Welfare universalism at the crossroads

As we struggle to get some sense of the contradictory messages emanating from the new Labour government regarding the future of welfare it seems that at least we can say with relief that the days when the very idea of ‘the social’ was under attack are now over. But while Labour may have embraced communitarianism principles it is also clear that many of the tenets of neo-liberalism and moral-authoritarianism that Thatcherism was built upon also inform its policies. As Dean (1998) notes, Labour draws upon a complex mixture of moral repertoires. Thus it is salutory to remember that the fundamental steps in the neo-liberal transformation of the welfare state – the introduction of markets and competition, centralised decentralisation, the installation of workfare, the subordination of social to economic policy – have been largely taken in the 1990s after the last Thatcher administration.

They say that history repeats itself first time as tragedy. In this chapter I will illustrate how the ideal of unconditional mutuality outlined in the work of Richard Titmuss constituted one of the central ethical principles underlying the development of the post-war British welfare state. One cannot help being struck by the irony that the idea of mutuality is now used by a Labour government precisely as a means of reneging upon the commitment of government to the concept of welfare universalism. This chapter will examine mutuality in terms of those interlinked values – generosity, trust, interdependence, solidarity – which have often operated tacitly as the submerged foundation of welfare universalism in the UK. I will examine the character of such values, epitomised by the notion of...
the gift and the gift relationship, and their influence upon post-war social policy. Using Titmuss's writings (1968, 1971) I will seek to demonstrate the enduring significance of this ethical foundation. But I will also examine the way in which an unreflexive modernism led Titmuss and others to embrace a highly institutionalised realisation of this universalist ethic.

I will argue that the new era of globalised capitalism opens up new sources of vulnerability which provide the material basis for a new cross-class commitment to welfare universalism. What is required now is the development of a post-modern universalism, one which I argue could find expression in the idea of a welfare society rather than a welfare state. Fiona Williams (1989, 1992) has done much to initiate debate concerning one of the key parameters of a renewed universalism, i.e. the way in which such a commitment must be combined with an equally unwavering commitment to social diversity. More recently (Williams, 1998) she has begun the task of sketching a new set of principles for welfare based upon what she calls the 'politics of recognition'; principles, she argues, which are perhaps vital for the renewal of a radical vision of welfare given the exhaustion of social democracy. Returning to the theme of previous chapters I will argue that 'the quality of social relations' should be central to any project for the renewal of welfare. Seen as a complement to the equitable distribution of material resources we could think of these two principles as the twin pillars of a radical vision of a welfare society.

The gift relationship

Co-operative individualism

Reciprocity, give and take, is the cornerstone of convivial social relations. As Giddens (1971) notes the idea of reciprocity was anticipated by Durkheim (1893) who was at pains to repudiate the economic individualism which had become the orthodoxy of late-nineteenth-century political economy. As with the neo-liberalism of today, this was an orthodoxy which insisted that the collective interest was only a disguised form of personal interest and that altruism was merely concealed egoism. In contrast, according to Durkheim,

even where society relies most completely upon the division of labour, it does not become a jumble of juxtaposed atoms, be-