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SOCIAL POLICY VERSUS SOCIAL INEQUALITY:
JUST COMPROMISING INJUSTICES?

ABSTRACT

The paper provides a critical discussion of the controversial relationship between social policy and social inequality. This is primarily about investigating the principles of equality, liberty and justice which are central to an understanding of inequality and of social intervention. A social policy system is either radical or compromising. For those who prefer the radical option, the failure of social policy to substantially erode inequality is unquestionable. For those who choose the prevailing version of compromise, social policy may gain the support of the tax-paying middle classes and may offer a means of reconciling notions such as capitalism and social welfare.

In short, there are two broad social policy options. First, a radical but optimistic version, where social policies are geared towards social change and vertical redistribution. Second, a compromise but surviving one, where moderate social policies effect some degree of social mobility and horizontal redistribution. In any case, social policy has to develop a more sophisticated and complex analytical paradigm reconciling class and social movement theories and reconsidering the current complexities of social inequality. Postmodern social policy should incorporate social participation with welfare provisions and cultivate a social reform inspired by more commitment for less inequality.

Keywords: social policy, social inequality, social justice, equal opportunity, redistribution

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is intended to provide a critical discussion of the controversial interchange between social policy and social inequality. This exploration is primarily about investigating the principle of equality which is central to an understanding of social reality and of political debate. In principle, social policy is expected to work as a redistributive refinery aiming at greater social equality. In practice, the contribution of social policy to ameliorate social inequality and to inspire collective spirit has been reasonably challenged. These challenges prescribe shortages of universalism in basic social welfare, lack of social participation in social policy-making, insufficient equal opportunities in areas such as education and employment. Different social policy regimes reflect different approaches to equality or justice and provide differing equalizing welfare benefits.

A social policy system is either radical or compromising. This is accurate when we consider the relationship between social policy and social equality. For those who prefer the radical option, the failure of social policy to substantially erode inequality is unquestionable. For those who choose the surviving version of compromise, social policy may gain the support of the tax-paying middle classes and may offer a means of reconciling notions such as liberty, equality, capitalism, social welfare.

A rational concern in analysing social policies, is by measuring their consequences against the stated principles for their enforcement. In terms of social equality, whether the outcome is desirable or not depends on the particular concept of justice or on the priority set on equalizing chances that underpins these policies. There is not ultimate definition of justice or equality but both concepts have an enduring appeal. Social policy analysis should provide the tools so that the prevailing principles are rendered visible and the outcome of a policy can be assessed against these principles. In the interlock between them, it is fundamental to discover the appropriate means of providing a viable relationship between equality and liberty. In this respect, the interpretation of social policies appreciates the extent to which welfare provision achieves to reconcile social equality and individual liberty. In every respect, the same priority we have for protecting political freedom would also lead to a commitment for both economic security and basic welfare services for all. In short, what we have to counterbalance are the specific gains and losses under the headings of freedom and equality as these arise in social policy intervention.

II. SOCIAL POLICY, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL REDISTRIBUTION

The principles used to shape any particular policy, determines the kinds of impact of this policy (Drake, 2001). *Social policy* is mostly regarded as a system designed to promote *social justice* and to implement *social redistribution* according to need and wealth. Any particular distribution of resources may be defended on the basis of a discourse of rights, the concept of which has been widened by social justice so that to encompass social rights. The “positive” redistribution from the better off to the worse off implies greater equality in the distribution of resources and the provision of rights. The concept of equality plays a major role as a principle against which social policies are judged. Social policy values and ideals are traditionally related to this highly contested concept. These values and ideals are also traditionally related to diverse left and right social policy approaches. The principle of equality lies at the root of conflict in politics and is largely seen as being the sole value which divides left and right (Brittan, 1968). Different meanings of equality reflect equally different understandings of social policy (e.g. Weale, 1993). Both left and right normally accept the principle of equality before the law as fundamental to a free society. The “thick” version of equality has been variously called “social equality”, “equality of status” or “equality of regard” (Alcock et al, 2002: 77). It reflects the recognition of the fundamental equality of each individual in social relationships and the opposition to social privilege or inequality (e.g. Tawney, 1931).

John Rawls, a leading political philosopher in the tradition of Locke, Rousseau and Kant, theorized the concept of justice which was concerned with problems about the grounds of basic civil liberties, the limits of political obligation and the justice of inequalities (1972). Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to the advantage of the worst off. Rawls defended a state which remained absolutely neutral between different ways of life but which should enforce economic policies promoting the well being of the least advantaged. Gradually, his thought has moved leftwards suggesting not just that just principles might be implemented by a “capitalist welfare state” but also either by universally high levels of education in a property-owning democracy or by a market-socialist regime (Rawls, 2001). Eventually, he had certainly come to despair of the capitalist welfare state, which “acquiesced” in a dramatic rise of social inequality in the 1980s and 1990s.

