

Social insurance: proof of concept

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Bob Ball's social insurance vocation inspires across generations. He literally saved Social Security as we know it, with fidelity to Roosevelt's intention: "...The Social Security Act marked a great advance in affording more equitable and effective protection to the people of this country against widespread and growing economic hazards. The successful operation of the Act is the best proof that it was soundly conceived. ...[W]e should be constantly seeking to perfect and strengthen it in the light of our accumulating experience and growing appreciation of social needs."²

Large scale social forces drive the need for social insurance. COVID-19 and widespread economic and social pain underscore systemic institutional sources of inequality by race, ethnicity, class, gender, ability, age, and identities of indigenous and immigrant peoples.³ Pandemics, economic recessions, depressions, mass unemployment, and wars cannot be fixed by the hardiest working individuals. Social stress, poverty, abuse, childhood trauma, unsafe neighborhoods, and low educational status may deplete and hasten cellular mutations, illness, death, and poor life quality.

The state, the market, and policy are deeply implicated in social insurance and its cumulative advantages and disadvantages. The segregated origins of Social Security⁴ reflect the early exclusion of black and brown workers, stunting opportunities and economic and health security. Women were recognized in their traditional (white) nuclear family. Over time this has locked out recognition of women of color, single motherhood, and no- or low-wage carework. Women's reproductive labor is not counted as work.

"Individual responsibility" narratives occlude systemic racism and sexism residing in present social insurance, as Hacker's *Great Risk Shift* documents.⁵ Herd and Moynihan's *Administrative Burden*⁶ depicts the stigma, criminalization, welfare ungenerosity, and cruel quirks. Individual self-esteem, opportunity, and "take-up" of benefits by those earning and needing them are depressed.

Deconstruction of the Social characterizes the processes that detach risk and responsibility from the larger force fields in which they are co-constructed and embedded. Ideals of social citizenship are deformed through discourses of dirty "aliens," blocking inclusion and citizenship paths. Social differences harden into concrete structural racial and gender divisions. Payroll tax caps, "waiting" for benefits (e.g., disability) to kick in, and erosions in minimum benefits foreclose savings and possible wealth creation for the 96 percent.

Political attacks against the idea of "entitlement" undermine trust in government except as a last resort, also promoting thought censorship.⁷ Welfare becomes Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) through safety-net



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sabotage. Child poverty and food insecurity haunt families as income, wealth, and health inequities spiral. A 2016 Federal Survey of Consumer Finances shows that an astounding 37 percent of blacks and 33 percent of Hispanics had *zero or negative net worth*.⁸ “Systemic and structural racism,” “extreme poverty,” “deaths of desperation,” and “white privilege” become vocabularies of motive for ejecting the *status quo*.

Social insurance is commitment to social and individual responsibilities, sanctioned by law, norms, mutuality and community. “Tough times require strong Social Security benefits.” Rockey Moore presents a plan for African Americans, Hispanic and white Americans.⁹ Social Security is 90 percent of income of more than half of Hispanics and similar high percentages of older blacks and Asians. “*Social Adequacy*” is a guiding measure of the income to provide for the basic needs of the protected population. “The intergenerational compact” describes “the fundamental obligation of the government and citizens of one time and the government and citizens of another time to maintain a contributory social insurance system.”¹⁰

Re-constructing social insurance equity and justice pathways is possible, as think-tanks, actuaries and scholars know. The Social Security Administration (SSA) (1) delivers millions of beneficiary checks on-time, despite hurricane, wind and fire; and (2) contrary to hype, SSA and CMS (Medicare and Medicaid’s agency) can *turn on a dime* activating the small tweaks and radical rule changes by presidential fiat and other power sources.

Social Security and Medicare offer founding principles, space and place for provisions, metrics of re-imagined systemic and structural change – the *potentia*¹¹ of which has been previously non-existent, unthinkable. Poverty under Social Security is an anachronism, abhorrent. Highly contentious, Social Security formulae for COLAs and poverty are unrealistically low. Shorter life expectancy, longer disability, widowhood and children intensify the preeminence of social insurance as a societal asset for people of color through reinstatement of student benefits, crediting lost caregiving “zero years,” universal family and medical leave, long term care and social supports (LTSS), and child care.

Hillary Clinton: “Women’s rights are human rights.”¹² Economic vulnerability is harshest for women of color, single mothers, and intergenerational caregivers. Women “#SayHerName.”¹³ See: *Building Bridges, Not Walking on Backs: A Feminist Recovery Plan for COVID-19*.¹⁴

Movements for opening the Medicare window include eligibility for those age 50, “buy-ins,” universal coverage, expanded Federal-state Medicaid, and rescuing Parts C and D (managed care and drug benefit).

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Millions of jobs are produced and protected by the spending and economic cycling of earned Social Security benefits by American workers and families. Last year Social Security paid out approximately \$1 trillion dollars in benefits, which generated approximately \$1.9 trillion dollars in 2019 US economic activity. State and local economies increasingly depend on this beneficiary spending.¹⁵ Medicare and Medicaid add \$1.5 trillion for insurers, hospitals, clinics, home care and nursing homes and health workers, which cycles through the economy generating additional trillions in health spending. But unlike Social Security, which provides direct payments to beneficiaries, the multi-billions of dollars that flow through Medicare and Medicaid are siphoned off as profits and excess compensation to medical-industrial complex stakeholders. Current policy imposes the unacceptable structural and systemically induced unfairness between the haves, the have nots and the have mores.

The social insurance *proof of concept* is the continuity, stability and security of the reciprocal social compact between governments and promised guaranteed earned benefits to which we contribute across our lifetimes and generations. Universal risk pooling corresponds to the urgency of re-engaged social citizenship. Instantiation of rights-based frameworks seek systemic and structural means to human dignity, equality, opportunity, and democracy. Silent dialogues of discriminations scream out in raised voices everywhere.

Race, ethnicity, class, genders, disabilities, age, indigenous, native and immigrant peoples require recognition. Privatization robs the land, air, water, nature resources (the commons belonging to all of us), and the fruits of our labor. Time's up to end what the Rev. William J. Barber calls "policy violence."¹⁶

ENDNOTES

1. For concepts and references, cf. C. L. Estes, with N. B. DiCarlo (2019), *Aging A-Z: Concepts Toward Emancipatory Gerontology*. NY: Routledge. <https://tinyurl.com/yb5bv8x> and Rogne, Estes et al, Eds. (2009), *Social Insurance and Social Justice*. NY: Springer.

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2. <https://www.ssa.gov/history/fdrstmts.html#liberal>
3. Estes with DiCarlo 2019, op. cit.
4. <https://www.amazon.com/Segregated-Origins-Social-Security-Americans/dp/0807856886>

5. <https://jacobhacker.com/the-great-risk-shift.html>
6. https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07JKDKXZM/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1
7. Estes, Rogne 2009, op. cit.
8. <https://wid.world/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/020-Wolff.pdf>
9. <http://globalpolicysolutions.org/resourcetype/reports/>
10. ssa.gov/history/brown3.html
11. As in *Scientia est potentia* = Knowledge is power.
12. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_rights_are_human_rights
13. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SayHerName>
14. Hawai'i State Commission on the Status of Women: www.humanservices.hawaii.gov/hscsw/
15. <http://socialsecurityspotlight.org/>
16. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-poor-peoples-campaign-calls-out-policy-violence/>