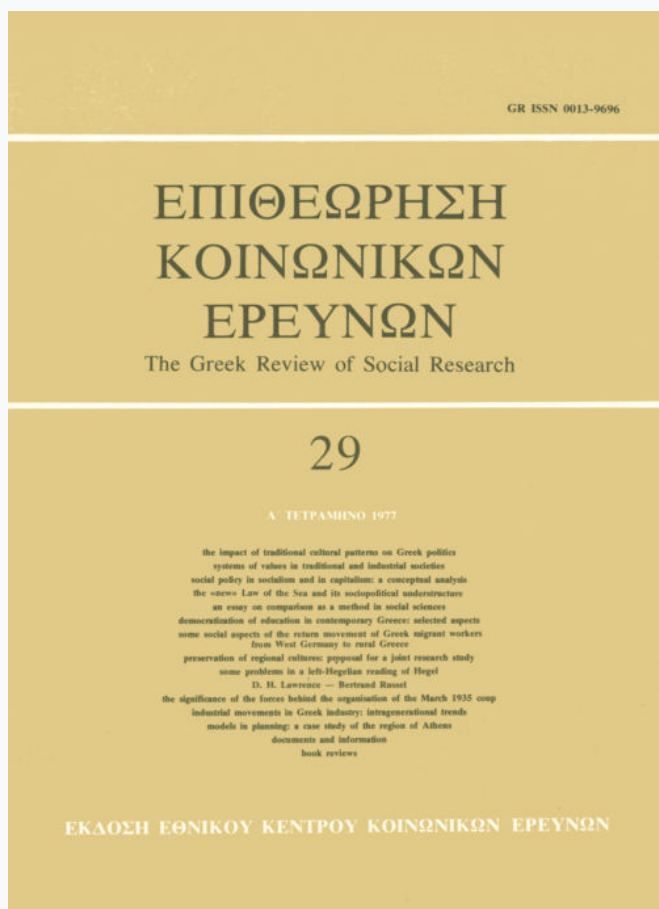


# The Greek Review of Social Research

Vol 29 (1977)

29 A'



## Social policy in socialism and in capitalism: A conceptual analysis

J.P. Roos

doi: [10.12681/grsr.332](https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.332)

Copyright © 1977, J.P. Roos



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Roos, J. (1977). Social policy in socialism and in capitalism: A conceptual analysis. *The Greek Review of Social Research*, 29, 24–29. <https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.332>

# **social policy in socialism and in capitalism**

*A conceptual analysis*<sup>1</sup>

by  
**J. P. Roos**

*Institute of Social Policy  
University of Joensuu, Finland*

## **on the basis of making comparisons**

In order to compare social policies in capitalist and socialist countries, specifically Finland and Poland, it is necessary to make some general points about socialism and capitalism which are relevant to our subject.

In a capitalist society social policy has a fundamentally different function from that of a socialist society. This means that, for instance, obvious similarities in certain aspects of social policy may have a very different meaning in both systems. On the other hand, it is possible to compare for instance the quality of certain services in both systems (say housing) and look for reasons in, the inadequate emphasis of certain factors due exactly to the comprehensive nature of socialist social policy.

It is especially necessary to take into consideration the role of production relations in analysing differences of social policy. Many sectors of social policy are very closely connected with the reproduction and maintenance of the labour force and this means they have direct relationship with the basic difference of socialism and capitalism.

On the other hand, the level of development of forces of production is something which cannot be left out of discussion. Reproduction of labour is dependent on the level of production forces and their qualifacational requirements, work-leisure time relationships and so on. This means that if the levels of the forces of production of socialist and capitalist countries differ, the systems of social policy differ accordingly. All this means that comparison of social policies in capitalism and socialism is an extremely difficult theoretical task, where direct comparison may tell little or be gravely misleading.

