Putting 'the social' back into social policy

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Introduction

As a result of the dominant neo-liberal approach to economic and social policy in the United Kingdom over the last three and a half decades British society is becoming increasingly fragmented with, for the first time since the 1930s, a generation of people set to experience worse living standards than their parents. This includes a decline in social mobility within and across generations, a vast chasm emerging between the haves and have-nots, a long-term squeeze on wages and living standards, health crises relating to underfunding and running down of the NHS and the move towards a rote-learning based secondary education system geared towards a low-wage, low-skill economy and a debt-fuelled higher education system that taxes aspiration and promotes the exclusion of less affluent students. This is supported by a political economy focused on the socialisation of financial sector risk, lax tax regimes for multinational corporations, and an economic model dependent on a housing bubble in London and debt-fuelled economic growth on the one hand; and, on the other; the individualisation of social, economic and environmental risks in terms of residual social protection, high levels of personal debt, and unwillingness to prepare for, and adjust to, crises caused by increasing extreme weather events associated with climate change.

The individualisation of risk has been evidenced in the transformation of social policies and the welfare state, from 'social security' to 'welfare' (usually used in the derogatory sense to refer to a lack of self-reliance or 'cultures of dependency'). A two-track approach to social policy making in practice has emerged focusing on 'good welfare' and 'bad welfare'. While 'good welfare' involves corporate subsidies and tax breaks for big business or 'wealth creators' (corporate welfare) and, to an extent, pensions and benefits for older people, 'bad welfare' involves the management of the deficient and deviant behaviour of individuals into whom personal responsibility and self-

reliance must be instilled, for example, in punitive workfare programmes in which unemployed people must work for benefits and by the removal of social housing provision and disability support schemes. The visible world of the welfare state in the, overwhelmingly negative, mainstream political discourse over the last thirty-five years has usually focused on problems with the latter while ignoring the negative consequences of the former.

In this context it is essential to reassess the meaning and purpose of social policy and where it fits within the overall direction of contemporary British society. With the marginalisation of the collectivist and humanitarian aims of the post-war welfare settlement and promotion of a strongly individualistic culture and politics, it is necessary to reconsider what 'the social' means and why it is important for societal progress. First, this chapter considers what 'the social' has meant for social policy in the post-war welfare state period. Second, the paper examines how 'the social' aspect of policy has been downgraded over the last three and a half decades by the dominant neo-liberal approach. This has been achieved by a combination of policy change, the biased mobilisations of public discourse, and increasing individualisation and disempowerment experienced by citizens. Third, an alternative 'social quality' approach is proposed, which seeks to put 'the social' back into both social and economic policy. This alternative model, which focuses on humans as social beings and collective solutions to social problems, provides an as yet incomplete, but promising basis on which to oppose neoliberal policy and promote an alternative vision for social policy in the 21st century.

What is 'social' policy?

Two major strands of thought underpinned the social democratic post-war welfare state: democratic socialism and social liberalism. While the former position idealistically saw the welfare state as part of a parliamentary democratic route to a socialist society, the latter position placed a pragmatic and reformist emphasis on humanising the worst aspects of capitalism through the provision of welfare services without a requirement to overthrow it. Both strands of social democratic thought are intertwined in the development of social policy, formerly 'social administration', as an academic discipline. Social administration had origins in, among other places, the

London School of Economics, with Tawney's pre-WWII work on equality and fellowship, and Titmuss as the first Professor of Social Administration at LSE in 1950. The social administration tradition paraded its multi-disciplinarity in drawing from economics, politics, philosophy, and sociology coupled with a very practical orientation towards addressing social problems, rather than abstract theoretical concerns and obscure academic debates. Instead its great strengths were (and still remain) a fundamental belief in collective provision as an expression of humanitarian values and a pragmatic, problem solving, approach to social welfare issues: the positive 'commitment to welfare', as argued by Titmuss.

Social policy within this framework was simply equated with public policy in the realm of social welfare; policy directed at improving society. Marshall (quoted in Townsend, 1975, p.2) captured this perfectly:

> [t]he policy of governments with regard to action having a direct impact on the welfare of citizens, by providing them with services or income [the central core of which includes] social insurance, public (or national) assistance, housing policy, education and the treatment of crime.

