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How Social is Social Policy? Fiscal and Market Discourse in North American Welfare States

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Abstract

Long regarded as a "laggard" among welfare states in advanced industrial countries, the USA may be emerging as a "leader" in the reformation of social programmes and the relationship between government, the market economy, and civil society. The dissemination and impact of this new orthodoxy is realized, in large part, through discursive practices. Fiscalization and marketization are two processes central to this growing influence of American social policy. Fiscal and market discourse, while not new, have increased in acceptance and influence, and are changing the welfare state from within by altering perceptions of issues, vocabularies used and programme reforms adopted.

Keywords

Discourse; Fiscalization; Marketization; Social policy; Welfare state; Europe; North America

Introduction

During the building of the postwar welfare states, social policy was commonly distinguished from economic policy in terms of its goals of building identities, fostering community, and making changes in the distribution of market-generated incomes. Government social programmes were said to modify the play of market forces, offering extra-market allocations and protection to people inside and outside the labour force, while asserting the primacy of social welfare values over economic ones. Even in debates on the crisis of the welfare state during the 1980s and early 1990s, one basic point not in dispute among the contending perspectives was that the welfare state did in fact intervene in economic affairs and vary market forces. The debate, of course, was and still is over the scale of such interventions and their consequences for workers, other citizens, businesses and the overall economy.

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Even so, things change. Today, more than ever in the last 40 years, market forces are both defining and delimiting welfare states. In many public policy areas, economic values now prevail over community values.

The way business, media and political elites talk about the welfare state—i.e. the nature of the social policy discourse—has shifted. The relationship of citizens to the welfare state is considered by politicians and bureaucrats to be more one of empowered consumers with choices and responsibilities, than one of clients or beneficiaries with entitlements and rights. Citizens hear less about welfare and national social security systems and more about "workfare" and "making work pay". The metaphor of the social safety net, with its images of security and protection, is given less emphasis than is the metaphor of a social trampoline or springboard, with its "active" programmes enabling people to adjust and be flung back into the workforce. The discourse has also shifted away from a commitment to universality to selectivity.

Welfare states can remain compassionate but cannot, we are told, afford to maintain traditional levels of concern about the distribution of income. Rather, we should adjust mindsets toward the policy goals of eliminating and avoiding government deficits and lowering public debts. By the same token, governments themselves need to be re-engineered or re-invented, business experts and management consultants insist, if they are to face more effectively the challenges as well as opportunities of global competition.

The United States as Laggard Transformed into Leader?

The literature on twentieth-century welfare state development used to dwell on the "exceptional" character of the United States, by comparison with (non-communist) Northern Europe as well as Canada, as if the latter "genuine" clusters of welfare states (for all their own social spending variety) were best to be defined by comparison with what they were not. Numerous explanations were put forward to account for the "reluctance" of the USA to perform as befitting a welfare state. Attention was drawn for instance to the peculiar characteristics of American immigrant society over the period of industrialization; to the absence therefore of socialism or even of a coherent working class; to the immigrants' ingrained distrust of government; to the provisions of the US constitution which—unsurprisingly for the time of its devising—had left matters of social policy to the individual states; and to the sheer wealth of the latter-day USA which had rendered collective social protection (other than earned occupational welfare) seemingly unnecessary and unattractive to the majority of its voting population.

Nevertheless, confidence in the "rightness" of classic welfare statism became more difficult to sustain once the welfare states themselves saw their economic viability and indeed entire efficacy of operation (e.g. OECD 1981) brought into question in the wake of oil-led economic crises from the early 1970s. Significantly, this was also the time from when US social scientists evinced increasing impatience with European dismissal of the USA as a mere welfare state *manqué*. In the eventual words of veteran liberal USA reformer Nathan Glazer:

> American social policy is different. The United States is far more dependent on a great variety of private, voluntary, ethnically and religiously sponsored, nonprofit and profit agencies to maintain the public welfare—even if in a somewhat private and individualistic way. Nonpublic resources in American welfare are greater than in any other major nation . . . The present mood of the United States does not favor a fully developed national system of social policy; that mood seems to be based on more than economic exigency. It reflects rather a considered judgement by many Americans that despite the cost in social disorder that prevails in their society; they prefer it that way. (1988: 192)