## **«social problems» in socialist and capitalist societies**

One way of approaching social policy is to discuss the «social problem» perception in socialist and capitalist societies. In both systems there are obviously problems which are considered socially important and relevant to social policy. Borowska (1976) has compiled one list based on such authors as Szubert, Tymowski, Morecka. According to them, the following problems do exist in socialist countries:

- the problems of participation in the enterprises and housing areas
- the difficult situation of disabled and aged
- alcoholism
- violent crime, juvenile delinquency

1. I thank Jan Malanowski for useful comments.

- uneven regional development
- perfunctory and spurious employment of certain groups of population (unskilled women for instance)
- low wages for many groups of population (leading e.g. to moonlighting)
- Rajkiewicz (1970, 1972) mentions also such problems as:
- the housing situation
- the living conditions of families with many children (see also Tymowski (1976) for data on their situation)
- the structure of consumption of certain groups of population

Malanowski (1974, 423) has mentioned the following problems:

- inequalities in housing and incomes and other material aspects of the level of living
- intra-class and intra-strata inequalities in the educational level
- social inequalities in the use of leisure time
- differences in the legal status of manual and white-collar workers
- inequalities in health care
- inequalities in the chances for vertical social mobility

Thus, we can speak of two types of problems: those pertaining to the *structure of socialist society* and mainly having to do with the still existing inequality which is not in accordance with the basic assumptions of socialism. On the other hand, we can speak of «social problems proper», those ones which are relatively isolated and pertain to the *individuals' and families' life situation*.

Especially the discussion about how to decrease inequality in the socialist society has taken place mainly in Poland, although there are references to this problem in articles and books of many Soviet authors (see e.g. Gordon-Klopov, 1975). For instance Wesolowski and Slomzynski (1974) have presented an interesting suggestion concerning a macrostrategy towards equalization, namely that of creating «status inconsistency» by conscious policy, that is, attempting to develop a system where status characteristics are not cumulative. They also point out that this is already partially true in Poland.

Malanowski has discussed this problem extensively in a great many articles (see e.g. 1974, 1976). Zofia Morecka has written an interesting article about the possibilities of using social consumption funds as a means towards more equalization, and so on.

It is interesting to compare the above social problem perception with that of the capitalist society. Some items on the list would be (see e.g. Etzioni 1976, Ozbekhan 1969, 85).

- inequalities in the housing situation, and a very difficult situation for certain «problem» groups, such as migrants, young adults, and recently married couples
- unemployment and insecurity of employment, especially for unskilled workers, small farmers, young adults, women, less educated
- inflation, with strongly different effects for various groups of population (aged, unskilled workers, low level civil service workers)
- incomplete unemployment insurance with many unsocial characteristics (such as the possibility of making people move from their home region)
- bad and unhealthy working conditions for large groups of population
- unevenly distributed health care system both socially and regionally
- inordinately low pensions and bad living conditions for large groups of the aged and disabled
- the economically and professionally insecure situation of the students
- alcoholism
- day care
- a debilitating and lopsided mass communication system
- juvenile delinquency
- a «lopsided» power structure, especially with regard to the so-called «economic power».

Thus, on the level of social problems and their perception in the socialist and capitalist countries, the differences are apparent concerning such problems as unemployment and inflation<sup>1</sup> on one hand and e.g. power structure and participation on the other, but otherwise the problems refer to largely same phenomena. But this does not mean that the nature of the problems would not be very different: in fact it is in many cases not a question of the same problem even if the headings are the same.

For instance, in the capitalist countries, the housing problem is both a problem of inordinately large part of workers' incomes going into housing (either as savings during an extraordinarily long period, and usually during a life cycle where difficulties are otherwise the greatest, or even as a rent) and a problem of inadequate housing in bad conditions, whereas in socialist countries the problem is essentially that of space and conveniences, with the cost playing a relatively small role (in fact, some authors emphasize that its role is too small, see Gordon-Klopov, 1975).

But it is obvious that the determination of the role of social policies in the socialist and capital-

1. Of course, there are some inflationary problems in countries such as Poland and Hungary, but their importance cannot be compared with those of the capitalist countries.

ist countries cannot be reduced to the level of social problems. As Malanowski has noted (Malanowski 1974, 1976), many of the social problems of a socialist society such as Poland are leftovers from capitalism: especially those which are connected with the way of life of the population. And, of course, capitalist social phenomena continue to have an influence on socialist societies as the contacts between the two systems grow and trade increases.

