

Richard Titmuss: Forty years on

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Editorial note and Acknowledgements

The content of this paper was originally delivered as the Richard Titmuss Memorial Lecture on October 23rd 2013 at the London School of Economics. I should like to thank those who attended for their contributions to the discussion afterwards. A podcast can be downloaded at

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/player.aspx?id=2066>

A collection of Titmuss' work together with commentaries on it can be found in Alcock, Glennerster, Oakley and Sinfield (2001).

Professor Glennerster taught in Professor Titmuss' department at the LSE during Titmuss' lifetime. He has been a member of CASE since its inception and is a previous Chairman of STICERD. He is now Professor Emeritus at LSE and a CASE associate.

Abstract

Richard Titmuss was one of the world's leading public analysts and philosophers. He was highly influential in shaping the post-war welfare state and created the subject we now call social policy. What would he make of the present state of welfare? This lecture reflects on the man and the times which shaped his ideas. What is his legacy forty years on from his death? Which of his ideas have lasted and which have proved less durable? What gaps were there in his world view?

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In Spring Term 1973 I had just returned from sabbatical leave in Washington DC – a visit arranged with Richard’s help. I found him a changed man, frail and in the last stages of cancer but determined to complete that term’s lecture course.

We knew that these lectures would be his last. It was standing room only if you were not early in E171. I remember him talking about his regular hospital visits, his chats with ‘Bill’ – a fellow patient, ‘blown up in the desert by Rommel’ and a passionate gardener, like Richard. (These lectures were posthumously reproduced in *Social Policy: An Introduction*, Titmuss, 1974.)

This chance relationship encapsulated for Titmuss what the National Health Service was all about. A university professor and a disabled soldier treated in neighbouring beds. There was no health insurer’s limit on Bill’s right to care – no pre-existing condition clause.

Who was Titmuss?

Some myths about his early life were dispelled by Ann Oakley, his daughter, at the Social Policy Association conference this summer. He did not come from a *bankrupted* farming family, for example. But he *did* leave school at 14/15. He took a course in book keeping at a local commercial college. He became an office boy and then a clerk in a life insurance firm.

His small earnings were necessary to sustain his mother and younger brother and sister when his father died shortly afterwards. So it was a pretty unpromising start to life. What followed through the 1930s was a journey of self-education, work with the Eugenics Society and writing that was gaining increasing notice. He was fascinated by the relationship between social conditions, fertility and health. He formed a close friendship with the epidemiologist Jerry Morris, which lasted for the rest of his life. A few weeks of book keeping lessons were, therefore, all the formal post school education Titmuss ever received.

He was asked to join the Cabinet Office in 1942 and write the official history of social policy during the Second World War – an inspired and somewhat surprising choice by the economic historian leading that group writing the ‘Civil histories’ of the war – Prof Hancock.

The resulting official history, *Problems of Social Policy*, was published in 1950. It has never been effectively challenged as *the* history of social policy for that period (Titmuss 1950) – an extraordinary achievement for someone with no formal academic training. It led to his being chosen to fill the first chair in Social Administration here at the LSE also in 1950.

The theme of that war history was to recur throughout his subsequent writing – how did a society that was under such pressure hold together? What makes those living in modern societies feel some kind of common identity?

Titmuss simply did not recognise academic boundaries. He had not been initiated into any of them. Yet there he was, observing policy at the very heart of a powerful centralised state in a period of total war. **Now, it seems to me that these two features of Titmuss' early career – his lack of a disciplinary training and his place at the heart of a powerful central state shaped his life's work.**

His circle

But Titmuss' legacy is also the legacy of the close group he collected around him. T.H. Marshall – his predecessor in many ways here at the LSE – wrote an appreciation of Titmuss' life in the *British Journal of Sociology* shortly after he died. He said:

‘...he had a flair for selecting brilliant colleagues, and his impressive assurance and magnetic personality ... made them readily accept his invitation to join him and what soon became to be recognised as his circle’. (Marshall 1973)

His circle included Brian Abel-Smith, Peter Townsend, and David Donnison. Each became international figures in their own right. Brian Abel-Smith was a health economist and policy advisor to successive ministers of health in many countries and to the World Health Organisation (WHO). Peter Townsend redefined poverty and our whole approach to disability and much else. David Donnison was an international housing expert and again much more. Tony Lynes, who is here tonight and Mike Reddin, who died recently, were his research assistants. Between them that group produced work that shaped British social legislation for the best part of 20 years.