It is necessary to underline here the difficulties in using concepts like equality, in order to appreciate why issues like justice are tyrannical to understand. Neither Rawls (1972) nor Nozick, who proposed an entitlement theory of justice (1974), offer a tenable definition of justice. Both fail to consider the fundamental human need for well-being (Ehman, 1991). However, both contribute in a wider understanding of justice and in adopting a conceptual model of justice which may enforce considerable implications for the implementation of social policy. Nozick's account of justice raises a number of moral questions but fails to understand that society needs more than justice in order to survive –it also needs compassion. Rawls in contrast, specifies that the privilege of inequality must be only attached to offices to which all may aspire under conditions of fair equality of opportunity regulated by the state. Nozick restricts the essence of justice to the processes, but not to the outcomes of human interactions. For Rawls, justice must have regard also to the outcomes of human interaction. Nozick argues for a minimal state which appears to rule out the development of social policies and restricts welfare to be a kind of voluntary transactions between individuals. Rawls's theory might lead to some principles of social policy, but not necessarily to all of its outcomes. In short, Nozick's minimalist state has no truck for interventions to redistribute wealth, the welfare state is regarded an unfair system, welfare is a commodity (Drake, 2001). Rawls's legitimate state provides welfare rights as a necessary guarantee of basic liberty and equality of opportunity –i.e. welfare rights serve to fulfill certain critical needs which stand prior to, and are a condition of, basic liberty and opportunity (Michaelman, 1989).

Social justice is a powerful but elusive term for social policy analysis concerned with the extent to which social arrangements may be regarded as fair (e.g. Alcock et al., 2002). It is concerned with who ought to get what and under what terms and implies a distributional element. Social policies produce both vertical and horizontal redistribution (Culyer, 1980). The extent to which such redistribution is justified, and which form should be given priority, depends on the way of understanding the principle of equality, and particularly the potential belief that certain specific scarce commodities –such as healthcare or education- should be distributed less unequally than the ability to pay for them. Social justice legitimizes a principle of “redistributive equality” (e.g. Tobin, 1970) –a fair redistribution of income and wealth between groups and individuals aiming to close the big gap between those at the top and those at the bottom. The principle of distributional equality leads to a range of social policies that are concerned

with the allocation of economic resources and social provisions, and that are connected with equality of opportunity and outcome. Such policies modify initial distribution, usually generated by the market, taxes, transfers and generate redistribution through the provision of universal welfare benefits and rights.

Welfare provision is therefore expected to have a major redistributive impact in the extent of inequality. The types of equality that are characteristic of the welfare state raise problems of value and justification in social policy. This depends on the degree of egalitarianism that is involved in justifying equality of specific outcome. A general redistribution of income and equality of access are normally acceptable strategies of social policy. What differs is the explanation for an equalization in respect of specific social policies and the way of considering the justification of such intervention. In sum, the argumentation derives from three sources (Weale, 1993). The argument for common needs – in a society where basic needs are to be satisfied, this is best done by supplying certain universal provisions. The argument for common citizenship – in a society providing access to universal services, there is a connection of between social policy provision and a sense of common citizenship. The argument for democracy – where the pattern of services provided depends on the preferences of the electorate for specific aspects of individual well-being.

All these three arguments give the equality typical of the welfare state an instrumental value – its implementation contributes towards other ends. Equality is to be promoted because in turn promotes other state of affairs having intrinsic value such as a sense of citizenship or the satisfaction of the electorate. The principle of equality is not regarded as an end in itself. The deeper question might be whether equalizing social policies can be justified by an argument that gives the principle of equality intrinsic value. This might be reached by equal treatment – treating all members of society as equals in certain fundamental respects and looking on persons as ends in themselves, with concern and respect (Dworkin, 1977). This might be also achieved by equality of provision – everyone deserves and is entitled to the same provision (Ackerman, 1980). In sum, an even limited equalization of the most important aspects of welfare may lead to a general commitment to equality and legitimize particular social policies against social inequality.

III. UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Justice requires differential treatment of individuals according to differences in circumstance (Drake, 2001). Unequal treatment is acceptable only when there are rational grounds for it. In other words, social justice might be also searched through justified unequal treatment. However, the vast majority of writers have stressed the need for equality of treatment. This serves for more equality, but not for substantially less inequality. Tawney (1931) proposed tax measures to pool surplus resources to fund universal services against most hateful privileges and to guarantee the satisfaction of basic needs through “a basic minimum below which none should fall”. This was extended to include entitlement to equal respect, political equality and equality of opportunity (e.g. Baker, 1987). In other words, social equality implies a degree of equalisation and underlies a need to define a minimum level of wealth, beyond which nobody should be allowed to rise.

