

T. H. Marshall, the Moral Economy, and Social Rights

At a crucial juncture in his famous lectures on “Citizenship and Social Class,” English sociologist T. H. Marshall explained that the new social rights he associated with the invention of the twentieth-century welfare state were in fact a blast from the past—a bequest from the moral economy to a later age grappling with political economy run amok. For this reason, Marshall’s celebrated theory of social rights provides one aperture through which to intervene in a dispute brewing between starkly alternative views of the moral economy tradition he invoked.

“The original source of social rights was membership of local communities,” Marshall related. The Elizabethan Poor Law backed up this ramshackle local approach. Just before the triumph of capitalism, the late-eighteenth-century Speenhamland modifications to the Poor Law system provided “a guaranteed minimum wage and family allowances, combined with the right to work or maintenance,” as Marshall recalled from Karl Polanyi’s presentation of 1790s innovations in *The Origin of Our Time* (as the English version of *The Great Transformation* was known). Marshall enthused that this provision was “a substantial body of social rights, even by modern standards.” Polanyi had not used the language of social rights, but otherwise Marshall directly incorporated his storied account of the endurance and transformation of the moral economy directly into his own.¹

That incorporated narrative proceeded through the displacement and return of the moral economy. The Elizabethan Poor Law helped delocalize the very social protection it intended to buttress, and inadvertently paved the ways for ideologies of transactional freedom to conquer old moral cultures of interdependence. To the extent that the moral economy remained live into the nineteenth century, “citizenship was divided against itself,” Marshall explained. To resolve the conflict, premodern social rights were liquidated in the name of the civil ones of modern liberalism. A premodern moral economy that had once fostered duty to others and a sensitivity to basic needs fell to modern political economy, with individual liberties of transaction safeguarded from the annoyance of countervailing norms of solidarity. Some “mercy” remained in the new Poor Law (1834), Marshall acknowledged, but it was of bare significance and no longer defined the entitlements of citizenship.²

After the crisis of political economy of the twentieth century, however, social rights were slowly being restored. And given the Speenhamland precedent, the return of social rights under the auspices of the twentieth-century welfare state was, in an important sense, a revenge of the moral economy on the political economy that had once bested it. Properly understood, the welfare state re-embedded a classical liberal political economy within an earlier and wider moral economy from which it had earlier escaped. And the integration of social rights into citizenship provided the signature of this achievement.

Marshall's presentation of the counterforce that "social rights" offer in re-embedding the political within the moral economy has proved broadly influential—not least since another of Polanyi's readers, James Scott, attributed this project to an immemorial and transhistorical peasantry, just as Polanyi had attributed it to premodern humanity generally. Scott, like Marshall, presented the "moral economy of the peasant" as consisting precisely in the defense of social rights against the depredations of states and markets.³

Especially since the financial crisis of 2008, the moral economy has often been presented in more or less celebratory terms, as a forgotten alternative to political economy once again in dire need of constraint—with important implications for how to respond to our "neoliberal" times, now that the welfarist moment that Marshall epitomized is an increasingly distant memory. Others, however, find the moral economy tradition little more than a rearguard counterpoint. It might appeal in the way that a daydream seems preferable to a nightmare, but is compromised by its nostalgia for a premodern sociability that never was, and is far from up to the challenge of chastening or overturning what it opposes.⁴

It is Marxists who typically take this latter view, but my suggestion here is that all readers of Marshall's theory should find in it a cautionary tale for our times about what it took to overcome classical liberal political economy or what it might take to confront today's "neoliberal" political economy. Perhaps instead of nostalgia for a "moral economy," we need an alternative approach to political economy, both analytically and mobilizationally. If so, it follows that adding social rights to citizenship without reconceiving production, exchange, and distribution is inadequate by itself—especially if one cares, as Marshall so clearly did, about materially egalitarian outcomes.

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It was in January 1949 that Marshall delivered the classic lectures on the welfare state at the University of Cambridge that made him so well-known. Marshall offered his thoughts when the extraordinary accomplishments of the Labour Party (in power since 1945) were certain, but the strict limits of those advances—let alone their future reversals—were not yet apparent. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Marshall's triumphalist narrative could end in a climax because of the arrival of the welfare state he and his listeners were experiencing. It is both of great interest and potentially misleading that Marshall famously characterized that climax as the coming of economic and social rights. But he was mainly interested in social rights as a synonym for sufficient provision of essential goods and services more generally—and he was interested as much in the equal relations of British citizens as in sufficient provision for them.⁵

A genteel but large-minded heir of English ethical socialism, Marshall was hired after World War II to teach social workers at the London School of Economics by the politician and reformer William Beveridge, who was famed for his World War II report calling for the welfare state. Marshall was fundamentally interested in how social citizenship had been achieved as an overlay on the civil and political citizenship that the centuries prior to the twentieth had birthed. An account of *one nation's* citizenship and its evolution, Marshall's lecture is most interesting because it confirms the dual commitment of midcentury welfare aspiration to the goals of sufficiency and equality, at a moment when Marshall assumed or hoped they would harmonize. Indeed, Marshall made clear that what truly interested him

was the rise of materially egalitarian citizenship under the auspices of the welfare state, not the pursuit of basic provisions alone.