Criticism of the two main planks of this tradition – the equation of the social with public services and the presumption that the welfare state always enhances welfare – was expressed famously by Titmuss in his seminal essay on 'The Social Division of Welfare'. From a critical sociological perspective Titmuss argued that 'social services' should be defined by their aims, rather than the technical methods of administration and institutional procedures. By distinguishing social (or public), fiscal and occupational welfare he demonstrated that social policy may be implemented through a range of institutions rather than those conventionally labelled as 'social services'. And, as the broadcasting of *Cathy Come Home* to a shocked nation in 1966 showed, the welfare state was not always benign in its treatment of people. For those on the receiving end of it often felt like social control and disempowerment. Thus, in Titmuss's (1963, p.53) words the 'welfare state' is a 'stereotype of welfare which represents only the more visible part of the real world of welfare'.

While Titmuss's social division of welfare represented a paradigm shift in the analysis of social policy it only implicitly addressed the meaning of 'the social'. That task was left to other sociologists, such as Donnison, and Townsend (1975, p.6, added emphasis), who prioritised the distributional core of social policy:

> [s]ocial policy is best conceived as a kind of blueprint for the management of society towards *social ends*: it can be defined as the underlying as well as the professed rationale by which social institutions and groups are used or brought into being to ensure social preservation or development.

Although the radical potential of social policy conceived in terms of rationale is clear, the above definition focuses mainly on the 'policy' side of the pairing. What is still lacking is an understanding of the 'social' side that goes beyond the organisational and institutional dimension. Thus, fast-forwarding to contemporary work, we find 'social action' is substituted for 'governments' but, otherwise, the essence of the optimistic Marshallian definition remains intact: social policy is 'support for the well-being of citizens provided through social action' (Alcock, 2008, p.3).

This perspective on the potential of collectivist, democratic and humanitarian values, especially in the form of a broader 'welfare society', rather than the narrower 'welfare state' begins to capture the sense of 'the social' in social policy. This theme is taken up further below in the proposition for the social quality approach to develop this idea. However, in practical policy terms, the positive vision of the classic social policy thinkers was, aside from the huge strides made in the immediate post-war Attlee administration, reluctantly embraced by British politicians and policy makers. Indeed, this led Esping-Andersen (1999) to consider Britain to have implemented a 'mutated' variant of social democracy. Despite some gains in areas of social welfare and collective organisation in the post-war years, classical free market liberalism and Victorian morality (institutional responses and policy interventions towards social problems that target only individual responsibilities and circumstances and not wider social structural causes, and moralising and degrading distinctions between 'idle' and 'deserving' poor) remained strong influences on political thinking in the post-war period. This legacy was explicitly revived in the late 1970s and contributed heavily to the downgrading of the idea of 'the social' in Britain.

The neo-liberal project and the downgrading of 'the social' in policy

Neoliberalism, an economic and political ideology which prescribes that human well-being is best fulfilled by free markets, free trade and individual choice, has been the dominant policy paradigm, especially in the Anglo-American world since the late 1970s (Harvey, 2005). The normative argument for the value of individual freedom in the face of bureaucracy and totalitarian state interference has a long legacy in Right Wing libertarian and liberal thought, with Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* being a key contribution. This perspective has particular salience in liberal societies, such as the UK. In practice, the dominance and 'scientific authority' of economic thinking over the last three and a half decades has underpinned a global political and economic class project to reassert the concentration of extreme individual wealth and power in the hands of the few (Dorling, 2014). The consequences of this, apart from damage to the social fabric and the individual and social costs of increasing precarity and inequality, is to establish a new 'common-sense' around individualism and individual 'projects of the self', described by Mirowski (2013) as 'everyday neo-liberalism', and the exclusion of the values of democracy, collectivism and social integration. This transformation has provided the basis for the downgrading of 'the social' in both policy and everyday life.