It took the famed 1980s empathy between British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and US President Ronald Reagan to popularize notions, at least within Britain, that the USA might have become a leader rather than laggard with regard to the *reformation* of the welfare state. More seriously, albeit rather late after the event, Paul Pierson (1994) was at pains to demonstrate why and in what respects there were parallels as well as contrasts to be drawn between the respective social policy agendas and achievements of these "twinned" radical administrations. Of yet greater potential import, there were others keen to demonstrate that it was precisely the hitherto laggard quality of the US welfare state which had equipped it to take the forefront in efforts to rethink the entire welfare state project. In such conditions of volte-face, so ran the argument, it was precisely the last which could and should expect to be first.

One version of this line of argument had centred on the (varying) condition of developed capitalism *per se*; that is, as to how far (and where) it had become "organized", as against remaining relatively *dis*-organized. According to Christopher Pierson (1989), drawing on Lash and Urry's thesis of 1987,

> those societies which were last and least organized will be the first to undergo the process of disorganization. It is the US that . . . was last and least organized and which we should correspondingly expect to have gone furthest in the process of *dis*-organization. However, in so doing, the US is likely to be "showing the way" for the more securely organized (but still incipiently disorganizing) societies of Western Europe.
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> The logic of this case may clearly be applied to the US welfare state experience. If the welfare state is indeed to be understood as a part of the structure of organized capitalism, but vulnerable to the tendency to *dis*-organize, we might continue to understand the US as a welfare state "laggard", in keeping with . . . [the] suggestion that the US is the recent and most partial example of organized capitalism. However it would follow further that the future development of the US welfare state is unlikely to see its continued growth to meet its more expansive Western European counterparts. Rather should we expect to see a further retrenchment of the US welfare state, and Western European welfare states now following the US example, as the logic of *dis*-organized capitalism impinges more and more upon their domestic social and political arrangements.

How far this should be seen as a matter of mere shifts in academic discourse, as opposed to shifts in actual policy-making agendas, depends of course upon the value placed upon such discourse as a factor bearing upon the social policy-making process.

Discourse Analysis and Social Policy Change

Social Policy and Administration has conspicuously *not* been a feature of US college teaching programmes, geared as these have been to the development of (by British terms) "sub-sectoral" specialisms in respect of such as social security, health care, housing, education, as well as social work. Nevertheless, there has been much academic attention paid—both within and outside the US—to the meaning of terms and the importance of language, as expressed by policy makers, the media and experts, whether in defining social problems, denigrating politics, or creating stigma for certain groups in society. Terms such as social welfare, economic growth, private costs, and market efficiency have been examined critically, and their complexity, ambiguity and partiality often emphasized. Drawing on postmodernist theory, this interest in the discourses of social policy greatly expanded in the 1990s, from addressing vocabularies of citizenship (Bussemaker and Voet 1998) to popular discourses and paradigms (Dean 1998).

Drawing on the work of Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995) on discourse analysis, this paper explores the discursive dimensions of two major tendencies, namely, fiscalization and marketization. As orders of discourse, both are affecting the general direction of social policy reform and welfare state practice in North America and beyond.

The central argument is that welfare state restructuring is possible by recasting the order of discourse on the nature of government social services and institutional relationships. Fiscalization and marketization are orders of discourse, which have acquired greater political salience in the last few decades. Operating in relation to other institutional domains in the political economy and political struggles, they have expanded within the welfare state, challenging the previously dominant order of discourse of Keynesian state welfarism. Fiscalization and marketization have served as justifications by elite groups for a wide range of "reforms" to social programmes and welfare state practices. Results of this policy change include the foreclosing of certain political spaces and opportunities and the opening of others. The very concept of what is social policy and what the purpose is of the welfare state itself, and the associated rights and duties of clients, citizens, corporations and communities, are also altered. Changes in language use and practices to do with the economy, the state and public finances have supported particular changes in policies and programmes.

