**Tribute to Professor Robert Pinker**

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Professor Pinker, receiving his 2015 SPA Special Recognition Award

The death of Robert Pinker earlier this year at the age of 89 on February 2nd marked the passing of one of the most distinguished and original senior contributors to the understanding of social policy and welfare. His books Social Theory and Social Policy of 1971 and The Idea of Welfare of 1979 broke new ground. For students and for their teachers they opened new windows on to that field. While Richard Titmuss had recommended that alongside the statutory social services we should consider also the workings out of taxation and occupation-based benefits such as pension schemes, Bob Pinker was planting his foot much more boldly outside the frame of orthodox social policy studies of the day. He asked how in everyday life do ordinary people, with their own values and priorities, and across the generations, go about enhancing their own welfare and that of their families, and of nearby non-relatives.
From that springboard he went on to develop ideas of familial altruism and its conditionality, of links between dependence and stigma, and of the nature and scope of welfare pluralism (as opposed to the ‘institutional model’ of welfare provision, namely welfare unitarism). He gave full acknowledgment of the pivotal contributions of the health and personal social services to the ‘states of welfare’ which people achieved, but there were other means to welfare as well as the ‘welfare state’, and they gave voice to diverse values, traditions and outcomes in the process.
This approach to social policy studies contrasted with that being cultivated by the apparently prevailing normative presumptions of the day, commonly associated with Fabian socialism. As Julian Le Grand later expressed matters (but while acknowledging Pinker as prefiguring the position), this was inclined to treat ordinary people as ‘pawns’, subject to the ‘superior’ decision-making powers of policy specialists having responsibility for the delivery of services by the state. Pinker’s criticisms were sharply different from other criticisms made in the 1970s which came from the political economy wing of critics, influenced by Marx, who found Titmussian social policy studies to take insufficient notice of the underlying dynamics of capitalism. Pinker’s criticisms in the long run have probably proved the more significant, not least because they chimed in with the ensuing rapid expansion of research studies into informal caring and ‘carers’ in the 1980s. Now carers in a family are less likely than earlier to be faced with services that exploit, neglect or dismiss their sentiments and worth.
Bob served his academic apprenticeship in Titmuss’s department at LSE from the late 1950s under Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend, as a research worker and a higher degree student. His research contributed to Abel-Smith’s The Hospitals 1800-1948 (and his own English Hospital Statistics, 1861-1938 of 1966) and Townsend’s book on accommodation for older people The Last Refuge. Successive academic appointments followed at Goldsmiths College, Chelsea College and then LSE, from where he retired in 1996 as Professor of Social Administration.
As Bob’s thought evolved, clear resonances emerged between his ideas and those of T.H. Marshall. He wrote an authoritative introductory contribution to Marshall’s The Right to Welfare and Other Essays of 1981. Both writers favoured concepts and theories born of the middle distance: ideologies, whether sourced from right or left, failed to capture the nuances of real-world complexities. Marshall’s conception of the ‘democratic-welfare-capitalism’ as characterising the contingent balances struck between civic, political and social rights of citizenship in mixed economies, offered an inviting path between the polarities of collectivism and individualism (and welfare and freedom). For Pinker, ‘a sound theory of welfare gives as much attention to the distinctive features of national culture and tradition as it does to the formal context of social policy’.
Bob promoted policy studies as an academic subject. He edited the Journal of Social Policy from 1977 to 1981 and chaired the Editorial Board from 1981 to 1985. For ten years from 1975 he was Series Editor of the highly-regarded books included in ‘Studies in Social Policy and Welfare’ published by Heinemann. He was a member of the committee which prepared the Barclay Report Social Workers: Their Role and Tasks in 1982, submitting as Appendix B ‘An alternative view’ challenging the proposed community-based models of social work. He was in demand as an external examiner of PhDs and degree courses, and served several terms as Visiting Professor at Ulster University. He received the Social Policy Association’s Special Recognition Award at the SPA 2015 conference in Belfast. In the following summer Ulster University awarded him the honorary degree of LLD for distinguished service to public life.
There was no rupture represented in Bob’s commitment to social policy and his long association with the Press Complaints Commission from its beginning in 1991. At home and abroad, Bob knew that unwarranted invasions of privacy whether suffered by the rich or the poor, could easily undermine well-being, against which protection or at least redress was due. He knew too that press freedom gave a liberal democracy the ability to monitor its institutions and take action once alerted to harmful practices.
Lucky enough to have known Bob for over forty years, in 2011 I was flattered when asked to assist him in preparing an edited collection of his essays. Through the process his mind was as sharp as ever; he remained a master of style in his writing. Opposing Brexit, he composed a new essay on its implications for policy in the UK’s devolved administrations. The whole period of collaboration was a delightful experience, long to be cherished. Up the hill from Westcombe Park station, a light lunch shared; then, either in the garden or up the stairs to Bob’s study, with London sights laid out below, we put in four or so hours of hard work, though never feeling like that. The book happened in 2017 (Social Policy and Welfare Pluralism: Selected Writings of Robert Pinker). But we found other projects to work on so the partnership continued.
Bob’s wife Jennifer died in 1994. He is survived by their two daughters.

John Offer