In the 1980s, the Conservative governments were brazen in their promulgation of neo-liberal economic doctrine and neglect of 'the social', with Mrs Thatcher famously denying the existence of society itself and also arguing that 'economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul'. The intended change was to remove the values of collectivism and the socialisation of risk amongst citizens, in favour of a more individualistic, self-interested and competitive society. Successive British governments of both right and left have constructed different narratives to try to differentiate themselves from the toxic legacy of 1980s neo-liberalism (examples are Major's *Citizens' Charter*, Blair's *Third Way* and Cameron's *Big Society)* but despite often large differences in rhetoric and small differences in policy, the overall logic driving these governments has been the same (Corbett & Walker, 2013). The consequences of this have been felt not just in policy terms and the effects on work

and living standards, but also in the organisation of power and influence within society as transmitted and amplified in the mass media, and concurrently, in the everyday imagination and 'common-sense' language of people in Britain (Mirowski, 2013).

Economic versus social policy: from Thatcherism to 'austerity'

It has long been recognised that neo-liberalism prioritises economic policy and marginalises the concerns of social policy. It is arguable that social policy has always ultimately been subordinate to economic policy in Britain. Successive governments since the 1980s, under the influence of the global neoliberal project, have further marginalised social policy in favour of a strongly economic and rational self-interest conception of human beings (utility maximising 'economic men'). This underpinning rationality remains present in the context of a shift of emphasis in political rhetoric, public discourse and policy from the public sector burden arguments utilised widely in the 1980s, to the public-private partnerships in public services, 'active' welfare and consumer choice that characterised the British *Third Way* vision, to the emphasis on 'austerity' and deficit-reduction to further entrench neo-liberalism which has superseded the Conservatives' apparent but fleeting rediscovery of 'the social' in the *Big Society* idea (Corbett & Walker, 2013).

Central to the political success of Thatcher's brand of neo-liberalism and its subsequent variants has been the remarkable adaptation, by a right-leaning political establishment in Britain, to the 'culture of individualism' that has been promoted more widely in post-industrial societies (Jordan, 2006). This has transferred risk and culpability from collective society, in the form of the state, to the individual and downplayed the role and potential of 'the social' in policy. As Jordan (2006, p.129) puts it

> [f]rom the perspective of the neoliberal governments of the 1980s, it was much better for people to borrow from banks than to pay taxes and receive benefits, because personal debt was chosen by the individual, whereas the tax-benefit system was imposed by the collective authority.

The first phase of neo-liberalism established the regulatory framework in the 1970s and 1980s by liberalising financial markets and constraining the scope of the public sector and the welfare state through cutting social expenditure, subsidising marketisation, implementing mean-tests, and residualising state provision. The period from the 1990s onwards established a so-called 'social' variant of neo-liberalism, which sought to adapt to the deep social shocks of these transformations by developing publicly funded, but harsher, policies oriented towards individual initiative and promoting self-help, with work as the solution to social problems such as poverty. This theme was central to the 1997 to 2010 New Labour Governments' focus on 'rights and responsibilities' with the development of a more 'contractualist' welfare state. The welfare contractualism of *Third Way* politics in the late 1990s and early 2000s enacted this new 'social' variant of neo-liberalism despite some relative gains such as increased funding for the NHS, minimum wages and child care.

This is evidenced in Giddens' arguments for a 'positive welfare' approach which emphasises individual initiative in finding suitable paid employment and individual responsibilities in exchange for the social rights of citizenship. New Labour's New Deal for Young People is a case in point where state support was called on in the demand for all under 25s unemployed for a period of six months to be doing either subsidised employment, environmental work, volunteering, or in full time education/training and no 'fifth option'. Ultimately though, the aim of individual self-help solutions to collective problems of the quality and availability of work, social and economic inequalities, poverty and care issues is one of making markets socially acceptable, even a market in unemployed people themselves, fighting over whatever job vacancies are available. However, this contractualist *Third Way* approach conceded too much ground to the neo-liberals and has furthered an individualistic conception of policy issues which neglects 'the social' and, under the guise of consumerism, actually disempowers users of social services. As Harrison and Hemmingway (2014, p.28) argue 'contracts often cannot involve equality of parties or consent in any reasonable sense, while discretionary power, surveillance and coercion may be present'.