Yet, from a Marxist point of view we can say that the basic social problem in capitalism is the contradiction between capital and labour, or between the high level of development of the productive forces and the restrictions placed on this development by the backward relations of production. In this framework, the analysis of specific social problems would require a systematic treatment of different types of social problems from the point of view of the basic problem.

However, certain general conclusions may be drawn which are relevant to the following discussion about the concept of social policy. Firstly, the strategic, structural problems are more severe in capitalist than in socialist countries, although there exist many structural problems in the socialist countries, too. Secondly, we may assume that the individual or family level problems are more concentrated to same groups of population in capitalist countries than in socialist countries (which is partly confirmed by the Wesolowski-Slomczynski article, 1974). Thirdly, there are specific problems which are clearly common to both societies and connected with such general phenomena as urbanization, migration, etc. (for instance, traffic, juvenile delinquency, alcoholism). For these problems the solution may in some cases be the same.

#### **the concepts of socialist viz. capitalist social policy**

There are no commonly accepted conceptions of either capitalist or socialist social policy. In the following part of this paper, we shall discuss some alternatives and try to present the main differences between these two concepts.

As it is well known, there was a period in the development of the socialist society when the practice of social policy, let alone the scientific study of it, were considered unnecessary (see Zawadski, 1976, who shows that the social function of the socialist state was not recognized until relatively late, and Szubert, 1976). As a Polish minister of labour put it in the fifties: our principles of social policy are: for everybody the right

to work, and those who don't work must not eat either (K. Rusinek, according to Borwoska, 1976). In other words, in a socialist society, social problems would be taken care of by offering everybody work.

As a science, social policy was disbanded between 1950 and 1956 (in Poland) so that the researchers and practitioners had to seek other employments, such as labour law or administrative duties.<sup>1</sup> It is notable that many good social welfare workers had to give up their work so that, as a consequence, there now exists a shortage of qualified welfare workers.

As mentioned above, there are many different definitions of socialist social policy (see e.g. Volkov, 1976, Szubert, 1976, Ferge, 1975, Rajkiewicz, 1976, *Aufgaben und Probleme...*, 1975, Manz et al., 1975) so much so that we can speak of two general orientations which have long traditions, namely, the *orientation towards changing the social structure of the society in order to secure given goals of social policy* and, secondly, the *orientation towards changing and affecting people's living conditions and especially way of life more directly*. We could perhaps call these orientations respectively the «macro-orientation» towards social policy and the «micro-orientation» towards social policy.

If the macro-orientation towards socialist social policy can be described as one of far-reaching reforms towards increasing equality under socialist social relations, then the micro-orientation can be described as one which is related to the improvement and development of the socialist way of life of the people. Here the emphasis lies in changing the conditions of work and life in the direction of socialist way of life, as in the following formulation: «Social policy affects the social relations through the following special factors: by raising the material and cultural standards of living..., by forming the work and living conditions in enterprises and communities, as also by influencing actively ways of thinking and behaviour, which are connected with the development of a socialist way of life. *The task of socialist social policy is to form these processes in a planned way.*» (*Aufgaben und Probleme...*, p. 2).

This conception differs then clearly from the above mentioned «macro-orientation» at least by

1. In Poland there exist long traditions of social policy so that the term «Polish school of social policy» has been used (see Szubert, 1976). In this sense the historical development between Finland and Poland is interestingly similar as compared to many other countries, although in Poland a progressive orientation was prevailing whereas in Finland social policy before the war was very conservative as a scientific orientation.

emphasis. Even though the question of increasing equality and social homogeneity is mentioned as one aspect of this policy, we can say that those who support the more «macro-orientation» are clearly less interested in affecting socialist way of life directly. For them the problem lies in creating preconditions of the socialist way of life.

As Szubert and Rajkiewicz have noted (1976, 1976), these orientations have a long tradition in Poland where the macro-orientation was directed towards changing the then capitalist society into a socialist one.

