Part I

Concepts and Approaches

Chapter 1

The Subject of Social Policy

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Overview

- Social policy is an academic subject which both overlaps with cognate subjects and has a discrete disciplinary base.
- It has changed its name from social administration to social policy to reflect a broadening concern with the theory as well as the practice of welfare.
- The welfare reforms in the UK in the period following the Second World War were critically important in establishing the policy context for subsequent policy development.
- Social policy analysts adopt a range of different theoretical perspectives, leading to differing conclusions about the viability and desirability of different policy measures.
- Much social policy has been developed by national governments, but policy also has local and supranational dimensions.

What Do We Study?

The study of social policy comes into the category of the academic social sciences. It is different from other areas of social science, such as sociology, economics and politics, however, because it is based upon a distinct empirical focus – support for the well-being of citizens provided through social action. Nevertheless, social policy draws on the methods used and the understanding developed within these other areas of social science. Thus, although on the one hand we can see social policy as a discrete academic *discipline*, which is studied and developed in its own right, on the other we can recognize that it is also an interdisciplinary *field*, drawing on and developing links with other cognate disciplines at every stage and overlapping at times with these in terms of both empirical foci and methods of analysis. To put this another way, the boundaries between social policy and other social science subjects are porous, and shifting; and students and practitioners of social policy may also be working within or alongside these other areas or cooperating closely with others who do.

The term 'social policy' is not used only to refer to academic study, however; it is also used to refer to the social actions taken by policy-makers in the real world. So social policy refers both to the activity of policy-making to promote well-being and to the academic study of such actions. This may

seem a bit confusing at first – whereas sociology students study *society*, social policy students study *social policy* – but it is a confusion that we all soon learn to live with.

This confusion is also true of the discipline versus interdisciplinary field debate, referred to above. The subject of social policy has the core features of an academic discipline, with its own theoretical debates and empirical foci, and it is recognized as such in the management and planning of higher education in the UK. At the same time, however, the study of social policy is developed and extended through interdisciplinary collaboration. This may seem odd in principle; but it is not a problem in practice. Thus students studying social policy may well find themselves in the same departments, or on the same degree programmes, as others studying different subjects such as sociology; or they may be studying social policy as part of professional education and training, for instance in social work. This variety and collaboration are to be welcomed, and students on these different courses will learn much from each other through learning together; but this does not mean that social policy can be subsumed within sociology or social work. Similarly, those engaged in social policy research often work alongside others such as economists or statisticians; but the focus of their concern is distinct – on investigating the development or delivery of policy, rather than on economic modelling (as economists) or data analysis (as statisticians).

The later chapters in this book explore in more detail some of the key concepts and perspectives which have underpinned the study of social policy, the major issues which inform policy development and the important areas of policy practice. Much analysis of social policy focuses on the policies and practices of national government. Within the UK, however, the devolution of policy-making and the local development and administration of significant aspects of welfare provision are of major significance, as discussed in Part V. In Part VIII the book also explores the international context of policy development and the importance of comparative analysis and global trends to any understanding of social policy in the one country. Here, however, we will focus on the development of social policy as an academic subject in the UK, for it has a particularly interesting history, involving even a change of name from *social administration* to *social policy*.

The Development of Social Policy

The development of social policy in the UK can be traced back over a hundred years to the end of the nineteenth century. This is because it is closely linked to the development of the Fabian Society and to the influence of Fabian politics on policy development in Britain. The Fabian Society was established in 1884, and was strongly influenced by the work of Sidney Webb, a civil servant who later became a Labour MP. It developed critical analysis of the social and economic problems found in late nineteenth-century British capitalism and campaigned for the introduction of social protection through the state to combat these. Fabian politics were closely linked to the establishment and growth of the Labour Party in Britain, which Webb and others saw as the political vehicle through which policy innovation and reform could be achieved. The early development of Fabian social policy thinking also drew on new research evidence emerging from some of the earliest empirical studies of social problems in the country by people like Charles Booth and B. Seebohm Rowntree, whose research revealed that the extent and depth of poverty in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century were both serious and widespread. This challenged conservative political assumptions that economic markets could meet the welfare needs of all;

and the Fabians used it to argue that policy intervention through the state was needed to provide those forms of support and protection which markets could not.

