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The Continuing Enigmas of Social Policy

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Acronyms

CCT	Conditional cash transfers
DSP	developmental state paradigm
DWS	developmental welfare state
EU	European Union
FSITA	fuzzy set ideal type analysis
GDP	Gross domestic product
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
NPF	National Pension Fund
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PBF	Programa Bolsa Família
PSSOPs	public sector systems of provision
RPS	Red De Protección Social
SOPs	specific chains of provision
SRM	social risk management
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
US	United States
VAT	Value-added tax
VoC	varieties of capitalism
WRA	welfare regimes approach

Abstract

One particular index of the systemic nature of the current crisis is the weaknesses of intellectual responses to the crisis and the inability, often self-confessed by orthodox thinkers and policy makers, to offer convincing or viable remedies. Unsurprisingly, this intellectual deficiency has primarily focused on the role of finance. But the intellectual weaknesses—especially as far as policy responses are concerned—run deeper and wider, covering (un)employment, industrial and housing policies, and so on. To a large extent, this reflects the debilitating influence of neoliberalism (looking at things in terms of a simple dichotomy between market and state, themselves simply conceived), the compromises with it, and the corresponding weaknesses of alternatives on offer prior to the crisis. These weak alternatives have swung between looking backwards to a Keynesian/interventionist renewal, and inventing alternative monikers for contemporary capitalism, such as post-Fordist or, more recently, the Cheshire-cat grinning knowledge economy.

In this light, this paper examines critically what has been one of the most successful intellectual contributions to the neoliberal period, Esping-Andersen's Welfare Regimes Approach (WRA) to comparative social policy. The paper shows that the WRA has deep roots within the conditions of the post-war boom and, as a consequence, was already well past its "use by date" when it emerged in the 1990s, let alone over the subsequent two decades of neoliberalism that have been underpinned by financialization. A close examination of the literature on the WRA shows how it has suffered from being unable to account for the differences between countries and programmes and has neglected both the changing conditions associated with neoliberalism and the causal factors underpinning it, and the closer determination of social policies themselves. The paper offers similar commentary on other approaches to social policy, such as appeal to convergence, divergence or path dependence. To some degree, the study of social policy has become tired, having been used to addressing yet one more crisis of the welfare state as if all that is involved is another round of responses to neoliberal antipathy or straitened economic circumstances.

With such analysis as critical point of departure—together with specification of financialization, its relationship to neoliberalism and their variegated influences over social policy—the paper offers an alternative in terms of a marriage between the developmental welfare state and (public sector) system of provision (PSSOP) approaches. More specifically, it argues that understanding of, and proposals for, social policy need to situate it in a broader developmental context. On the other hand, the paper emphasises how different elements of social policy are both country- and sector-specific in and of themselves and in relation to developmental context. This underpins the PSSOP approach that focuses upon how provision is organized for particular aspects of policy. The marriage of these two approaches is presented in contrast to other approaches already mentioned as well as by reference to World Bank postures and the current interest in conditional cash transfers.

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Introduction and Overview

The purpose of this paper is to provide a way of framing both the understanding of social policy and how to approach the making of social policy itself. In doing so, it faces a number of difficulties. First and foremost, social policy is extremely diverse across different countries, different programmes and over time and circumstance. At the very least, any framing of social policy will need to be able to allow for such diversity. What sort of country, at what sort of stage and with what sort of dynamic of development; what welfare service, such as health or education, or income transfer such as pensions or social security; and who is served, the old or the young, male or female, etc.

Second, this diversity does not mean that social policy is free of common influences or determinants that should be identified. Leading candidates for such factors, particularly in the contemporary world, include the role of globalization and neoliberalism and, most recently, the response to severe crisis. There is also the role played by ideational factors such as the presence and strength of goals of meeting human rights, basic needs, alleviating poverty, and so on. This creates a dual task of both specifying what these controversial common determinants are or mean, for they are themselves contested in how they are understood, and whether they are positive or not for welfare policy and more generally, how they allow for what are unavoidably heterogeneous outcomes.