The macro-orientation has a strong tradition in Poland, but there are also some authors in other socialist countries who emphasize this aspect of social policy.<sup>1</sup>

However, we can maintain that both the macro- and micro-orientations are well anchored inside the general approach to socialist social policy, and, indeed, some authors, such as Rajkiewicz, take clearly a middle position and emphasize both aspects equally strongly (see 1976, see also Rajkiewicz and Rosner, 1976). Thus, he has defined social policy as the planning of social progress, i.e. the quantitative and qualitative fulfilment of people's needs and the elimination of social inequality.

It seems to us that this double emphasis is very necessary in order to avoid, on the one hand, a merely «reformist» social policy of the capitalist type and, on the other, a too restricted approach to social policy where central questions of societal change are ignored.

Thus, in general, we would say that *socialist social policy has to comprise two aspects: firstly, the control and management aspect where interest lies in consciously controlling and managing social processes and relations*. We can also call this the «planning» aspect of socialist social policy. *Secondly, the socialist social policy should have direct relationship to people's needs; it is connected directly with people's needs and activities which comprise their way of life*. These two aspects then define the area of social policy: the first relates it to more general control and

guidance problems of the society and the second links it to its specific field, namely the fulfilment of people's needs according to a definite way of life.

So we could attempt to present a general definition of socialist social policy as follows: *social policy is the totality of those collective activities by which social relations, processes and structures are managed and developed in that field of social life which is related to the needs of the population and their way of life, and which is directed towards eliminating of social inequalities and creation of a classless society*.

All three aspects lead to very complicated theoretical problems, which we shall not consider here. For instance, the question of conscious management of social processes is related to the problem of the dialectics between the subjective factor and objective laws, which is one of the most central in the philosophical discussions of scientists in the socialist countries (see the Objektive Gesetzmässigkeit und bewusstes Handeln..., 1975). Also the question of social needs, their nature and development as well as relationship to the way of life, is subject to a very lively debate, which we shall not discuss here.

### the concept of social policy in capitalism

In discussing conceptual differences between socialist and capitalist social policies there are certain semantic problems which must be remembered. After all, nothing prevents (or has prevented) a bourgeois theorist of social policy from defining social policy in capitalism as conscious management of social processes to fulfil people's needs, although this definition would averse to some «schools» of social policy (see George-Wilding, 1976, Wilensky, 1975). The question whether this would be a correct description of capitalist social policies is a question of concrete analysis of social processes; something which is not so easy.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, we cannot here fix a «true» definition of social policy in capitalism but we can present some alternatives and discuss their relative merits.

The discussion of the concept of social policy has been very extensive in capitalist countries. We shall refer here—as in the case of socialist

1. E.g. Gordon-Klopov, 1975: a noted Hungarian social policy theorist, Susan Ferge, in a lecture at the Polish Academy of Sciences, has expressed strong doubts about the definition of social policy as formation of the socialist way of life. It is true, according to her, that in the last instance social policy aims to change the way of life, but in the present situation social policy can only mean structural changes both in institutions and social mechanisms to increase equality. This, of course, affects the way of life and it should not be attempted. L.A. Gordon, in private discussions with the author, has expressed the idea that the way of life should not be used as a criterion of planning, but as something which will be directly «formed» through social policies.

2. It should be noted that we cannot certainly claim that socialist social policies fulfil all the criteria: as many authors have pointed out, socialism creates a possibility for conscious direction of social processes towards desired ends but it by no means automatically ensures that these ends can be realized (see e.g. Malanowski, 1974, 1976).

social policies—to some main directions only.

The typically bourgeois way of explaining and conceptualizing social policy is to discuss various motives of social policy. So, for instance, Armas Nieminen has in his classical treatment (1955) distinguished christian, humanitarian and totalitarian motives for social policy. And, after accepting the humanitarian motivation as the most appropriate one, he proceeds to define social policy on the basis of this humanitarian motivation as the *complex of those activities of the state which are directed towards guaranteeing adequate living standards and social security to all classes, social groups, families and individuals*.

To us, definitions of this type are not adequate for the analysis of social policy in capitalism. The capitalist state is not free to choose any objectives it would like to pursue (or perhaps, it is free to choose but not free to pursue). The development of social policy must be seen as a more complex phenomenon connected with the fundamental differences of socialism and capitalism.