In researching Peter Townsend's life recently I came across a note in his diary written after a supper with Richard and his wife Kay in their Ealing home. Peter had applied for a job in the department and, I think, had just landed it. Townsend wrote:

‘We all like to think we can be critical of our own society. (but) Richard asks questions about things everyone else accepts. It is this and his integrity, rather than mental brilliance...which makes him the one surgeon under whom I want to practice.’ (1 August 1956) (Glennerster 2011)

I discussed Titmuss' contribution with David Donnison recently. He said something similar but with a qualification:

‘Richard gave us license to be critical. But this criticism had its limits. You would not be expected to call in question the welfare state in its entirety.’

All embracing

Above all Titmuss took an all-embracing view of the subject. I remember being summoned to his room at the top of the East Building shortly after being appointed to the Department in the summer of 1968. Rather nervously I asked ‘What part of social policy am I to teach this autumn?’ Fixing me with those piercing eyes of his he said: ‘Howard you can never teach *part* of social policy – it has to be taught as a single whole’. And that is what he practiced.

So for those of us who fell under his spell all those years ago the significance of his contribution seemed obvious. But what does it look like now seeing it from the perspective of 40 years?

The legacy and the critics

Richard had his critics when he was alive both on the left and the right of politics and his work has attracted more critics since his death.

Marxist writers, like John Saville (1957), argued that social policy was an inadequate instrument to combat the degrading effects of being poor. It could never seriously dent the major forces at work in the wider economy. It was, he said, merely:

‘the 20th century version of the Victorian ideal of self-help’. (p25)

Indeed, a whole branch of social policy calling itself ‘critical social policy’ sprang up, critical, largely, of the Titmussian tradition.

At the other extreme there was the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) whose hostility to Richard’s ideas brought them to the verge of the law courts on more than one occasion. This contest between Richard and the IEA has been finely documented by the French economist Philippe Fontaine. It is clear from Fontaine’s study that the IEA saw him as a major threat (Fontaine 2002). Ben Jackson, at Jose Harris’ festschrift in Oxford recently, argued that Titmuss was the first academic to take on the IEA in a really serious way (Jackson, forthcoming).

Later critics emerged from within the social policy community itself. Bob Pinker was critical of Richard’s brand of social administration (Pinker 1971; 1979). It was too prescriptive and it was too dismissive of any kind of market exchange. Yet, social policy depended for its revenue on the success of that despised economic sector, Bob Pinker pointed out.

Others argued that Titmuss’ determination to reduce the stigma of receiving social security benefits had been naïve, ignoring the incentives to game the system. David Reisman (1977) in his book on Titmuss remarked:

‘The severest criticism of Titmuss on selection without stigma is that it would be easier to realise...if every man were Titmuss’ (p109).

Or take Frank Field's comment:

'the (sinful) fallen side of mankind was written out of the script.'

Hence Titmuss' 'paradigm was built on sand' (Field 1997).

Or there was the more balanced critique on the same lines by Alan Deacon (1993). In a paper entitled 'Richard Titmuss – twenty years on' he argued that in his determination to remove stigma and encourage access to benefits he underestimated the dangers of cheating and free riding.

Now, I think it is simply wrong to assume that Titmuss was unconcerned about the perverse incentives welfare policy could produce if it was badly framed or administered. That was precisely his objection to extensive means testing – it was a disincentive to work and saving.

Moreover, the Supplementary Benefits Commission, of which he became deputy chairman, ran Re-Establishment Centres for the long term unemployed 'designed to revive the will to work' with required attendance, programmes of training and help to establish a pattern of work attendance in wayward dependants. Receiving Supplementary benefit was conditional on attendance and they achieved at least a 50% success rate on first attendance. I never heard Titmuss object. On the contrary it was the skill and understanding with which that was done that mattered. Hence the time he devoted to the quality of training these supplementary benefit officers received. As staff in the department we were all expected to attend DHSS summer schools helping do that.