Marshall specifically distinguished the significance of social citizenship in the twentieth century from the earlier view that, so long as indigence were remedied, inequality was allowable or even indispensable. "Citizenship, even in its early forms, was a principle of equality," Marshall insisted. For a long time, however, commitment to equality in the civil and political spheres had had spectacular ramifications for the production of material inequality. Stratification had gone so far that early attempts to set minimum standards in distribution in response to it had to be interpreted as indirect efforts to establish and engage in "class-abatement." As for the turn to the welfare state, it involved even more grandiose aims. As Marshall explained in a critical passage, there was "no longer merely an attempt to abate the obvious nuisance of destitution in the lowest ranks of society." The welfare state, rather, "assumed the guise of action modifying the whole pattern of social inequality. It is no longer content to raise the floor-level in the basement of the social edifice, leaving the superstructure as it was. It has begun to remodel the whole building, and it might even end by converting a skyscraper into a bungalow."⁶

What he meant is that it was bringing up how the poor lived so that they were no longer indigent, while not ignoring how far the rich still towered over them or how much the rich might even increase their gains. Marshall admitted that, as they had come to work by 1949, the indirect effects of social minimum policies in the various fields of medical care, public housing, and unemployment relief were spotty and had more immediate implications for equality of status than of distribution. Recognized as fellow citizens and afforded a floor of protection, so far people felt more equal in their standing without yet enjoying corresponding material equality with limits to hierarchy. In fact, Marshall acknowledged, sometimes social rights functioned to entrench or even expand distributive inequality: "Citizenship is itself becoming the architect of social inequality," he recorded glumly. Ultimately, however, Marshall felt he could place faith in the fact of the evident compression of the income scale and, above all, the "enrichment of the universal status of citizenship," which allowed significant inequality to persist but within a new conception of national community that moderated the gap between the rich and the rest. Its destiny was to subordinate not just old aristocratic privileges but also the new non-egalitarian action of the market to its norms. An ideal of sufficiency was not separate in action from a principle of distributive equality; the welfare state had fused them into one package.⁷

Remarkably, Marshall's vision, like that of the larger welfare state, was inclusionary and egalitarian for some while exclusionary in the extreme or at least patronizing and subordinating for others. The passage of the British Nationality Act the year before he spoke had formally included hundreds of millions of former imperial subjects as imperial citizens, in tune with the attempt to preserve European empire through reform across the continent. Yet Marshall gloried in the long- and short-term achievements of the English welfare state without ever mentioning the British Empire. He did not mention women, either, who were generally the beneficiaries of social rights in his model only through male family wage and their husband's prerogatives as a default, and at a cost to earlier proposals for welfare more sensitive to the insecurity of women. And Marshall understood social rights to be broad ideals of state reform, not much concerning himself with what would happen if majorities excluded minorities, or for that matter if majorities did not want

social provision anymore (or, as American history illustrates, at all). For all these shortcomings, however, social rights did breathe the materially egalitarian spirit of their moment, and they struggled to include more people in social justice than ever before.⁸

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Thinking through the path to social citizenship exclusively (but unsurprisingly) within the framework of one national welfare state, Marshall believed there was no real choice between sufficient provision and egalitarian distribution. To socialize national citizenship by according social rights would automatically translate into rough parity. That belief, however, turns out to be an illusion brought on by its 1940s moment. It now looks like a wildly overoptimistic and temporary scenario, perhaps induced by the fact of Labour's supremacy for the prior years and unaffected by the ideological consequences of the Cold War (which, like the international scene generally, Marshall never mentioned). As W. G. Runciman, one of his Cambridge friends, later wrote, it turned out that the specter Marshall could briefly exorcise from social rights had come back to haunt them. Policies aiming at a social minimum not only began to falter as the postwar era wore on, but sometimes proved compatible with the expansion—rather than the reduction—of material inequality.⁹

In fact, perhaps the most striking feature of contemporary “neoliberal” distribution, relative its nineteenth-century forbear as well as to the intervening political economy of the welfare state, is that it allows for consideration of the worst off and even sufficient provision for them while tolerating massive increases in inequality. China epitomizes these developments, having saved more humans from extreme poverty than any agent in world history, while also accelerating inequality more quickly than any other regime in the past few decades. Many other countries reproduce Marshall's nightmare less spectacularly: less poverty and more class hierarchy, more social rights or their equivalent alongside less constraint on the gap between the rich and the rest. The social rights that Marshall invoked in relation to the prize of material equality have survived as the highest aim of a number of governmental and nongovernmental agendas, but only in an age of exploding inequality.¹⁰