Thus, such factors as the conditions for the reproduction of labour, the social and political struggle of the working class, the requirements of the enterprises concerning the organization and intensity of work and the existing «progressive tendencies» inside the development of capitalism play their part.

In the marxist discussion concerning the concept of social policy, there are many different positions. The most generally accepted approach relates social policy with the requirements for the reproduction of labour so that social policy is seen as the complex of those activities which regulate and change the conditions for the reproduction of labour (see, for instance, Proletariat in der BRD, Kasvio, 1976).

A recent, interesting version of this is the attempt to relate social policy directly to the increase of labour intensity in the enterprises (Böhle-Sauer, 1975) so that the development of social policy is seen as an «objective» response of the state to the problems caused by the attempts of enterprises to increase labour intensity in order to increase the production of the relative surplus value and decelerate the fall of the profit rate. In the view of Böhle and Sauer—contrary to the prevailing opinion about the need for higher qualifications, etc.—the dominating form of the increase in productivity is still to organize work in such a way that the tasks are divided, mechanized and simplified (i.e., Taylorization).

This creates increasingly a problem of too rapid usage of labour and thus, on the other hand, puts the state into a dilemma of necessity of guaranteeing the process of labour intensification in the

present stage, and in the future, too. Also, with the approaching problem of the shortage of labour (parallel with persisting unemployment), these problems become increasingly urgent.

Criticizing the approach of Böhle and Sauer as too «neat» (1975), Claus Offe has presented an interesting alternative hypothesis of «subversive reformism» of the social policy of the state. In his version the social policy cannot be conceived as anything homogeneous, directed towards securing conditions of labour reproduction, but on the contrary as being always structurally unable to determine and react the needs presented by the capital. In fact, the activities of the state may often go against the «required» development of social policy as fulfilment of the needs of capital.

In our opinion, the Offean version is also too neat: there are certainly both objective and subjective processes going on, which help to form social policies best adapted to current requirements of capitalist development. But there is truth in the assumption that these processes are not omnipotent, and social policy in capitalism may have many different, conflicting effects.

This is related to the question about the role of the «progressive tendencies» in social policy in capitalism. Thus, there are obviously some reforms and policies which can be termed progressive and about which there is a great struggle between the interests of capital and the interests of the workers; on the other hand, in the Offean sense, there are many policies with intended and unintended effects completely different so that the resulting final effect may be «progressive». The interaction of the struggle of the working class, the social policies of the state and the intensification of labour by the enterprises are a very complex phenomenon. Böhle and Sauer (1975) present the hypothesis that the present forms of labour intensification are creating increasingly restrictive limits for capitalist social policy and, thus, there will be a tendency to look for completely new solutions inside and outside state social policy.

In conclusion, we shall try to present which are to us the *most important differences* between capitalist and socialist social policies and which should be further studied.

1. The question of the course of social development is specific to socialist social policy; in other words, socialist social policy has a more comprehensive and homogeneous goal-value system than capitalist social policy.

2. We can also say that for socialist social policy the basic course for social development is given, whereas in capitalism the course of social policy is a question of social and political struggle between antagonistic interests.

