

NOAM CHOMSKY
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Utne Reader

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*Philippine Crisis, Adult Kids of Alcoholics,
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THERE'S
NO
PLACE LIKE
HOME

Have you found yours?

Bioregionalism
& the politics
of place



Wesley

Social services and the poor: Who needs who?

JOHN L. McKNIGHT
PUBLIC WELFARE

The desire to give, to help, to care and to serve other people is natural and noble. To make a living out of serving others is a dream come true for many Americans in our service economy. But as we build institutions and professions to serve the welfare of those in need, we may be doing more to perpetuate need than relieve it. In the following articles, John L. McKnight wonders whose interests are really served by the service professions, while Ram Dass and Paul Gorman consider how serving others can serve the server.

*McKnight is a professor of communication studies and urban affairs at Northwestern University. Ram Dass (a.k.a. Richard Alpert) is the former Harvard professor who collaborated with Timothy Leary on early psychedelic experiments and then greatly influenced American spiritual thinking with his book *Be Here Now*. Paul Gorman is a radio talk-show host on WBAI-FM, New York.*

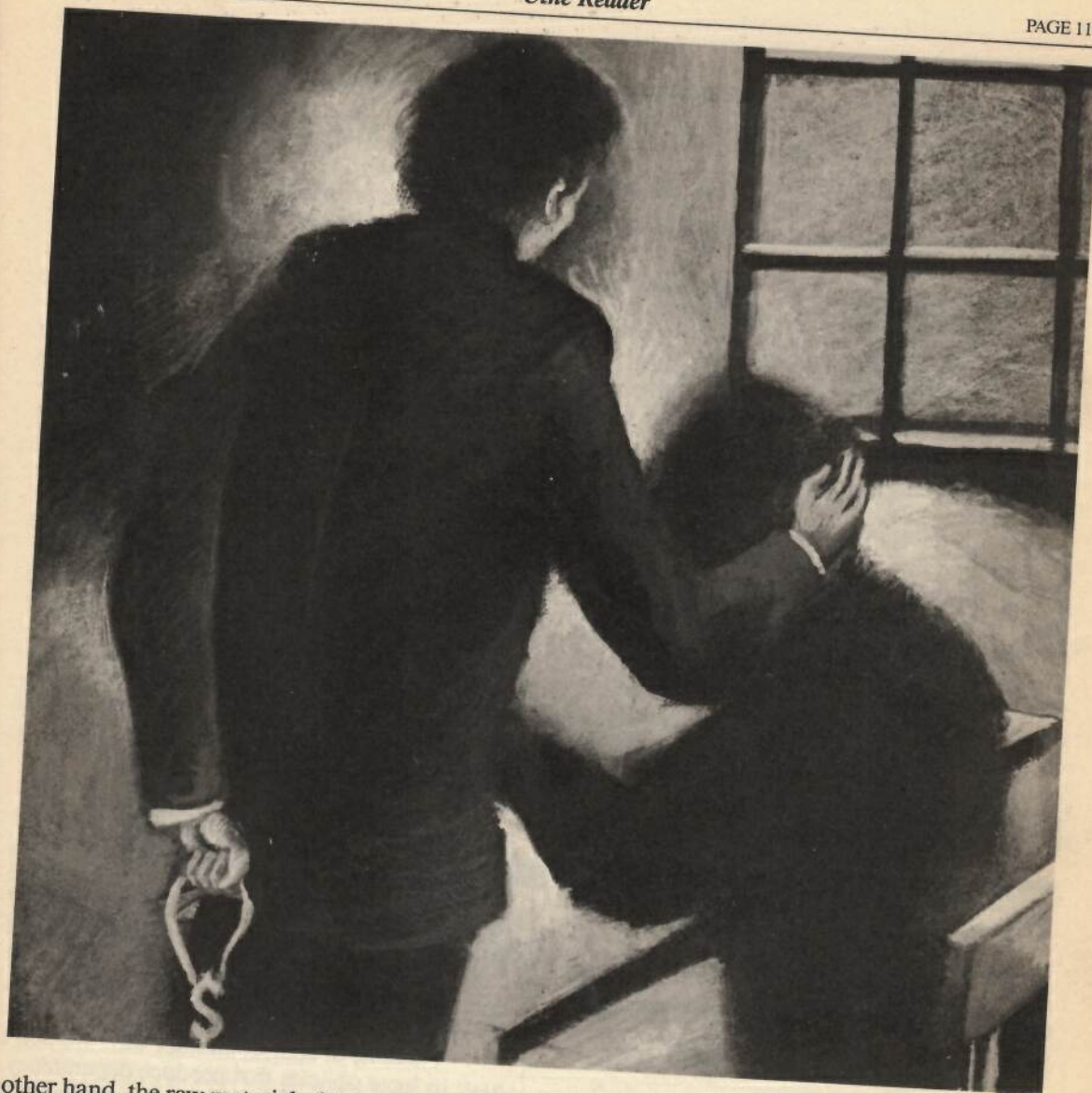
We are now living in a new age—the service economy. As a working people, we are no longer wheat stackers, steel makers and hog butchers. We are doctors, teachers, clerks, social workers, insurance agents and bureaucrats. As a million people each year move from the production of goods to service, the service industry requires more raw material—more need. More clients. ¶ This shift in the nature of work—the movement to a service economy—may be the most important change that we’ve experienced in our century. If some of the labor economists’ projections are correct, by the year 2000, 90 percent of the paid workers in this country will produce services and 10 percent produce goods. In the 120 years between 1880 and 2000, America will have changed from a society in which two out of ten paid workers produce services to one in which nine out of ten paid workers produce services. ¶ Most of us believe that there is no limit to how much service we can produce. If service is an expression of care, then certainly it is clear that you can never care enough. There may be a limit to how many automobiles you can make or use, but there seems to be no limit to how much care and service you can produce. ¶ We recognize that there is a limit to the goods we can produce because the raw materials are limited. The raw materials of the steel industry are coal, lime and iron. We know these resources are finite. On the