Moreover, it is important to remember that this was a time of strong demand for labour. Overall unemployment was running at no more than one per cent of the work force and long term unemployment well below that. If you took into account those who suffered long term recurrent illness, the numbers were tiny. As a result there was powerful external social pressure to take a job. If you were unemployed, you were likely to be the only man on the block. Large scale unemployment in whole communities returned only a decade after Titmuss died. The task of requiring genuine job search to be eligible for benefit became a much bigger problem. Those difficulties cannot be primarily laid at Titmuss' door.

But a much more fundamental criticism has been levelled at Titmuss by those more generally sympathetic to his cause. Titmuss never managed to piece together a coherent theory of welfare.

Ramesh Mishra, in a book published twenty years ago, argued that mainstream social policy – Titmuss and his circle – had never managed to advance a 'centrist theory' that could compare in its rigour to that advanced either by Marxists or the free market liberals (Mishra 1984). Others reached similar conclusions in the 1980s and 1990s by different routes (Plant, Lesser and Taylor-Gooby 1980; Harris 1992; 1996). There was no convincing political theory underpinning his work they claimed.

More recently John Offer saw *strands* of 19th century idealism in Titmuss' work but implies that he never really managed to knit a completely convincing well-fitting jumper from them (Offer 2006). Titmuss' theoretical stance was 'elusive' as Ben Jackson (forthcoming) puts it in the paper I have mentioned already.

I want to question this 'no theory' charge that has been made over the years.

Titmuss' justification for social policy.

So what was Titmuss' basic framework of ideas? What was new about it? How well has it survived?

I use the phrase 'a basic framework of ideas' because I grant the critics the argument that he advanced no tightly framed, fully developed academic theory. The origins that I described earlier may explain it. Perhaps he was too busy running a department for many years and he died too early. But he did provide, I would argue, a framework that has stood the test of time and led others to develop it. It is now more theoretically robust and we can see its virtues more clearly 40 years on.

For me the strength of Richard's framework is that it was based on three foundations – three legs if you will. It was in part unabashedly *moral*, in part *political and institutional* and in part *economic*. Previous justifications for social policy had rested on one or at most two of these legs. I, for one, would rather rest on a three legged stool than a two legged one let alone a one legged one.

The crucial *third leg* that Titmuss supplied was economic. And it resulted, I think importantly, from Titmuss' long working partnership with Brian Abel-Smith. *His* biography is to be published next month (Sheard, 2013). Brian Abel-Smith was a young Cambridge economist who worked initially for the National Institute for Economic and Social Research. He combined with Titmuss to produce the economic evidence for the Guillebaud Committee (1956) on the cost of the National Health Service which reported in 1956. That collaboration became a life time partnership.

Titmuss began to set out the *moral* case in his 1951 inaugural lecture and extended it in the 'Social Division of Welfare' lecture four years later (Titmuss 1958, Chapters 1 and 2).

All individuals, he claimed, have 'basic needs' and 'necessary mutual relations' that arise by virtue of belonging to a given community. To deny individuals access to these 'needs' and 'relations' demeaned them, reduced their individuality, and caused 'social and psychological distress.' These needs depended to some degree on the nature of the society to which an individual belonged but would surely include adequate shelter, having enough income not to be excluded from the crucial life of that society, to have sufficient education to be able to gain work and act as an informed citizen, to have

access to health care and to enjoy a safe home life. This gave rise to all kinds of debates about the list of needs and how to measure them.

But Titmuss argued these ‘needs’ could not be set in stone nor deduced from philosophical first principles. It was the task of academic social administrators to expose them to public discussion and to ascertain what distress their absence caused. That had to be matched by convincing the public that they were prepared to meet the cost of supporting those needs. That must be a continuous informed political process.

Moreover, a simple law to require that such a need was met would not be enough. The way it was delivered was crucial. It had to be non-judgemental and non-stigmatic. Unless it was so administered it would not relieve ‘social and psychological distress.’ That was an argument about institutional quality.

