooth and effective speech, was beginning to play an ever greater role in our societies. Isn't it paradoxical that the neglect of rhetoric has coincided with the spectacle of the presidential elections in countries like the United States and France, those events of the greatest public importance, in which victory goes invariably to the