The Fiscalization of Political Discourse

From the crisis of the welfare debates and from economic globalization have come changes in the way we *think* and *talk* about the welfare state and *do* social provision. A new conception of welfare prevails, with a related social policy discourse, which defies many of the accepted ideas of the postwar social security vision. The goals of a comprehensive social policy system and high and stable levels of employment have effectively been abandoned by most governments as unattainable aims.

Part of the new orthodoxy is that a postwar welfare network of social programmes is no longer appropriate for the times we are living in, because of the "new realities" of fiscal constraints, global trade imperatives and an ageing population. Social security has become too expensive and too passive; it is a burden on the economy and must be reformed because of, and in close relation to major economic trends.

Fiscal crisis (the problem), public and or political irresponsibility (the causes), and expenditure restraint (the solution), have become the meta-narrative in many countries. It is the politically dominant storyline on what the most critical issue is that faces governments, how it came about, and what needs to be done about it. As Pal (1997: 79) observes:

> Arguments about social policy and the deficit can be seen as "redemption stories". In the past, good will and good intentions built a welfare state to meet important needs, but then temptation led us astray and we indulged in excesses and financial debauchery. Our problems got worse, but we ignored them and continued our profligate ways. Now the only option is a complete renunciation of our past sins, and with much pain and suffering we will be redeemed. No wonder finance ministers sound like preachers these days. Their "narrative line" is about nothing less than weakness, temptation, and eventual, if painful, redemption.

The new conception of the welfare state, in wide currency over the past decade or more, is that social policy should fit with the new economic order, complementing economic restructuring and international competitiveness. This viewpoint actually narrows the focus of the social policy field. Many areas of quality-of-life are downplayed as official priority is given to matters of job readiness, training and skill redevelopment. The guiding principle for reforming social programmes is that they support the work ethic and economic productivity. For income support and social service programmes in Canada, the United States and Britain, this has meant more targeting, a tightening of eligibility requirements and increasing work-related obligations for clients of social assistance.

Fiscalization occurs when financial concerns, especially considerations of expenditure restraint and deficit avoidance/reduction, dominate deliberations on setting public policy priorities and contemplating social reforms (Rice and Prince 2000). A fiscal discourse on social policy promotes certain ideas and objectives rather than others; favours some interests in government and in the economy over others and some programme designs and institutional arrangements over others.

"The state welfare system", under what Jordan (1998: 170) calls the Blair-Clinton orthodoxy, "is to become a safety net for the most needy, and not a universal provider." A more active imagery for labour market programming is, in turn, replacing the safety net analogy. In a survey of the OECD countries, Eardley (1996) notes that the circus metaphor of "safety nets" has shifted to one of "springboards" to independence. Such shifts convey three messages. One is that public expenditures of the past have been quite substantial though not necessarily very effective. A second message is that allocating more tax dollars to social problems is irresponsible, the "throwing money at problems" argument. A third is that the social security system has bred dependency; the argument that programmes have been "passive" safety nets rather than "active" supports. Along with other "extensive social assistance states of the English-speaking world", American and Canadian governments have placed increased importance on the connection between welfare and the labour market by adopting "a mixture of carrot and stick" measures (Eardley 1996: 282). Note the use here of yet another metaphor, sticks and carrots, that is common in Anglo-Saxon public policy discourse. It usually refers to penalties and rewards for shaping behaviours of clients. In welfare reform in North America, among the sticks employed are more intensive requirements for job search, shorter duration of benefits, and harder eligibility criteria. So-called carrots include higher benefits for clients, tax credits, and services for the transition from welfare to work. References to equality and social justice, as fundamental and feasible policy ends, typically are not addressed within this discourse.