3. Socialist social policy operates both on the level of social structure and the level of the individual and family situation, whereas capitalist social policy attempts primarily to affect the individual and family living conditions.
4. Socialist social policy implies basically an attempt at comprehensive and conscious direction of social processes, whereas capitalist social policy is oriented towards partial, isolated changes in response to perceived social ills. Thus, capitalist social policy is more compartmentalized, and often conflicting in its approach.
5. Socialist social policy has more means and more effective means at its disposal than capitalist social policy.
6. We can also, perhaps, say that there is less contradiction between economic and social policy in a socialist society, whereas in capitalism social policy is either strictly subordinated or in conflict with economic policies.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aufgaben und Probleme der Sozialpolitik in der DDR* (Thesen), Wirtschaftswissenschaft 1, 1975, 1-22.
- Etzioni, Amitai, *Social Problems*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N. J. 1976.
- Borowska, Maria (red), *Socialpolitik i Polen II* (Social policy in Poland) Institutet for social forskning, Stockholm, 1976.
- Böhle, Fritz-Sauer, Dieter, «Replik auf die Bemerkungen von Claus Offe zu Böhle/Sauer: Intensivierung der Arbeit», *Leviathan* 2, 1975, 280-284.
- Böhle, Fritz-Sauer, Dieter: «Intensivierung der Arbeit und staatliche Sozialpolitik», *Leviathan* 3, (1.1975), 49-78.
- George, Vic and Wilding, Paul, *Ideology and Social Welfare*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1976.
- Gordon, L.A.-Klopov, E.V., *Man after Work*, Progress, Moscow, 1975.
- Kasvio, Antti, *Valtio ja työvoiman uusintaminen*. (State and reproduction of labour), Tampere, 1976.
- Malanowski, Jan, *Social Planning-Basic Problems*, A paper presented at the Polish-Finnish seminar on Comparative Social Change, Vuoranta, Finland, 15-19, 11.1976.
- Malanowski, Jan, Social Planning and Changes in Social Structure, Rutkevich et al. (eds), *Transformations of Social Structure in the USSR and Poland*, Moscow-Warsaw, 1974.
- Manz, Günther et al, *Das materielle und kulturelle Lebensniveau des Volkes und seine volkswirtschaftliche Planung*, Verlag der Wirtschaft, Berlin, 1975.
- Morecka, Zofia, «Samhälleliga konsumtionsfonder och jämlikhetsproblemet», in Borowska (red), *Socialpolitik i Polen II*, Institutet for social forskning, Stockholm, 1976.
- Nieminen, Armas, *Mitä on sosiaalipoliittikka* (What is Social Policy) WSOY, Porvoo, 1955.
- Objektive *Gesetzmässigkeit und bewusstes Handeln in der sozialistischen Gesellschaft*, Materialien des IV Philosophen-Kongresses der DDR, Berlin 12-13.12.1974, Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, Berlin, 1975.
- Offe, Claus, «Anmerkungen zum Aufsatz 'Intensivierung der Arbeit und staatliche Sozialpolitik' von Fritz Böhle und Dieter Sauer» *Leviathan* 3, (1.1975), 79-83.
- Ozbekhan, Hasan, «Toward a General Theory of Planning» in Jantsch, Erich (ed.), *Perspectives of Planning*, OECD, Paris, 1969.
- Proletariat in der BRD, Reproduktion-Organisation-Aktion*, Institut für Gesellschaftswissenschaften beim ZK der SED, Dietz Verlag, Berlin, 1974.
- Rajkiewicz, Antoni, «Problems of Social Policy», *Polish Perspectives*, 12, 1970.
- Rajkiewicz, Antoni, «Social Policy and Tomorrow», *Polish Perspectives* 6, 1972 3-11.
- Rajkiewicz, Antoni, *La politique sociale en Pologne*, Enseignement et recherche, unpublished manuscript, 1973.
- Rajkiewicz, Antoni-Rosner, Jan, «Sozialpolitik im Aufbau des entwickelten Sozialismus», *Polnische Perspektiven* 7/8, 1976, 12-22.
- Slomzynski, K.-Wesolowski, W., *Reduction of Inequalities and Status Inconsistency*, Paper presented in the International Congress of Sociology, Toronto, 1974.
- Szubert, Wacław, «Den socialistiska socialpolitikens ursprung», in Maria Borowska (red), *Socialpolitik i Polen II*, Institutet for social forskning, 1976.
- Tymowski, Andrzej, «De polska familjernas levnadsvillkor», in Maria Borowska (red), *Socialpolitik i Polen II*, Institutet for social forskning, Stockholm, 1976.
- Volkov, Juri, *NKPN sosiaalipoliittikka*, (The Social Policy of CPSU) *Kommunisti* 2, 1976, 132-138.
- Zawadski, Stanislaw, «Statens sociala funktion i ett socialistiskt system», in Borowska (red), *Socialpolitik i Polen II*, Institutet for social forskning, Stockholm, 1976.