

AUTUMN 1998

INSIDE:

WELFARE: THE PAST, PRESENT, & FUTURE

SOKAL'S SWIFTIAN SATIRE

THE (IN)COMPATIBILITY OF
ROUSSEAU & OLSON

KANT'S FIRST ANTINOMY

DOSTOEVSKI: LOVE & THE
UNDERGROUND MAN

BOOK REVIEWS

HUMOR



CONFERENCE CONFERENCE CONFERENCE
CONFERENCE CONFERENCE CONFERENCE

**C
O
N
F
E
R
E
N
C
E**

VOLUME 8, No. 1
\$4.00



CONFERENCE

VOLUME 8, No. 1
AUTUMN 1998



CONFERENCE

VOLUME 8, No. 1
AUTUMN 1998

CONFERENCE

TO THE READER:

In your hands is issue one of the eighth volume of Conference. No doubt regular readers will notice three major changes. First, gone are many of the previous editors, some to permanent positions in academia, others to itinerant-adjunct status, a poor, hard spot between a tenure-track position and a high-paying job outside the University. Call it the curse of Herzog.

Second, and more importantly, is the modest shift in content and the addition of structure. Previously, an issue would consist of one interview of some notable thinker...or maybe two, and four or five papers on assorted subjects in philosophy or literature. The best pieces submitted to Conference were those published. Laudable though this be, the result was issues lacking in balance. Aggregation does not a good journal make. One issue might be filled with essays on epistemology while the next might center on topics in post-structuralism. The upshot, obviously, was that a few readers were delighted because the topic *du issue* was their main interest, while all other readers were alienated.

To remedy this, Conference journal has adopted a structure. Each issue will have an interview, book reviews, and sections devoted to philosophy (Philosopher's Corner) and literature (Bard). There also will be a section devoted to current affairs.

Which brings me to the third problem. By focusing so intently on hot topics in philosophy and literature, Conference unnecessarily limited readership. Like so many other scholarly journals, Conference nearly became academic in the pejorative sense, of interest only to those who kept up on these complex, cutting-edge subjects. Worse, by addressing a small clique or two of thinkers, Conference fell in line with the current trend in American universities—specialization to the point of utter fragmentation and discipline-solipsism.

The answer, obviously, is not to dumb down the journal, but to carry these pieces and articles accessible to a broader readership. This will be achieved partly by publishing articles that ask more general questions (e.g., how to make sense of this text?—See Dostoevski: Love & the Underground Man). Moreover, the addition of the Current Affairs section is designed to draw in those studying anthropology, politics, and the myriad other human sciences who are interested in matters beyond their department's walls. Fittingly, the first topics of Current Affairs, welfare reform and discourse between disciplines, are matters we all can ponder and discuss. Hopefully, in reaching out to others in the University on these topics, we can elicit their thoughts on our main subjects, philosophy and literature. Such seems the proper goal for a journal named Conference.

—Kevin R. Kosar

Volume Eight
Number 1
Autumn 1998
ISSN#1072-1894

Executive Editors

Sarah Borden
Fordham

Catherine Jack
Fordham

Kevin R. Kosar
NYU

Edward Rackley
NSSR

Copy Editors

Bruno Agulli
CUNY

Jennifer Horan
CUNY

Layout Artist

Ken Wohlrob

Publisher

Kevin R. Kosar

C ontents

Current Affairs

- 3 Interview with Lawrence M. Mead,
Welfare: Past, Present, and Future
- 9 Sokal's Swiftian Satire:
Scientific Language and Critical Discourse

Philosophers' Corner

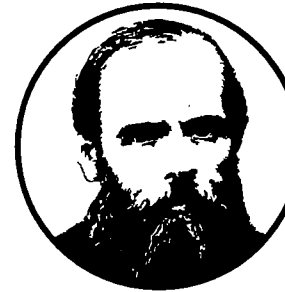
- 23 . . . The (In)compatibility of Olson and Rousseau
- 30 . . . Kant's First Antinomy

Bard

- 42 . . . Dostoevski: Love and the Underground Man

Book Reviews

- 53 . . . A Matter of Interpretation by Antonin Scalia
- 57 . . . True Love: In Pursuit of Cultural Justice
by Andrew Ross



Humor:

- 59 . . . Philosophical Chicken
- 61 . . . Your Tax Dollars At Work

STATEMENT OF MISSION

Conference is an interdisciplinary journal of philosophy and theory produced by graduate students at the City University of New York Graduate Center, Columbia University, Fordham University, the New School for Social Research and New York University. We hold no particular theoretical or policy positions and accept submissions from any school of thought. We encourage submissions in all scholarly, theoretical areas, especially those which either strike new paths or encourage cross-disciplinary discussion. We welcome any students from the New York Consortium universities to join our effort to build a conference across the manifold fields of human inquiry.