The political response to the financial crisis has helped to shape a further period of neoliberal marginalisation of 'the social'. Under the narrative of austerity, the intensification of an unbridled neo-liberal policy agenda has forcefully promoted the

idea of social policy as a burden and a luxury, unaffordable in the new austere landscape. This helped to make 'austerity' narratives palatable to people as common-sense rhetoric about public spending as economically wasteful, though arguably 'austerity' is just the latest phase of the neo-liberal project (Mendoza, 2014). Public policy announcements have reflected the theme of contrasting 'skivers' and 'strivers', dismantling a supposed 'something for nothing culture', and even helping people 'trapped in the welfare system', under the guise of 'making work pay'; including a system of repeated assessments of disabled people to see if they are fit to work (and therefore no longer eligible for state support). Investigations have revealed a harsh, stressful and anxiety-inducing regime of testing disabled people, with tens of thousands of successful appeals and over two thousand deaths of disabled people, shortly after being found 'fit for work'.

In this context, policies aimed at the so-called 'empowerment' of individuals (including children) and communities boil down to governing the behaviour of 'autonomous' individuals through imposing individual responsibility for their freedom of choice (Ryan, 2011). In Ryan's (2011) analysis of techniques of governing children, shifting the focus of policy from universal provision to targeted supports for people that do not conform to the ideal of autonomous self-governing individuals means that issues such as child poverty, homelessness, suicide, and harmful behaviours (smoking and substance misuse) become framed in terms of their detrimental (individual) effects on future employability. However, another facet of this change is that compelling people to compete with each other on unequal terms exacerbates the social and personal problems which collective provision and social citizenship were previously intended to address (Ryan, 2011).

Recent proposals by the Conservative Government to redefine child poverty along more individualistic and moralistic lines, focus on addiction, family breakdown and personal debt while removing some long accepted and internationally valid measures of relative deprivation, which are likely to reduce the official levels of poverty in Britain. In other words, for the Government, poverty should be a concern centred around 'bad' life choices and 'cultures of worklessness' rather than structural issues of power, participation in society, material inequality and access to labour markets.

Ultimately, neo-liberal marketisation under the guise of increasing individual freedom does not promote voice for citizens, nor does it increase the quality of public services such as transport, healthcare, housing or basic utilities, functions of the welfare state, or, indeed, the quality of 'the social'. Instead, the market solution enables 'exit' options, primarily for those with the money and other resources to take-up privatised welfare, leaving residualised services for those unable to opt-out. The emphasis on the option to exit from collective provision to enable 'freedom of choice' has negative consequences for those without the resources to exercise such options. It has long been argued that the neoliberal project

> suppresses any conception that for many people a decent life means a constant struggle against the 'impersonal' decisions of the market. However, the unemployed, single parents, the disabled, the elderly, ethnic minorities, women, are unlikely to be impressed by the news that their disadvantaged positions are sure signs of their freedom, and by the insistence that any attempt to organise collective assistance for them will rob them of their liberty (Belsey, 1986, p.193).

Although not mentioned in the 'freedom of choice' narrative and not often felt in the bubble of privilege that neo-liberal policies create, the division of society between haves and have-nots diminishes everyone, including the former. For example, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) estimate that if Britain had the same distribution of income and wealth as the four most equal countries in the world, mental health problems might be halved.

The prioritisation of economic policy and economic thinking under the guise of individual freedom and consumer choice has marginalised the collectivist, egalitarian, integrative and empowering possibilities of a genuinely 'social' policy. The outcome of this neo-liberal project is vast increases in inequality, and the reduction of life chances for many; coupled with increases in consumer choice for the rich and residual provision for those left behind. The operational meaning of 'social policy' in this context, in contrast to private debt-fuelled consumption, is increasingly individualised, punitive, authoritarian and *de-socialised.* One of the key challenges for the early 21st century is therefore to draw on the legacy of the earlier social policy tradition and put 'the social' back into social policy in order to work towards societal progress.

For 'social policy' we need social quality

The idea of social quality emerged in the 1990s in response to the neo-liberal inspired downgrading of 'the social' in policy in different European countries and within EU policy making (Beck et al., 1997). Two challenges were spotlighted: the dominance of economic thinking and the democratic deficit. As within several Member States at that time (and more generally later) the development of the EU was constructed almost entirely as an economic project. The foremost example was Economic and Monetary Union (which preceded the single currency). This was undoubtedly a historically unique form of European political unification, but while it focused on economic integration, it ignored the social dimension of this process. The social dimension has been recently recognised in the 'going beyond GDP' discourse (Stiglitz et al., 2009). However, even in the report of Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 'the economic' is fore grounded in place of 'the social'. The democratic deficit was hotly debated at the time and remains a deep concern ever since. Social quality was developed specifically to address these challenges by providing a conceptual and empirical tool by which, on the one hand, to frame comprehensive policy approaches which valued both economic and social dimensions and, on the other, a measuring rod with which citizens could engage in political debates about the direction and pace of development. It is expressly against the processes of individualisation associated with neo-liberalism and for 'social' policy.