How does one illustrate that last point? In one lecture I remember he described a recent visit he had made to a recipient of supplementary benefit in his capacity as deputy chair of the Supplementary Benefits Commission (our present Income Support system or something like it). She was about to give birth and an official told her that a pram would be supplied under the Commission’s discretionary powers.

‘Her face lit up... ..It would of course be a reconditioned second hand pram, the official explained. Her face fell’.

In future, Titmuss said, the Commission should make a single payment to such mothers to enable them to purchase a pram themselves.

Profligate, naïve, too inviting for cheats...or a sensitive judgement? I leave you to judge. But for me it was pure Titmuss. He would have said: ‘If someone *is* eligible for help, treat them with respect.’

Now it is perfectly true that Titmuss never rigorously defined ‘need’ – not least I think precisely because he saw it as a moving, evolving target. But over the past forty years others have dug deeper foundations for that concept. For me Len Doyal and Ian Gough (1991) began to do that seriously over twenty years ago in their book *A Theory of Human Need*.

Amartya Sen (1985; 1993; 2009), in a different version of the same endeavour, elaborated a set of ‘capabilities’ – ‘valuable things that people can do and be’ that he claimed are crucial to an individual’s identity and freedom (though it was not immune from criticism from those within social policy, Dean 2009).

Polly Vizard and Tania Burchardt here at the LSE have linked Sen’s ideas with the notion of basic human rights and investigated how people actually interpret these notions. (Vizard 2006; Burchardt and Vizard 2011)

However, what remains uniquely Titmuss for me is his insistence that it is not enough to establish a theoretical ‘need’ or a right in some law. It is essential to study the

human dignity with which that law is interpreted or service administered - institutional quality.

So let us move on to Titmuss' *second leg* – the political theory leg if you will. A government that ensured those basic needs were met with humanity would inspire confidence in its political system and hence cement good governance. That in its turn would make democracy viable.

I think that is the message that pervades Titmuss' official history of the Second World War (Titmuss 1950) which is an overlooked and unappreciated book. In it we have repeated reflections on the collective action taken during the War to secure the population's needs.

Government, he said:

'assumed a measure of direct concern for the health and well-being of the population which...by contrast with that in the 1930s was little short of remarkable. No longer did concern rest on the belief that, in respect to many social needs, it was proper to intervene only to assist the poor but almost all classes of society.' (1950, p506)

As a result, he pointed out, infant mortality and still births actually declined in war in a way they had not in peace. Why did this happen?

I quote, again:

'Regular employment, regular sums for housekeeping, food, clothes and other necessities, stable prices – all this, not for a period of weeks, but years.' (1950, p532)

Some had predicted social collapse in the face of nightly bombing and shortages. That did not happen, the social fabric held, and it held, Titmuss suggests, because the population's basic needs had been met.

Now I think the role of the state in all this may have been overstated. Individuals' own guts and bloody mindedness played a large part. All kinds of other glue exist which bind societies together not just state institutions – families, neighbours, local churches, voluntary organisations, trade unions indeed. I do not think Titmuss really disagreed with that. But his contention was that a shared sense of social justice was a necessary *condition* for those other binding agents to work. Without it, these other ties – religion, local community loyalties – can become disuniting, even murderous. The history of Northern Ireland in the past 40 years is but one example. Titmuss did not much use the term social justice. Rawls' 'Social Justice' was only published in the year before Titmuss' death and he commended to his students in that last series of lectures.

But again for Titmuss a sense of justice came not merely from 'fair allocations', in Rawlsian terms, but from the nature of the institutions doing the work. Those institutions had to foster 'mutual relations'.

That theme was elaborated in the *Gift Relationship* – a study of the national blood donation service and international alternatives. A national blood donation service:

‘allowed people the choice to give or not to give to unseen strangers. [a market in blood by contrast] would set people free from the conscience of obligation’. (Titmuss 1970, p159).