SUBMISSIONS TO CONFERENCE

Submissions to Conference should be in triplicate, with a single cover sheet including the author's name, university, department of enrollment, home address and phone number. Submissions should be double-spaced, have endnotes, and ought not exceed twenty pages. Please send submissions or correspondence to: Conference, c/o Department of Politics, Kevin R. Kosar, 715 Broadway, Floor 4, New York, NY 10003.

Those desiring to submit visual art, fiction, or poetry should first submit a letter to the aforementioned address detailing the nature and value of the proposed submission. Anyone desiring to join Conference should also write the above address.

Web site: <http://home.sprynet.com/sprynet/kkosar>

E-mail: kkosar@sprynet.com

Welfare: The Past, Present, and Future

By
Kevin R. Kosar
Department of Politics
New York University

Jesus reportedly said, "The poor will always be with you." For two millennia authorities ecclesiastical and political have differed over how to contend with this brute fact. The way a society treats its poor is very much a function of its perceptions of the poor. If the poor are thought to be vicious and immoral, authorities will drive them from town, jail them, or let them suffer their lot. If the poor are perceived as victims of racial oppression or a downturn in the economy, authorities will offer them assistance.

Such, in a nutshell, is the range of perceptions and corresponding public policy that the United States has taken toward the impoverished. The welfarism which reached its height under Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency has in the past decade fallen into discredit. Now America is vociferously debating a new paradigm for dealing with the presence of the poor. In light of this, Conference is pleased to present this interview with Professor Lawrence M. Mead of New York University's Department of Politics.

Professor Mead teaches public policy and American government. He has been a visiting professor at Harvard, Princeton, and the University of Wisconsin. Professor Mead's expertise is poverty and the politics surrounding the issue. Possessing a wealth of government service experience and the author of numerous articles on the poor, Professor Mead most recently edited, *The New Paternalism: Supervisory Approaches to Poverty*, and *From Welfare to Work: Lessons from America*. Presently he is researching Wisconsin's much-touted workfare program. In 1986 his *Beyond Entitlement: the Social Obligations of Citizenship* was published and instantly set Washington D.C. politicians, policy analysts, and pundits buzzing over its sharp critique of the LBJ model of welfare and its call for a new "paternalistic" model. With over a decade past since its splash, Kevin R. Kosar of NYU asks Professor Mead to reflect on *Beyond Entitlement* and assess the present debate on welfare.

Conference: Why did *Beyond Entitlement* cause such a stir?

Lawrence Mead: I think because it was the first social policy book which focused unambiguously upon the obligations and needs of the poor instead of their rights. The book managed to capture at the theoretical level a mindset that was coming to fruition at the time. The idea being that social policy should be based upon the idea of a social contract where the recipients of welfare do something in return for their benefits. That attitude is very prominent in American public opinion. The idea isn't an original one, but among policy experts I was the first take it seriously and provide a sustained meditation on it.

CF: Precisely what problem does Beyond Entitlement address and what is your remedy?

LM: The thesis is that the American poverty problem is due in large part to the moral character of government social policy. Federal social policy is permissive in character. It gives people benefits but does not expect that they function in ways people normally do in society. Specifically, the government gives money to many people who do not work though they are able to work. And we reward people for behavior that is contrary to their own interests let alone the interests of society. That includes all the behaviors that cause people to become dependent upon government- crime, drug addiction and all the other forms of failure to function.

CF: On what grounds had the debate previously been?

LM: The previous debate was always centered on the scale of the benefits, with the academics and left saying that the poor needed more government benefits and the right saying they needed less. I said the question is not the scale but the character of the benefits given. I wanted people to ask if benefits ought to be given with no strings attached or if they ought require something

from the recipient. I asked that our thinking on these issues go beyond entitlement- entitlement being understood as a government assistance program based solely on income alone without any conditions on behavior.

CF: In *The Dream & the Nightmare*¹, Myron Magnet offers a different take on the poverty problem. His was a cultural thesis, that leftist, elite ideas unleashed during the liberation movements of the 1960's trickled into the minds of a great many of the poor. The libertine life of sex, drugs, and rock and roll results in rampant drug addiction, crime, teenage pregnancy, and fatherless children among the poor. So, Magnet declares, moral renewal is the answer to the problem of the poor.

LM: Yes, Myron believes that the permissive force which leads to the dissolution of inner-cities is popular culture, the ways of living and thinking popularized by Hollywood, the media, and counter-culture thinkers of the 1960's. This culture stresses immediate self-gratification and does not honor virtue. This is why the poor have disproportionately succumbed to crime, drug addiction, unwed pregnancies, and so forth...Now I differ with Myron in that I'm not so sure popular culture is permissive. I agree that Hollywood is permissive, but I've found that social attitudes are conservative about personal behavior.