Social quality is defined as 'the extent to which people are able to participate in the social and economic lives of their communities under conditions which enhance their well-being and potential' (Beck et al., 1997, p.9). The centrality of participation in the definition derives from the core assumption that humans are social beings and derive their identities, self-realisation and, to a large extent, well-being, from social recognition. The contrast with neo-liberal and neo-classical utility maximising 'economic men' is obvious. The emphasis on democracy and participation also seeks to develop a new direction for social policy to overcome the prior problems of the uncaring or disempowering forms of provision even in the social democratic welfare state.

Within the social quality model the social world comprises two sets of tensions. On the one hand there is the tension between societal and biographical development while, on the other, there is the tension between the worlds of systems and those of communicative structures. Across the field of the interplay between these tensions is enacted a constant process whereby people interact within diverse collectives which, in turn, provide the essential context for their self-realisation. Human social action and the wider framing structure of society must therefore both be taken into consideration in devising social policies.

Everyday life takes place in the context of these two sets of tensions and individuals seek self-realisation in their interaction within various collectives (family, community, workplace and so on). Then, and this is the critical step with regard to practical applications, there are four specific conditional factors governing the realisation of social quality:

- *Socio-economic security*: the extent of ownership of material resources and rights over time (including environmental security).
- *Social cohesion*: the extent to which social relations, based on identities, values and norms, are shared.
- *Social inclusion*: the extent to which people have access to and are integrated into the different institutions and relations that constitute everyday life.
- *Social empowerment*: the extent to which social structures enhance personal capabilities and the ability to participate in daily life.

Although these four conditional factors are placed in a separate part of the quadrangle formed by the two interacting tensions, they overlap in practice (Diagram 1).

Diagram 1   Quadrangle of the Conditional Factors
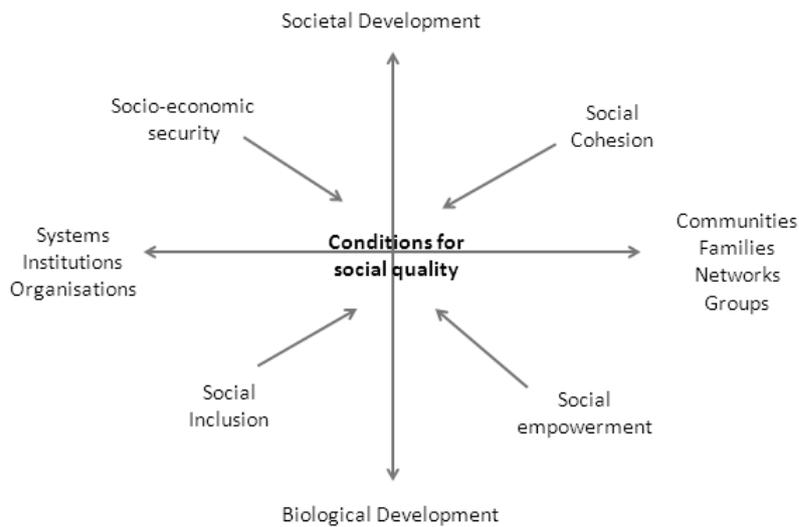
For measurement purposes each of the four conditional factors comprises between four and six domains including financial resources (socio-economic security), trust (social cohesion), citizenship rights (social inclusion) and supportiveness of institutions (social empowerment). The concept has been used extensively in social science research in both Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. This does not mean, however, that it is a finished product. For one thing it requires a relatively parsimonious aggregate index in order to measure and compare social quality across different nations. For another, the complex task of developing and incorporating indicators of the impact (positive and negative) of environmental conditions on both objective and subjectively perceived security into the model needs to be undertaken. Sustainability is yet another dimension of social quality that requires attention in the face of increasing social and environmental catastrophes associated with climate change. Finally there is the apparent paradox of a concept purporting to be 'social' yet being measured at the individual level. This is legitimate in methodological terms, however, first because of the absence of comparative objective data for measurement purposed; second, because individual responses provide evidence of social context and, third because these responses are aggregated. Despite its rough edges social quality provides what myriad quality of life indices do not, which is an assessment of social relations and their impact. Moreover it has the advantages over the rival concepts that

it is far more comprehensive, oriented to society rather than interpersonal relations and attempts to define and operationalise 'the social'.