Third, unsurprisingly, there is a huge literature on social policy ranging from grand comparative posturing at a general level to close and detailed study of particular programmes in particular countries at particular times, and with impact upon particular sections of the population – by age, gender, location, or socioeconomic status. This wealth of literature and experience is both helpful in providing the raw materials for framing an approach, but daunting in its own volume and diversity.

Fourth, disappointingly if unsurprisingly, the vast bulk of the social policy literature, especially that concerned with framing the understanding and making of policy, derives from developed countries and Europe in particular, with both the United States and Japan, not prominent as examples for understanding social policy. Indeed, there has been a degree of conceptual imperialism as far as social policy is concerned, with the analysis and policies for developing countries following the putative lead of development, whether it be in erstwhile goals of modernization or the more recent turn to market mechanisms. This raises the issue of how to learn from the literature without becoming its slave, and whether initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and poverty alleviation offer a way of escaping unduly pre-determined ways of thinking.¹

Fifth, yet again unsurprisingly, the literature is well-established and runs along a number of well-oiled grooves. Social policy and the welfare state have been around for long enough for us to be able to debate, if not explain, whatever is happening or might happen. We have, after all, seen it all before, whether it be fast or painfully slow convergence to modern forms of welfare provision; the response to or setbacks due to crises; neoliberalism and globalization; the emergence or strengthening of new concerns such as gender; or the path dependence built into institutional and policy inertia (see section 3). Surely, we already have more than enough toolkits for assessing and proposing social policy?

¹ The MDG programme and similar are not covered in this paper. See Lancet Commission (2010).

This paper suggests otherwise on the basis of two wide-ranging, if necessarily selective, reviews of the literature. One was prepared shortly after the current crisis broke and the other over the last year by way of an updating and stock-taking of responses to the enduring global crisis.² Of necessity, such reviews were guided by four key threads to assess the literature critically and, where appropriate, be challenged by it.

The first thread, and unusual for framing social policy, other than in the latest neoliberal fad of treating citizens as consumers, is to relate social policy to long-standing work on consumption for a retrospective account (Fine 2013d). This offered two insights. One was to see private, commercial consumption in terms of commodity specific chains of provision, or systems of provision as they have been termed (SOPs), significantly distinct from one another as with food, fashion, energy, housing systems, etc. (Fine and Leopold 1993). The other was to recognize how the huge expansion in the study of consumption across the social sciences in the decades of postmodernism had studiously neglected *public* consumption. In a sense, it has been as if social policy simply does not exist when it comes to the study of consumption. As I have argued, there are good and understandable reasons for this. As soon as consumption becomes recognizably public, it tends to be redefined as something else, most notably as the welfare state or social policy. This places it outside the realm of consumption studies as such, once again with the reservation of what has been termed, under neoliberalism, the recommodification of social policy so that the latter does to some degree become more market-like, and the citizen deemed to be and made more putatively consumer-like.³

While social policy does depart from market forms of consumption to a greater or lesser degree, this is no reason for abandoning how studying consumption sheds light on public provision. Without in any way reducing social provision to private consumption, this leads me to argue that social policy can be addressed in terms of what has been dubbed *public sector* systems of provision (PSSOPs).⁴ This is taken up in section 6 where the PSSOP approach can be seen to have a number of advantages, especially in light of the difficulties previously raised. For it does emphasize the diversity of social policy by time, place, programme and context; it does take an integral or holistic view of such policy rather than focusing on a particular aspect such as public or private provision, mode of financing, presence or not of user charges; it does locate social policy in its wider context such as neoliberalism and globalization as well as country-specific factors; and the PSSOP approach allows the critical incorporation and assessment of the existing literature by relating whatever it contributes to the functioning of the PSSOPs under consideration.

The second thread in my take on social policy was to emphasize the role of

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