

PHILOSOPHY & PUBLIC POLICY

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Welfare and the Liberal Conscience

Among critics of state intervention in the economy and public provision for the needs of the poor, it is commonly asserted that classical liberals would have been utterly hostile to measures designed to attenuate the relative disadvantage engendered by free-market systems. Indeed, adversaries of the welfare state often try to make us feel derelict for having abandoned our noble libertarian heritage. Classical liberalism was antistatist, it is assumed, hostile to social planning, fond of liberty above equality, unwilling to engage in redistribution, assured of the spontaneous harmony of interests, trustful of the market, hopeful that the public sector would shrink and that the private sector would expand. Where this account of the liberal tradition prevails, welfare-state liberalism is seen as "radically revisionist," and the normative foundations of the welfare state are said to constitute a fundamental breach with the classical liberal tradition.

My purpose here is to contest these assumptions, and to highlight some neglected similarities and interconnections between eighteenth-century liberal rights and twentieth-century welfare rights. The implications of this exercise, however, must not be overstated. A similarity or correspondence of beliefs, which is all I shall attempt to document, does not constitute proof of historical continuity; evidence of transmission and reception would be required to support any kind of stronger claim. Moreover, even if we could definitively trace the conveyance of a system of liberal values from the Enlightenment to the present, this would not con-

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