The Marketization of Social Programmes

Marketization of social programmes is a process routinely overlooked in analyses of welfare state politics. Customary themes of restructuring concern the contraction of the public sector or "rolling back" of the state and the expansion of the private sector. There may also be the expectation explicitly created that the voluntary sector can and should do more. In feminist analyses, restructuring is also interpreted as involving the regulation and imposition of additional burdens on the domestic realm. Retrenchment is ordinarily evaluated in terms of whether welfare state benefits and services are taken away from clients; and whether social budgets are slashed or at least significantly reduced. In a detailed examination of welfare politics in Britain and the United States, Paul Pierson (1994) concludes there are substantial continuities in social policies in both countries, while under strong conservative administrations, with few radical changes. A limitation of this approach is that regardless of the welfare state's size or the apparent stability of policies, fundamental changes can take place within existing social programmes and budgets. Indeed, major reforms of a residualist nature can and do occur even when the welfare state is expanding.

Fairclough defines marketization, or what he also calls commodification, as referring to "the extension of market models to new spheres" (1992: 99) and "where the market and market–consumer relations are colonizing new domains of social life" (1995: 149). Fairclough conceives of this expansion of market models as "the colonization of institutional orders of discourse, and more broadly of the societal order of discourse, by discourse types associated with commodity production" (1992: 207). He elaborates that it is a process "whereby social domains and institutions, whose concern is not producing commodities in the narrower economic sense of goods for sale, come nevertheless to be organized and conceptualized in terms of commodity production, distribution and consumption" (1992: 207). He observes a recent increase in the penetration of the market order of discourse to other parts of public life and state activity, such as the arts, education and health care.

At a macro-level, marketization is one of the basic processes for mediating the relation between capitalist economies and liberal democracies.[1] Marketization entails the blending of the logic of the market (private property, competition and profit) with the logic of the state (ultimate authority, public interest and citizenship). In part, this is what democratic capitalism and the mixed economy are about. It is also what the mixed economy of care or welfare pluralism is partly about. External to the state, marketization entails the influence of economic values on social policy. It conditions the goals and means of benefits and services, and shapes public attitudes as to which groups and needs are deserving and worthy of support, and which are undeserving and the object of exclusion or stigma.

Internal to the state, marketization involves the culture of capitalism moving into public-sector activities. It is the expansion of private-sector principles into social programmes, ideas, structures and processes. It also includes the injection of "sound business principles" into social welfare systems and public service administration more generally.[2]

Marketization of welfare is quite an old process. The principle of less eligibility in social assistance—setting benefit levels no higher, and preferably lower, than the lowest wages in the labour market—has been in effect for about 400 years. The principle of social insurance, viewed as a central way to modernize welfare systems and founded on market concepts, reflects the market society we live in. Entitlement to social insurance benefits under such programmes as the work-based public pension plans and unemployment benefits are based on the person's situation as a wage earner and direct contributor, not as a citizen or resident of the country.

Fairclough's metaphor of colonizing, therefore, in terms of market ideas moving into a *new field* with the local practices of that field now connected to hitherto external forces, does not describe the historical experience of state welfare and its dialectic relation to capitalism and industrialization. Far more than being recent conquerors, market values and discourse have been long-time residents of social welfare territory.

What is new is the intensification of designing social programmes on the ethic of the economic market. Economic conditions and market values are more influential today in determining social policy developments than in earlier periods of the welfare state. The death of Canada's two national universal income programmes, Old Age Security and Family Allowances, in the 1990s dramatically symbolizes the decline of communal social principles and the subordination of welfare values to market norms. Eligibility to child benefits and senior benefits rests entirely now on income testing.

While such concerns as assistance to the disadvantaged are still accorded some attention in official policy circles, they are overshadowed by initiatives more acceptable to the interest favoured by a globalizing economy. Marketization of social policy is affecting eligibility criteria for programme benefits; the level and duration of benefits; disqualification provisions; programme financing and other uses of programmes.

The recent marketization of social policy in Canada and the United States is perhaps most apparent in social assistance and unemployment insurance programmes. Amendments to these programmes by governments in both North American welfare states have pushed them closer to market ideas. Tellingly, the unemployment insurance programme in Canada was renamed employment insurance (EI) in 1996. A long-standing debate over this programme is how much of it is insurance (a market concept) and how much is social welfare (a public policy concept). Financial contributions to the programme directly from the public purse were eliminated, placing the onus for full funding on employees and employers. Both the amounts and duration of benefits have decreased numerous times. Eligibility requirements have tightened, penalties have toughened and disqualification provisions expanded. Such changes are motivated by business complaints and government concerns that EI has a negative impact on employee and employer incentives, the unemployment level and the mobility of workers. These reforms have strengthened EI's labour market role, while weakening traditional income protection and macro-economic stabilization functions. Likewise, welfare reforms in Canada, the UK and the United States in the 1990s followed a similar direction, involving the exercise of state authority in targeting benefits to "make welfare work and work pay" (Blank 2000; Jordan 1998).