CF: We hear much of a moral collapse amongst the poor, some like to cite as evidence the great drop in church membership amongst the poor.

LM: Yes, there is something to this thesis. But I also think it has very little to do with public policy. In public policy you need to find levers which government controls. The enforcement of moral values has broken down in the inner cities, but unlike Myron I don't find evidence that the values themselves have dissolved. I don't see people living Bohemian lives because they have taken up these new

permissive values. What I see is people who want to live straight, who don't want to live like Bohemians, but who nonetheless tolerate such behavior in themselves, their families, and others. They tolerate it because they don't feel that they can live the straight life in the situation they are in. So it is not the values that are permissive but the lifestyle which is permissive. It fails to conform to their beliefs. Public institutions have particularly failed in their duty to enforce values. We're not talking about controversial values like abortion or the right to life. We're talking about the work ethic, obedience to the law, staying in school, working for a living, things like this. Those values aren't controversial. Everyone supports them. But the breakdown of public authority has made living according to these values very difficult.

CF: Which institutions are at fault?

LM: Three institutions have failed. Law enforcement has failed to keep people safe, the schools have failed to enforce learning, and the federal government has failed to enforce the work ethic by allowing people to get paid without working.

CF: So there is much to James Q. Wilson's "broken-window theory"- that nobody wants broken windows or quality of life crimes to occur in their neighborhood. However, when they occur, if the criminals are not swiftly punished and the windows repaired, greater crimes follow. Many small transgressions unpunished make the mind receptive to large scale disorders. And so comes a collapse into barbarism.

LM: Yes, and I agree with cultural conservatives who think that enforcing values must also be done by social organizations- churches, civic groups, the family, and other non-public organizations. But I don't think they can do much if the public institutions fail. Some people say that private groups like churches and non-profits groups alone can

bring a moral revival but I think that's a romantic fantasy. They can't do their part unless the public authorities restore order.

CF: Michael Tanner and Marvin Olasky² have blasted public efforts to do what they believe is the job of families, churches, and private groups- that is, minister to the needs of the poor. By usurping this responsibility government has replaced caring neighbors with an indifferent bureaucracy.

LM: I don't accept that government must be a corrupting force and that the private sector can take care of everything. Olasky's study is really about nineteenth-century poverty, when people suffered low wages and needed money to get them back on their feet. Otherwise these were folks with orderly lives. The poverty I'm researching is of a more desperate sort and today is more prevalent than what Olasky is talking about. I study people whose lives lack social order, the poverty we find in modern inner cities. Today the problem is more intense and of far greater magnitude. I do agree with Olasky that the character of outreach to the poor, be it the church or government, has to stress values. Those who seek to help the poor need confront people about their lifestyles and not just hand them checks.

CF: In *Beyond Entitlement* you wrote that government programs define which needs government will meet and which the people themselves must handle. The structure of benefits and obligations required of welfare recipients create an "operational definition of citizenship." Specifically, what obligations have they?

LM: These are very basic and common to all citizens. They include things like paying taxes, obeying the law, speaking English, serving in the military if drafted, serving on juries, and so forth. There are other ones that are not directly enforced but presumed by society. Most prominent is the work ethic. Adults who are not disabled need to be

employed. Public opinion does not demand utter self-reliance. The public is willing to help those who are working but fall short of earning enough to pay for their needs. What the public will not do is pay for those who can but don't work. This is an important point: when I say that certain behaviors should be required for the receipt of benefits, I am not offering my moral prescription for society. This is not personal politics being thrust on others or an attempt at micromanaging people's lives. Rather, these behaviors are the very behaviors most Americans expect. What is needed is governmental action to enforce what the people expect.

CF: Sociologist, William Julius Wilson³ might say that your thesis is all good and fine but ignores a big problem - there are too few jobs for the poor to take.

LM: That's an important criticism that comes from the left. Rather than dispute that people must work for benefits, the Left now claims that the poor can't find work due to lack of jobs or training and education. My later book, *The New Politics of Poverty*, was written in part to answer this charge by William Julius Wilson, David Elwood, and other liberals. The evidence shows that jobs are available.

CF: What of the critique that says the size of the impoverished class is due in large part to their breeding. Specifically, they have far more children than they can support and their offspring do likewise, creating an ever-burgeoning class of the poor. Why not mandate birth control for those who want welfare benefits?

LM: The evidence doesn't support the claim that the poor have large families. Three-quarters of welfare mothers have only one or two children. The average family size amongst the poor might be slightly larger than that of the better off, but not much. Yes, there has been a growth in the numbers of poor in America, but most of that is driven by immigration, specifically from Latin American countries.