With reference to social policy, social quality clearly goes beyond the conventional equation of the social with the state or with social welfare. Thus it offers an opportunity for social policy to connect, or re-connect, with the social and resist the widespread de-socialisation as a consequence of neoliberal policy choices outlined above. What would this mean in practice? It seems to us that the possibilities are legion. Here are just six for starters.

First, the application of social quality should awaken a debate about the essence of social quality and especially the 'social' part of the pairing. Second, it would provide a new focus for societal progress in the form of well-being oriented participation for the many, instead of either economistic GDP growth or minimalistic welfarism protection from hunger and poverty (just one component of socio-economic security, albeit a vital one). Third, it would provide new explicit and measurable social quality goals, such as maximising social cohesion and social empowerment in policy and theory (neither of which figure on coherent government or academic agendas). Fourth, the application of social quality would place social empowerment at the heart of social policy to replace, hopefully, the anti-social consumerist deception of individual choice, which too often masquerades as empowerment. Fifth, it would facilitate social policy as the focus for citizen participation and involvement; for example by examining openly and democratically the social quality of different cities, communities or neighbourhoods and participation in meaningful localised and democratic decision making. Sixth, for social policy analysts there is the challenge to complement welfare regime analyses with an examination of social quality regimes. What configurations of institutional and policy paths, political priorities, normative values and structural relations (gender, race, age, class and so on) reproduce different outcomes in terms of social quality?

Conclusion: a defence of welfare or pro-social policy?

This chapter has considered the consequences of neo-liberalism in policy terms and its connection to everyday understandings of the social, and suggested that in order to renew the social in social policy, alternative approaches to the different variants of

neoliberal policy prescriptions over the last three and a half decades must be constructed. We began by bringing into focus the conceptualisation of social policy in post-war social administration perspectives, and the importance of 'the social' part of the concept. Evidence in the second part of the chapter highlighted the deeply corrosive consequences of centring neoliberal policy around individual freedom and consumer choice, which have paradoxically, increased moralising techniques for social control and disempowerment, while reducing individual freedom for many unable to advance through market-based purchasing of welfare services. The prioritisation of an economic understanding of human motivation and downgrading of the social nature of human beings is cited as a key facet of this.

In order to overcome the problem of policy that focuses on correcting individual behaviours and 'enabling' individual projects of self-realisation we must consider what is entailed in putting the social back into social policy. It was suggested in the third section that the social quality approach is a useful concept to seriously engage with a theory of the social and the political, policy and power implications of a pro-social policy. While social quality is subject to ongoing critical debate and development, socio-economic security, social inclusion, social cohesion and social empowerment are recognised as legitimate conditional factors that a pro-social programme for government would need to engage with. But above all, the recognition that humans are social beings, rather than rational utility maximisers would be a powerful starting point.

The social policy community, including academic, policy making, practitioner and social activist dimensions has in recent years been on the defensive, seeking to protect valued services and provisions from further neoliberal retrenchment (Foster et al., 2015). This is a valuable form of action but, what is required also is the momentum to develop a new direction for a pro-social policy which recognises the legacy of social policy traditions, but emphasises new forms of participation, empowerment and democracy in the service of collectivist and humanitarian societal progress. Hay and Payne (2015, p.3) have begun a debate on the parallel political economy dimension in the form of civic capitalism; 'the governance of the market, by the state, in the name of the people, to deliver collective public goods, equity and social justice'. These developments all emphasise the need to put 'the social' back into social policy, in the

spirit of the optimistic and idealistic vision of the creators of the post-war welfare state, with the ultimate aims of combatting inequality and promoting universal well-being.

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