Implications: Allusions and Illusions

As systems of belief and argumentation, fiscal and market discourse not only enliven many recent policy changes, they underpin and define the social policy process more generally. Collective entities frequently use two storylines to construct political problems and policy solutions (Stone 1989). One is the story of decline that either describes a serious decline under way or predicts one about to happen. Fiscalization as a discourse of social policy and government budgets represents this type of narrative structure. The lineage of causal factors runs like this: the public deficit is a grave problem that is the result of excessive spending by previous governments. Most government spending is on social programmes, demanded by the public and interest groups, which has caused the problem or is a major contributing factor that cannot be exempt from any solution.

Rarely under this discourse is the responsibility for government deficits or national debts assigned to the extensive provision of tax breaks to business, declining revenue from economic slowdowns or the adverse effects of high interest rate policies on investment. Rather, the areas seen as causes of fiscal problems are universal social programmes, the self-interest of helping professions, and the claims by various "special interest" groups. Framing the problem in this way reinforces prevailing ideologies and interests within the political economy as well as the state itself. The implication of this fiscal discourse, then, is to challenge welfare state practices as outdated, ineffective, self-centred in part, and unaffordable.

The second narrative is what Stone calls the story of control that suggests problems of decline can be addressed if not avoided. This is where the discourse of marketization enters popular debate and decision making. The relative importance of these two major institutional domains in modern society—the market economy and the welfare state—is altered by the increased marketization of social policy by legitimating market mechanisms as solutions to defined problems. This discourse, as the name implies, fortifies the existing capitalist order by *changing the welfare state from within by marketizing programmes and practices*. The focus of social security policy changes from income redistribution and the reduction of inequality between the wealthy and the poor, to targeting income assistance to those most in need.

Increasingly over the 1980s and 1990s, the monetarist-minimalist policy advocates in North America and elsewhere argued that the competitive forces of markets needed strengthening to restore and enhance economic growth. Keynesian-style intervention, they claimed, was ineffective and a monetarist policy would create the required environment for economic competitiveness. This agenda has included free trade pacts, the deregulation of certain markets, the privatization of some public services, the limitation of collective bargaining and union powers, and reducing the number of public employees. In addition to transforming the tax system, the agenda has also included restructuring local governance structures (municipalities, hospital authorities and school boards), promoting charities and other community groups as vehicles for meeting social needs.

Extending the position of market values in the governmental arena is a compelling way to watch over the welfare state and to promote private interests. Business executives, senior government officials and the leadership of conservative political parties all subscribe to some form of the pro-fiscal restraint and pro-market positions. Trade liberalization, international competitiveness and restructured social policy are core aims of this prevailing ideology.

For many social policy clients and interest groups, the companion processes of fiscalization and marketization are debilitating. For them, social policy change is a politics of isolation. Part of this is due to fiscal constraints, the limited resources of advocacy groups and the complex diversity of the community itself which poses challenges in building alliances and speaking with a strong united voice on issues. To take part in policy reviews means, for these groups, fighting the discourse and concrete reforms proposed by the government and business elite who strongly favour a social policy agenda motivated by fiscal restraint and market reforms. For some community agencies, cloaking budget requests in economic terms can provoke heated internal debates as to the desirability and utility of such a strategy. Some agency staff may see it as an essential tactic for survival and securing grants while others no doubt view it as selling out their philosophy. Such experiences and sentiments translate into a politics of resignation. Social movements representing labour, the poor and women, along with the traditional Left, have been placed on the defensive, seeking to protect universal programmes, national standards and other valued aspects of the postwar welfare state and related order of discourse.