other hand, the economy is human needs are the try.

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other hand, the raw material of the service economy is human need. Our *deficiencies* and unmet needs are the ore and coal of the service industry.

Thus, the servers called teachers need students. But as their raw material declines, as the baby boom drops off, what are they to do? How can they justify their work in the same numbers as the child population decreases? One answer is to "discover" new needs, unperceived needs, unmet needs—or the need for "life-long learning."

Consider American law schools. In the next three years, they will produce 127,000 lawyers, increasing by 25 percent the number of licensed attorneys. What is the need—the raw material—for their industry? What will all of

The service economy requires more and more raw material—more need. More clients.

these new lawyers say you need that you didn't know you needed?

The service economy presents a dilemma: that is the *need for need*. As a million people each year move from goods to service production, the service industry requires more raw material—more need. We can now see that "need" requires

us to discover more human deficiencies.

I have recently observed two examples of this discovery of new human need. At a conference on service to the elderly I met a person being trained as a bereavement counselor. She will receive a master's degree in order to help people through their grief after they have lost a loved one—for a fee.

How many people in the United States are feeling they have a "need" for that bereavement counselor? Certainly people grieve; it is a hurt that people have suffered for eons. But does that grief constitute a need for service? Or does the bereavement counselor need that hurt more than the person in grief needs her help?

Another example is a person I recently met in a Canadian city: he is a recluse manager. This service was developed when a recluse died and no one found him until 14 days later. A newspaper photographer took a picture of the room where he lived. People were shocked, and the result was the conversion of his death into a need. The local government created a committee of officials who decided to respond to the need his death created. They recommended that the city create a new service—recluse management. The committee also wrote a manual that now guides recluse managers. It tells the managers how to find recluses, how to observe them without their

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knowing they are being observed, and when to intervene in their lives.

Does the person in grief or the recluse "need" service? Or does the service economy need grief and recluses? Considering the gross national product as an indicator of the national well-being, the answer is clear. If kin deal with grief, it will never be counted as a product. If a bereavement counselor deals with the grief, our gross national product will increase. If an old man dies and is undiscovered for 14 days, he is worthless. If a recluse manager controls his death, the service economy will count his death as a product of value.

The service economy presents a dilemma: the need for need.