Joan Costa-Font and colleagues (2013) have shown in a recent paper that more people in many countries are prepared to give blood driven by the ‘warm glow of giving’ than respond to cash payment as an inducement. Other kinds of non-monetary incentives do help – recognition meeting travel costs – but that does not refute Titmuss’ case.

To put it more generally – we do not give up our time to help out in Tesco’s or Barclays Bank out of love or duty. We *do* do so in large numbers to help at the local hospital and the local school, and for local charities, citizens’ advise bureau and many other not for profit agencies.

So be *very very careful* with institutions that generate altruism.

Michael Sandel, Professor of Government at Harvard, draws on Titmuss’ work and ends his recent book *What Money Can’t Buy* by saying:

‘Democracy does not require perfect equality, but it does require that citizens share in a common life’ (Sandel 2012, p203).

Exactly Titmuss’ argument.

This brings me to the *third economic leg* of Titmuss’ three pronged argument. Markets have severe limits especially in those parts of the economy that finance our basic needs. Titmuss and Abel-Smith pointed to a series of such market failures long before economists showed much or indeed any interest in them. Let me list just some of them.

- Most of us are bad at thinking about the future – especially planning for retirement or long term care. We need some help or compulsion to do so in our own interests. Behavioural economists have recently developed a whole body of literature on this summarised in the Turner Commission Report (2004, p208) and in the recent House of Lords Committee on Ageing (2013, Annex 6).
- Pension companies handle people’s investments in ways that are not understood by contributors. Hence pension funds can charge exorbitant administrative overheads and massively undervalue the pensions they offer. Titmuss gave a Fabian Lecture about this in 1959. *The Irresponsible Society* he called it (Titmuss 1976). We now have a whole economic literature on this and scandals to attest to it.
- He saw that employers play a crucial role in providing welfare – pensions, sickness benefit, but *only for some*. If that was not to be a source of major

inequity, the state should make sure minimum occupational benefits were available to all.

- The Turner Commission's proposals for pension reform were based on precisely that logic (Turner Commission Second Report 2005).
 - And of course precisely the same arguments underpin Obama Care.
- There is the whole question of tax reliefs to which he drew attention in 1954. You paid less tax if you had children or were buying a house on a mortgage or were contributing to a pension scheme. The problem was that this gave disproportionately large gains to higher income groups. At its height owner occupied tax relief amounted to over 1% of the GDP. The more expensive your mortgage and the higher income you had the more of that large sum you got. Only a decade and a half later did economists begin to catch up with idea – they called it 'tax expenditure' and began to put it in budget and public expenditure white papers. Mortgage tax relief only ceased in 2000. Pension tax relief continues though is being capped. The introduction of tax relief for marriage proposed by the present Chancellor suggests the lesson is being unlearned.
- Finally a key insight in many ways. There is a major imbalance in information between health insurers and the insured and between givers of blood and the authorities collecting it, let alone the recipients. Yet markets need good information on both sides of the market. It was a more general insight that led George Akerlof to produce a market failure theorem from the 'market for lemons' – the second hand car market in American slang. It gained him, along with other work, a Nobel Prize (Akerlof 1970). And where was Akerlof at the time of writing this piece – well, a junior lecturer in the Economics Department here at the LSE! There is no evidence either knew what the other was doing or saying.

In short, Titmuss was between two to five decades ahead of the game in most of these economic arguments or was at least in the front line. I can almost see his rueful grin if he were now to be told that his ideas have been followed up above all by economists.

To have begun shaping any *one* of these three legs – moral, political and economic – would have been a considerable achievement. But what is the key to Titmuss' corpus of work is that these three elements link into a single framework.

We now understand much more clearly that:

- Individual freedoms, markets and economic prosperity depend on trusted legal systems, secure contracts and stable governments.
- But these in turn depend on governments ensuring that morally central aspects of life are not denied to any type or class of citizens.
- And that cannot be achieved without governments involving themselves in the means by which those 'needs'/rights are met. Markets alone will not do it.
- None of that will happen if government action is targeted exclusively on the poor.

‘...separate discriminatory services for poor people have always tended to be poor quality services’

probably Titmuss’ most widely quoted or misquoted saying (1967 lecture on ‘Welfare and wellbeing’ to the British National Conference on Social Welfare, Alcock et al 2001.)