In fact, of course, it was some time before the Labour Party did achieve political power in Britain, and important reforms were introduced before this by the Liberal governments of the early twentieth century. The context for these reforms was influenced significantly by a review of the Poor Laws, the mainstay of nineteenth-century welfare policy, by a Royal Commission established in 1905. The work of the commission was an important step in the development of debate about social policy reform in Britain, in part because the commissioners themselves could not agree on the right way forward and so produced two separate reports:

- a Minority Report, which was largely the work of Beatrice Webb, who was married to Sidney and herself a prominent Fabian;
- a Majority Report, which was largely the work of Helen Bosanquet, who, with her husband Bernard, was a leading figure in the Charity Organization Society (COS), a body which coordinated voluntary action to relieve poverty.

Both reports stressed the need for policy reform to improve welfare provision. But, whilst the minority Fabian report saw the public provision of state services as the means of achieving this, the majority COS report envisaged a continuing central role for voluntary philanthropic activity. This debate about the balance between state and non-state provision of welfare continued to influence the development of social policy throughout the rest of the twentieth century, as the chapters in Part IV of this book reveal; and the concern to secure the appropriate mix between public and voluntary provision remains a key element in social policy planning at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

What is particularly significant for our purposes about the policy debate between the Webbs and the Bosanquets, however, is that this did not influence only the development of social policy reform, but extended also into the study and evaluation of policy as it developed. Despite their political differences, both the Webbs and the Bosanquets were concerned to promote the study of social policy as well as the development of welfare reform. And this took concrete form with the establishment by the Webbs of the London School of Economics (LSE) and the incorporation within it of the COS's School of Sociology to form a new Department of Social Sciences and Administration in 1912. This was the first, and most important, base for the study of social policy. Its first new lecturer was Clement Attlee (later Prime Minister in the reforming Labour government after the Second World War); and later members included W. H. Beveridge (architect of the modern social security system, and Director of the LSE from 1919 to 1937), R. H. Tawney (who developed theoretical analysis of poverty and inequality) and T. H. Marshall (whose idea of 'social citizenship' has been used by many as a theoretical basis for understanding the development of social policy in modern society).

The LSE has continued ever since to provide a leading base for the study and evaluation of social policy. In 1950 it appointed Richard Titmuss as the first Professor of Social Administration in the UK, and during the 23 years before he died he became a leading figure in the academic study of social policy throughout the developed world. Titmuss's major contributions to the development of the study of social policy have now been collected together into a single volume (see Guide to Further Sources), and his writing remains at the centre of academic debates about theory and practice today. Some of the

contributors to this *Companion* come from the LSE's current Department of Social Policy; but the study of social policy has now extended much further than this. Over the last fifty years, social policy teaching and research have spread to most other universities in Britain, and have been taken up more widely in schools and colleges too. There are also major research centres in a number of universities, and other independent agencies and think-tanks providing specialist research and consultancy in particular fields or from different perspectives.

What is more, as we shall see shortly, this wider development of teaching and research has promoted debate and controversy over the aims and methods of study and over the direction of, and priorities for, research and policy reform – and this has provided a challenge to the Fabianism which dominated debate within social policy until the 1970s.

- Much of the early teaching of social policy was geared to the training of social workers and others to act as providers within existing welfare services – it was focused upon how to administer welfare, rather than upon what welfare should be administered.
- Much of the early research work concentrated on measuring poverty and other social problems in order to provide evidence of the need for policy intervention – it was focused upon measurement of social need, rather than upon definitions of need or debate about the appropriateness of seeking to respond to it.

These broader questions became much more important as social policy expanded and developed in the latter quarter of the twentieth century. However, in the middle of the century such questions seemed to a large extent to be answered by the introduction of a 'welfare state' by the Labour government of 1945–51. At this stage, the debate about the direction of reform appeared to have been won conclusively by the Fabian supporters of state welfare, and the focus of academic study upon the training of state welfare workers and the empirical measurement of new welfare needs appeared to have been established as the orthodoxy for all.

The Welfare State and the Welfare Consensus

The creation of what has come to be called the welfare state in the years immediately following the Second World War remains the major development in social policy in the UK and is central to the study of it, although in fact the depiction of these reforms as a 'welfare state' is a controversial and contested one. It begs questions about what we mean by this and why these particular reforms should be seen as achieving it; and these questions are matters of significant debate and disagreement. Nevertheless, the post-war welfare state thesis has been widely promulgated – and for important and obvious reasons.