In the city of Chicago where I work, the neighborhoods are falling down around us. People need work and a decent income. While there is less and less money for the poor, there are more bereavement counselors and recluse managers—more and more servicers who need the poor. We may soon reach the point where there are more people in Chicago who derive an income from serving the poor than there are poor people. Do the servicers need the recipient more than she needs them?

In terms of the gross national product, the answer is clear. The recipient is much more valuable in her dependency; she is a national resource. If she were a productive member of our society, the net loss to the gross national product could be very significant because she may never produce as much income as the income derived from her dependency.

Northwestern University recently completed a study in a low-income neighborhood where 60 percent of the people are dependent on welfare. In that neighborhood, for every welfare dollar a recipient received in cash income, 57 cents was spent for only one service—medical care. One dollar for the poor and 57 cents for doctors, nurses and hospitals. Who really needs whom in that kind of economy?

There is, of course, another way. We don't have to have policies that produce dependency. My father recently told me that, during the New Deal when Franklin Roosevelt was president, most people understood this country as a place where there were *interests* that were the enemies of the common people. But, he said, today we identify the enemy of the people as poverty, sickness and disease. My father insists that the enemy isn't poverty, sickness and disease. He argues that the enemy is a set of institutions and interests that take advantage of clienthood and dependency.

His wisdom reminds us of what we already know. Enemies of the right to livelihood and the right to income are those professionals involved in increasing the demand for certification and licensure of work. Professional efforts to certify work in the service area are stealing jobs away

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from the poor by putting those jobs in an elite status, requiring the kind of training and education that most poor people do not have.

The enemies of the right to livelihood and the right to income are the business leaders who continue to support and maintain large-scale unemployment and underemployment.

The enemies of the right to authority—the power for people to act and decide—are governmental officials and bureaucrats who are fearful of a transfer of authority. They want “participation” but oppose popular control.

The enemies of the right to care are the architects of the service systems and the professionals who need dependency.

The enemies of the right to popular tools are the technologists who create “megasystems” that provide work for a very few and increasingly produce goods that working people can’t afford.

The enemies of the right to working neighborhoods are those banks, savings and loans and insurance companies that literally steal the savings of poor and working-class people and use that money to make loans to foreign governments to build tanks or to corporations to build resort condominiums in distant states.

My father, that voice of older America, is right. The enemy is not poverty, sickness and disease. The enemy is a set of interests that need dependency masked by service.

Do servicers need the recipient more than she or he needs them?

We are in a struggle against clienthood, against merely servicing the poor. We must reallocate the *power, authority* and *legitimacy* that have been stolen by the institutions of our society. We must oppose those interests of corporate, professional and managerial America that thrive on the dependency of the American people. We must commit ourselves to reallocation of power to the people we serve so that we no longer will need to serve. Only then will we have a chance to realize the American dream: the right to be a citizen and to create, invent, produce and care. ■

This article is adapted from a speech presented at a conference of the American Public Welfare Association. Excerpted with permission from Public Welfare (Fall 1980). Subscriptions: \$20/yr. (4 issues) from American Public Welfare Association, 1125 15th St. NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20005. Back issues: \$5.50 from same address.

How can I help?

RAM DASS & PAUL GORMAN
THE SUN & YOGA JOURNAL

The following are excerpts from *How Can I Help? Stories and Reflections on Service* by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman. The italicized portions are personal statements about service from a wide variety of people, while the rest of the text contains Gorman's and Ram Dass' reflections on service.

Is helping a reflex?

At times, helping happens simply in the course of things. It's not something we really think about, merely the instinctive response of an open heart. Caring is a reflex. Someone slips, your arm goes out. A car is in a ditch, you join the others and push. A colleague at work has the

blues, you let her know you care. It all seems natural and appropriate. You live, you help.

When we join together in this spirit, action comes more effortlessly, and everybody ends up nourished. Girding against the flood . . . setting up a community meeting . . . preparing a funeral . . . people seem to know their part. We sense what's called for. Or if we don't, and feel momentarily awkward, someone comes quickly with an idea, and it's just right, and we're grateful. We babysit the kids while their parents move possessions to homes farther from the rising river . . . we bring a comfortable chair for an older person who might attend the meeting . . . we call the rabbi with a favorite psalm of the one