Robust over time

So my claim is that Titmuss did begin a compelling framework of middle ground ideas that has effectively evolved over these forty years. In contrast, it seems to me, T.H. Marshall’s contribution has aged. The steady march of citizenship rights he charted was not really explained and stopped in 1948. Beveridge has a different claim to fame. He captured the public mood in his famous report. He was in the right place at the right time and took that opportunity brilliantly. But an originator of new ideas – no. Moreover, Marxism has lost its appeal precisely because its prescriptions did not work. And our faith in unbridled markets has surely taken a knock.

Not entirely right either

However, that does not mean that Titmuss was entirely right either. Nor that his circle agreed with everything he wrote.

He said little about gender, or about family policy or the role of the voluntary sector. Odd perhaps given his emphasis on giving. Nor did he discuss caring or its social and economic importance. Nor indeed did he ever say much about education. But all of these themes *have* been taken up by a second generation of social policy writers. And in ways that seem to me consistent with the framework he set.

But there are times when Titmuss seems to be implying that *all* ‘economic’ or market relations, are evil and only public service ones are good. There is in Titmuss’ writing a rather unspoken presumption in favour of the virtues of state monopolies. Yet for anyone who has studied at first hand hospitals services or local housing departments or the relations between health and social care agencies that is really difficult to sustain.

It was a presumption which some colleagues came increasingly to question. David Donnison worried about local authorities as virtual monopoly landlords in many poor areas. Brian Abel-Smith worried about the weak clout that public service users had. He set his worries out in a Fabian pamphlet published just before the 1964 election. In a world of growing consumer choice, he argued, denying choices to public service users would lose middle class support and without that you could not sustain universal services. Service quality would suffer.

‘If we were all saints we would not need...the threat to withdraw (our) custom...But we are not.’ (Abel-Smith 1964)

So long before Julian Le Grand talked of public servants as ‘knights and knaves’ Brian was there making the same point with saints!

There are parts of Titmuss’ own work that lead me to suspect he might have developed the same concerns. Take the history of child evacuation in the Second World War. Titmuss describes two phases. The first evacuation was centrally planned and executed. Whole schools were evacuated together with their teachers. The local school children had school in their own buildings in the morning, say, and the evacuees in the afternoon. My wife and I can both remember watching a crocodile of evacuee children approaching down our street. In ones and twos they were allocated to houses as they passed. Two *girls* arrived in our house I remember – horrors.

It was all a great logistical success. But many evacuees subsequently drifted home. In the next round of evacuation the government introduced a scheme of travel vouchers that families could use to enable them to make their own arrangements with relatives and friends in designated safe areas. The hosts would be paid for the cost of looking after the ‘fostered’ children. It was more popular and effective. Titmuss thought it sensible.

In one of his essays Titmuss worried about the growing power of hospital consultants to determine who did and did not get treatment. Before the war, he pointed out, consultants had been partly dependent on GPs for their income – the result of GPs referring patients to them. Abel-Smith reminded me of this passage when I was studying GP fundholding.

In the recent past governments have introduced a whole range of incentives to try to improve the standards of poorly performing public agencies. They include:

- giving users wider choices of school or hospital;
- introducing new providers to challenge existing ones;
- publishing quality rankings for hospitals and schools and ambulance services.

There is some evidence these do work in improving the performance of the poorest performers. But badly done they can have perverse effects.

I think the best we can say is that we are still stumbling towards understanding *what* mix of sticks and carrots, choice and altruism is optimal. But a debate about how to strike that balance is exactly what Titmuss would be asking us to have.

I was searching my bookshelves recently for some classic texts to give my grandson to read in his gap year. At his request I hasten to add! I happened to pull down Malthus’ 1798 ‘First Essay on Population’. I had marked, long ago, the passage on the poor laws. It read:

‘...dependent poverty ought to be held disgraceful. Such a stimulus seems to be absolutely necessary to promote the happiness of the great mass of mankind.’

Titmuss fought that view all his life. It is a battle that still has to be won.

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