At the same time, political groups have contested fiscalization and marketization. Outside of government and the corporate sector, the public and groups in the social policy community tend towards a challenging, if not opposing, outlook, because of their values and their greater sense of vulnerability in the world economy. Canadians, in contrast to Americans, tend to value social security, equality and collective rights more highly than elites' priority ideas of international competitiveness, individualism and a much smaller welfare state (Graves 1999).

Community groups and their policy analysts are examining trends of commercialization, for instance, within the education sector, with the use of vouchers in American schools, and describing the implications for civic culture and social citizenship (Shaker 1997). Other examples are the resistance by feminists to the commodification of motherhood and reproductive technologies; resistance by child welfare advocates to the commodification of adoptions; and resistance by poverty activists to the marketization of welfare through workfare (Shragge 1997).

The universe of policy discourse therefore contains a prevailing discourse and one or more competing discourses engaged in a political struggle over the naming of issues, the use of language and the credibility of particular narratives. These differences and struggles suggest the interactive relationship between power and language, and the opportunity for alternative voices in specific political and historical settings.

Conclusion

Long regarded as a laggard among welfare states in advanced industrial nations, the USA may be emerging as a leader in the reformation of social programmes and the relationship between the state, the market and civil society. Fiscal and market discourses are important avenues through which this leadership is occurring. The American regime is still exceptional in many social policy aspects, most notably in lacking a national health insurance system as well as in practising capital punishment, and tolerating high levels of poverty and inequality despite very robust economic growth in the 1990s. There are, however, other aspects of the American experience over the past 20 years, that may be a "model" to the UK and possibly other welfare states in Continental Europe (Jordan 1998). These include the increased emphasis on the personal obligations of citizenship, partnerships between the state and voluntary sector; tax credits for the working poor, and the lowering or tightening of various social insurance programme benefits. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, social policy in North America is more deferential and exposed to market forces than in the heyday of the welfare state. The concept of marketization indicates that government need not privatize a service in order to extend the market system. Some elements of welfare states have disappeared and others have been sharply cut, but much of what has happened, and still is happening, to social policy is a realigning in aid of domestic and global capital. A central goal of policy reform, in this context, is changing benefits and programmes to promote a more mobile labour force and to order a more work-ready group of welfare clients for low-wage employment. The fiscalization of public discourse and priority setting coupled with the marketization of social programmes have pushed public interest groups and social advocates to the periphery of many national and local political systems. We can understand these processes not so much as invading social policy but rather as intensifying ideas and beliefs already present in this policy field. The fiscal and market vocabularies tend to constrain and challenge the welfare state, shifting boundaries among the state, market, communities and families.

Market-centred approaches to social issues do not signal the resurrection of "economic man" in social policy, since market principles were never dead in the welfare state. Instead, what we see is the reassertion of these principles in a number of programme and service areas. The market ethos is alive and flourishing in the public sector as well as the private sector in North America. State intervention does not necessarily mean there is a corresponding decline in market systems or values. With the marketization of social policy currently in vogue, we have market capitalism and market welfarism in concert. Marketization should prompt us invariably to ask how social is social policy.

Notes

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1. Other processes where governments extend the state's realm into the market and community include nationalization or state ownership; economic and civic regulation; taxation; expenditures to persons and other levels of government; and the provision of a range of public services. These all represent, in varying ways, the penetration of the political system into the market economy and civil society. By contrast, the processes of taking governments out of the market include the privatization of public assets and services; the full or partial deregulation of economic sectors; tax cuts, especially for corporations; and spending cutbacks and the contracting-out of public service provision to for-profit agencies. In the latter case, the result would be a marketization of society, by subjecting more areas of life to the influence of private-sector values and market mechanisms.
2. The marketization of social programmes can be distinguished from the concept in the welfare state literature of the "social market" which refers to the welfare state or the state and the non-governmental provision of health and social services in the voluntary sector. My use of the concept of marketization of social programmes also differs from "occupational welfare" and "corporate welfare"—the development and administration of social benefits and services in the workplace, such as employee assistance plans.

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