Part of the reason for the electoral success of the Labour government in 1945 was its manifesto commitment to introduce state provision to meet major welfare needs – and to do this on a comprehensive basis, replacing the piecemeal and partial provision which had been developed in the earlier part of the century. This message had been prefigured in Beveridge's famous report on the need for comprehensive social security reform, published in 1942 and included in Labour's manifesto promises. Beveridge had written about the 'Five Giant Social Evils' which had undermined British society before the war: ignorance, disease, idleness, squalor and want. He argued that it was in the interests of all citizens to remove these evils from British society, and it was the duty of the state, as the representative body of all citizens, to act to do this.

In the years following the war, comprehensive state provision to combat each was introduced:

- free education up to age 15 (later 16), to combat ignorance;
- a national health service (NHS) free at the point of use, to combat disease;
- state commitment to securing full employment, to combat idleness;
- public housing for all citizens to rent, to combat squalor;
- national insurance benefits for all in need, to combat want.

All of these required the development of major state services for citizens and they resulted in a major extension of state responsibility – and state expenditure. Many of the reforms were enacted by the post-war Labour government; but despite their Fabian roots they were not supported only by Labour. Indeed, the state education plans had been introduced by a Conservative member of the coalition government (R. A. Butler) in 1944, and the Conservative governments of the 1950s supported the spirit of the reforms and maintained their basic structure. This cross-party consensus on state welfare was so strong that it even acquired an acronym – Butskellism – made up from the names of the Labour Chancellor (Gaitskell) and his Conservative successor (Butler).

For Fabian social policy, therefore, the post-war welfare state could be seen as the culmination of academic and political influence on government and, after this, analysis and debate focused more on the problems of how to administer and improve existing state welfare than on the question of whether these were appropriate mechanisms for the social promotion of well-being. However, this narrow Fabian focus within post-war social policy did not last for long. It was soon under challenge from other perspectives which queried both the success and the desirability of state welfare.

Theoretical Pluralism

From the 1970s onwards, the focus of social policy began to move beyond the narrow confines of Fabian welfare-statism. This was symbolized most dramatically by a change (at the annual conference in 1987) in the name of the academic subject from 'social administration' to 'social policy', primarily because it was felt that social administration was associated too closely with a focus upon analysis of the operation of existing welfare services, whereas social policy encompassed a more general concern with analysis of the political and ideological bases of welfare provision. This change was representative of more general trends within academic and political debate to embrace a wider range of conflicting perspectives challenging the orthodoxy of Fabianism, and to move academic study towards a more open theoretical pluralism in which questions of *whether* or *why* to pursue state welfare became more important than questions of *how* or *when*.

The new left

The predominant focus of Fabianism on the success and desirability of state welfare was challenged in the 1960s and 1970s by critics on the left. Drawing on Marxist analysis of capitalist society, they argued that welfare services had not replaced the exploitative relationships of the labour market; and that, although they had provided some benefits for the poor and the working class, these services had also helped to support future capitalist development by providing a secure base for the market economy to operate. Unlike the Fabian socialists of the early twentieth century, these new left critics did not necessarily see the further expansion of the existing state welfare base of social policy as resolving this dilemma. Indeed, for them, state welfare was in a constant state of

contradiction, or conflict, between the pressure to meet the welfare needs of citizens and the pressure to support the growth of capitalist economic markets.

The new right

In the 1970s and 1980s, rather different criticisms of state welfare began to appear from the right of the political spectrum. Right-wing proponents of free market capitalism, most notably Friedrich von Hayek, had been critical of the creation of the welfare state in the 1940s, but at the time these had been marginal voices in academic and political debate. In the 1970s, as the advent of economic recession revealed some of the limitations of state welfare, these voices became both more vocal and more widely supported – especially after the move to the right of the Conservative Party following the election of Margaret Thatcher as leader in 1975. The essence of the new right critique is that the development of extensive state welfare services is incompatible with the maintenance of a successful market economy, and that this problem will get worse as welfare expands to meet more and more social needs. For them, the desirability of state welfare itself is called into question.

New social movements

The failings and limitations of state welfare also came under challenge in the late twentieth century from perspectives outside the traditional left/right political spectrum. Most significant here was the challenge by feminism to the unequal treatment of men and women in the development and delivery of welfare services. As feminists pointed out, the provision of welfare was 'gendered'. Others have also challenged traditional analysis of state welfare to address a wider range of social divisions and social issues in analyzing social policy. Anti-racists have pointed out that welfare services can be discriminatory and exclusive; disability campaigners have suggested that the needs of certain social groups can be systematically ignored; and environmentalists have argued that existing service provision is predicated upon economic development which cannot be sustained over the longer term.