CF: How big a problem is unemployment amongst the poor? Some say that drug and alcohol addiction, decrepitude, functional illiteracy, and having to care for young children keep a large number of welfare recipients from being able to work.

Specifically, the government gives money to many people who do not work though they are able to work. And we reward people for behavior that is contrary to their own interests let alone the interests of society.

LM: Perhaps one quarter of poor adults are unable to work at all. Most are able to work at least part time. This is not to say that this three-quarters can make themselves self-sufficient. No doubt some who take work will require supplemental income from government-which Americans support. But they must work.

CF: Should the government create jobs for people? Say, paying them to clean up their communities, picking up garbage, painting over graffiti, acting as posse committatus adjunct to their local police?

LM: Only if the private sector fails to create enough jobs. So far it hasn't.

CF: Philosophically, what is the American understanding of liberty? If it is, as some assert, Hobbesian, in Justice Brandeis' words, "the right to be left alone" (*Olmstead v. United States*, 277 U.S. 438, 1928), then asking

welfare recipients to work for their benefits seems an offense to liberty, a kind of moral mandate coming down from the government.

LM: I believe that liberty for Americans is essentially negative, but of course it is not unqualified. No Anglo-American theorist has ever argued that the citizen owes nothing to the state. Even in Hobbes and Locke the collectivity has the right to restrict individual liberty for the common good.

CF: True, both Hobbes and Locke agreed that the government is obliged to take personal property and redistribute it to those who might become lawless due to material desperation. Locke also advocated that vagrants be put to work and taught the rudiments of morality.

LM: The American mind is libertarian but also accepts that for there to be an economy and political action there needs to be trust. Individuals need to be able to believe that their fellow citizen will not rob them or kill them if they are to engage in common activity. Obligations come with citizenship.

CF: We agonized that nobody helped Kitty Genovese as she was being viciously murdered in the street. This would appear to show that Americans believe we are in some minimal sense our brother's keepers.

LM: Yes. The presence of government agencies which intervene in the lives of people who are being harmed or hurting themselves, like children's services and the agencies that provide assistance to the mentally ill and those addicted to drugs and alcohol, for example, shows that Americans believe they have obligations to tend to others.

CF: What of the American understanding of equality?

LM: Surveys show that Americans don't think of equality in economic terms. Equality to them means that everyone has the same rights and obligations. No matter who you are you should be punished for committing crimes. Everyone has to pay taxes, serve if drafted by the military, and so forth. Academics and intellectuals tend to think that equality should mean equality of income and status. But this isn't what Americans think. Americans are remarkably undisturbed by great disparities in wealth amongst them. What they are disturbed by is unequal treatment by government. For example, they would be deeply offended if rich people got to stand in a quicker line than the rest of us when renewing their driver's licenses. Equality is having the same essential rights and obligations- this unites Americans.

// So it is not the values that are permissive but the lifestyle which is permissive. It fails to conform to their beliefs. //

CF: So, those who can work but don't are failing to participate in the common obligations of American life, thereby placing themselves outside citizenship.

LM: This is what Americans believe. Again, being one of us requires those who can work do so. Taking checks and refusing to work is very offensive to the American way of thinking. Those who do not partake in the obligations of citizenship ought not to partake in the benefits.

CF: In the last decade, how has the debate over welfare changed?

LM: Government has become much more serious about requiring welfare recipients to work. The debate has shifted from the amount recipients are to receive to how to make them full citizens.

CF: Are you in favor of the 'let 50 flowers bloom' approach to welfare, wherein the federal government gives block grants to states and lets them craft welfare policy as they like?

LM: No. My fear is that the money will be handed out as it always has been and nothing will change.

CF: What of the more radical notion that the federal government should get out of welfare altogether and let states handle the problem?

LM: I question whether states can handle the problem. Some states like Wisconsin have great people crafting their policy and are getting good results. Most don't. So I think for the time being the federal government needs to retain a role in creating policy.

CF: To close, what do you see happening to government welfare policy in the near future?

LM: I think things will continue to change in the direction I advocated in *Beyond Entitlement*. No counter evidence has arisen which refutes mine and public opinion is behind it. However, the magnitude of the problem of poverty and reworking the giant government apparatus that deals with it will take time. Progress will be slow and uneven and starting these workfare programs is not easy. **C**

Notes

1 Myron Magnet, *The Dream & the Nightmare: The Sixties Legacy to the Underclass*. (New York, William Morrow & Co., Inc. 1993).

2 Marvin Olasky, *Renewing American Compassion*. (Chicago, Regnery, 1992).
Michael Tanner, *The End of Welfare*. (Washington, D.C., CATO Institute, 1996).

3 This argument was made most recently in William Julius Wilson's, *When Work Disappears*. (New York, Knopf, 1995).