In the harsh light of retrospection, how does Marshall's error of perspective bear on our thinking about the moral economy tradition? We can, of course, debate the historical believability of the tradition's appeal to premodern social rights—especially if we think communal responsibility never defended any kinds of rights as non-negotiable entitlements, and if we worry that nostalgia conceals the massive costs of premodern moral order in the name of prettifying its archaic alternative to “capitalism.” We can also wonder what value the moral economy is supposed to impart, aside from providing a reminder that the losers to political economy were capable of noble protest before they were swamped—a reminder that offers no reason to believe that a revival of the moral economy tradition could ever transcend such protest. Marshall's analysis, like Polanyi's before it, begged the question why, if the moral economy could not withstand the pressure of political economy the first time around, one would expect a second attempt to work any better. We can ask, lastly, about Scott's globalization of the moral economy tradition, which could not even give rise to Marshall's illusion of the harmony of sufficiency and equality in a postcolonial world of massive gulfs of means, and so instead sided clearly

with an ethic of sufficient provision *against* an ethic of material equality, anticipating our recent distributive patterns. (What mattered to the moral economy of the global poor, Scott wrote, was that “all should have a place, a living, *not that all should be equal.*”)¹¹

But even to the extent that we believe in the priority of a distributive ethics of sufficient provision, and accept its allegedly necessary price in relation to growing rather than reducing class inequality, we can ask whether the moral economy tradition distorts our task. Is sufficient provision best guaranteed by conceiving of such protection in terms of “social rights” that political economy must honor, rather than reimagining production and exchange? The moral economy tradition risks treating morality as *external* to political economy, which then has to be subordinated to its norms somehow. But the tradition thereby ignores that political economy has never been a matter of take it or leave it, and indeed the welfare state was not so much a “reembedding” of “capitalism” as a reinvention of political economy in new terms, with ethically and institutionally specific virtues and vices.

If this intuition is correct, then an unequal world does not need a revival and globalization of social rights as part of the re-embedding of worldwide “capitalism” in a moral economy. It needs a rescue attempt for Marshall’s broader ideal of welfare and a new political economy that would realize it locally and globally, and would transcend the limits of the premodern moral economy and of mid-twentieth-century social citizenship alike.

NOTES

1. T. H. Marshall, “Citizenship and Social Class,” in *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), reprinted in *Class, Citizenship, and Social Development: Essays by T.H. Marshall* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1965), 86–87.

2. *Ibid.*, 87–88.

3. James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), esp. 5 and n on Polanyi and 33, 44, and 184–88 for social rights. I should admit that I have no evidence of the direct influence of Marshall on Scott, but given the absence of social rights as a category in Polanyi, such influence makes sense.

4. See Tim Rogan’s excellent *The Moral Economists: R. H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E. P. Thompson, and the Critique of Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

5. It is noteworthy that, in Marshall’s Great Britain, there was next to no usage of the concept of social rights in the glory years of the welfare state’s creation. In his celebrated 1942 report, Beveridge had not described minimum standards provided by “cradle to grave” social protections in terms of individual rights. That Marshall in 1949 chose to work with the notion of social rights as his synonym for sufficient provision may indeed have been largely accidental; he gives no impression of having been influenced by any of the wartime or immediate postwar social rights talk elsewhere—and, most strikingly, does not seem to have known about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, though the United Nations voted it through just the month before he mounted his Cambridge lectern. And for Marshall, as for so many of his contemporaries, talk of social rights really prompted more attention to welfarist duties. “If citizenship is invoked in the defence of rights,” he observes, “the corresponding duties of citizenship cannot be ignored, [requiring that one’s] acts should be inspired by a lively sense of responsibility towards the welfare of the community.” Marshall, “Citizenship and Social Class,” 123. The likeliest explanation for his use of the notion of social rights is that he hoped to insert himself in a local Cambridge tradition by affiliating with famed legal historian F. W. Maitland’s earlier account of the progress of prior “rights” in sketching how citizenship had developed since medieval times. “Rooted in the intellectual culture of Cambridge[,] Marshall’s sociology is, first, an extension of Maitland’s view of history.” A. H. Halsey, “T. H. Marshall: Past and Present 1893–1981,” *Sociology* 18, no. 1 (February 1984): 4.

6. Marshall, “Citizenship and Social Class,” 95, 106.

7. *Ibid.*, 117, 128.

8. See also Julia Moses, “Social Citizenship and Social Rights in the Age of Extremes: T. H. Marshall’s Social Philosophy in the *Longue Durée*,” *Modern Intellectual History* 16, no. 1 (April 2019), 155–84, which properly emphasizes the culturalist and nationalist premises of Marshall’s vision of social citizenship. On the gendering

of Marshall's welfare state, see Susan Pedersen's classic *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), esp. 5–7 and 336–54.

9. W.G. Runciman, "Why Social Inequalities Are Generated by Social Rights," in *Citizenship Today: The Contemporary Relevance of T. H. Marshall*, ed. Martin Bulmer and Anthony M. Rees (London: UCL Press, 1986).

10. Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

11. Scott, *Moral Economy of the Peasant*, 40 (emphasis added).