The new pragmatism

The new radical voices which began to influence social policy towards the end of the twentieth century have had widely varying, and sometimes mutually conflicting, implications. They challenged state welfare and the orthodoxy of Fabianism, but they were also critical of the new left and the new right. At the beginning of the twenty-first century these differing perspectives have resulted in a theoretical pluralism which has not only transformed academic study but has also shifted the focus of policy-making itself. The Labour governments of the new century have openly eschewed the policy programmes of the Fabian left and the new right, and have appealed instead for a 'third way' for social policy in which private and public welfare are openly combined. There is much debate about what is meant by this new Third Way politics (see chapter 12); but its embracement of the legacy of theoretical pluralism has resulted in a more pragmatic approach to policy planning – captured in the phrase 'what counts is what works'.

Emerging Issues: The Future of Social Policy

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, therefore, social policy has developed from its Fabian roots at the LSE and its support for the welfare state reforms of the early post-war years to embrace a wide range of diverse – and conflicting – theoretical debates about both the value and the success

of public welfare provision and a wider conceptualization of the policy context as the product of local and global action as well as national politics. Social policy is now characterized by theoretical and geographical pluralism. It is also characterized by 'welfare pluralism': the recognition that state provision is only one feature of a broader mixture of differing forms and levels of welfare service.

We can capture these new pluralisms within social policy as the product of a shift in the focus of study from the *welfare state* to the *welfare mix* – and this is a shift which is likely to develop further during the early part of this century. As all social scientists know, social forces, and hence social policies too, are dynamic. The legacy of the past will continue to structure the agenda for study in the future; but change is always taking place. And in social policy, trends for future change are already being set:

- We are moving beyond state-based welfare, to focus not only upon public services but also upon partnerships between the state and other providers of welfare and well-being and on the role of the state as a subsidizer and a regulator of the actions of others.
- We are moving beyond the provider culture, to focus not only upon questions of who provides welfare services but also on examination of who uses and benefits from these and how access to such benefits is determined, or prevented.
- We are moving beyond a focus upon policy development within the nation-state to embrace also the impact of global forces and global actors on social policy and the importance of comparative analysis of issues of welfare and well-being.

These changes will accentuate further the overlap and the collaboration between social policy and the study of other cognate subjects such as sociology, economics, politics and law. However, it is just such interdisciplinary flexibility which has always been a central feature of the study of social policy – that this is likely to develop and to grow is a sign of continuing academic vitality and strength.

Guide to Further Sources

There are no textbooks dealing with the history and development of the discipline of social policy, but M. Bulmer, J. Lewis and D. Piachaud (eds), *The Goals of Social Policy* (Unwin Hyman, 1989) is an interesting review and history of the work of the leading department at the London School of Economics. The major work of Richard Titmuss, undoubtedly the founding father of the subject, is now gathered together, with commentaries, in P. Alcock, H. Glennerster, A. Oakley and A. Sinfield (eds), *Welfare and Wellbeing* (Policy Press, 2001).

More recently, however, a number of authors have sought to provide introductory guides to the discipline. The most well established is M. Hill, *Understanding Social Policy*, 7th edn (Blackwell, 2003), which provides a service-based review of welfare policy. P. Alcock, *Social Policy in Britain*, 3rd edn (Palgrave, 2008), takes a broader approach, covering also key questions of structure, context and issues. J. Baldock, N. Manning, S. Miller and S. Vickerstaff (eds), *Social Policy*, 3rd edn (Oxford University Press, 2007), is a collection which covers both contextual issues and service areas. K. Blakemore, *Social Policy: An Introduction*, 3rd edn (Open University Press, 2007) uses key social policy questions to provide a different perspective on provision in different service areas. C. Bochel,

H. Bochel, R. Page and R. Sykes, *Social Policy: Issues and Development* (Prentice Hall, 2005) is a broad and accessible collection on topical issues in social policy.

A collection of topical essays on UK policy issues is also provided by N. Ellison and C. Pearson, *Developments in British Social Policy*, 2nd edn (Palgrave, 2003). Finally, the Social Policy Association produces an annual collection of topical essays, *Social Policy Review* (Policy Press). A useful website providing introductory material on social policy is maintained by Paul Spicker at: <http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/publicpolicy/introduction/main.htm>.