But, people have different skills, talents and goals as well as different amounts of wealth and determination. The unequal distribution of natural gifts and talents amongst individuals constitutes a formidable obstacle to economic equality in societies providing a high degree of economic opportunity (Berlin, 1969). The strong, able and ambitious are likely to acquire more wealth and power than those with less or without these qualities. This creates and recreates inequality because, even if everyone has the same, in fact cannot be the same. A constant process of redistribution to prevent the growth of inequality is required in order to maintain equality (Scruton, 1982).

But, also, why should social goods be fairly distributed? A widely accepted response to this question is centred around the relationship between the natural and the social: if there is a thing as natural equality then it reasonable to “support and create a corresponding social equality” (Goodin, 1988; Fitzpatrick, 2001). In social policy debate this means that all humans possess certain basic needs, suggesting some kind of common human nature – these universal basic needs might justify equality in some form (Doyal and Cough, 1991). This kind of association between equality and basic needs justifies the presence of social equality since this requires a fair distribution of social wealth. In other words, the recognition of universal basic needs – nutrition, housing, health, education, environment, physical and economic security- demands that certain forms of regulated welfare provision will cover these needs. The form of regulating welfare provision –the social policy systems of contemporary societies– depend mainly on the level of economic development and on the culture of the sociopolitical environment. In this respect, societies must respond to a minimum satisfaction

of universally acceptable human basic needs – social goods that have to be fairly distributed. The major thing to decide next, is the type and the degree of intervention needed to secure the prevailing social equality pattern.

A kind of “absolute equality” could only be achieved under the supervision of a strict regulatory regime. Such a mechanism would involve huge bureaucracy that it would diminish the liberty of the individual – inequality is incompatible with personal freedom (Hayek, 1960). Hayek stresses that government should provide a framework of law that guarantees fairness in the processes of exchange and that should not implement redistribution of resources. The allocation of wealth should be left to the market and should not be based on moral principles – equality is neither feasible nor a legitimate political aim. However, free markets, if they ever exist at all, seldom persist and soon become “rigged” markets (Drake, 2001). Those who are successful can gradually use the advantage of their profits to move towards dominance and then towards monopoly (Walzer, 1983). This lack of any constraint or regulation can produce a situation in which the absolute liberty of very few entails the subordination of the many. Inequality of earnings is necessary; where leveling takes place it will be downwards the lowest common denominator and will produce the destruction of individual freedom (Joseph and Sumption, 1979). Both unequal distribution of resources and inequality growth are considered as phenomena of justice.

This might be a misinterpretation of justice leading also to a despotic authority of the free market and an extinction of individual freedom. Inequality may bring freedom and power for an elite but it would reduce freedom and power of the rest of the people; freedom for better positions and offices, freedom to participate in political debate and decision-making, freedom to achieve more equal outcomes. In other words, this is a kind of “absolute liberty” of very few achieved under the auspices of the market and diminishes the liberty of the remaining individuals.

Alternatively, there is an influential idea that social equality and individual liberty can be mutually reinforcing. It is unequal societies which deprive people of much of their liberty (Tawney, 1931). Capitalist societies allow the development of vast inequalities of wealth and power. Individuals have to spend much of their lives to avoid poverty –there is a need for a more cohesive society embodying equality and liberty. Social equality and individual liberty might straightly establish a reciprocal, means-end relationship (Plant, 1984). Social equality promotes liberty and, in so doing, individuals come to recognise and promote such equality as a necessary condition of their enhanced freedom (Fitzpatrick, 2001). The prevalence

of this idea is very supportive for the development of welfare provision within a redistributive social policy system.

In recent years, some thought provoking debates about social equality have been flourished. The new ideas include approaches of complex equality, differential equality and equality of obligation (Fitzpatrick, 2001). The theory of “complex equality” envisages a multidimensional system of distributive justice that envisages each good operating within its own distributive sphere according to norms that are not necessarily shared by other spheres (Waltzer, 1983; Miller and Waltzer, 1995). On the opposite, simple equality imposes a single system of distributive justice upon society and all social goods are automatically located within this “single sphere” of distributive justice. The common objective for both theories of equality is the avoidance of monopoly. The difference is that simple equality wishes to substitute economic monopoly –i.e. the power of rich– with political monopoly –i.e. the power of the state, while the basis of complex equality is on communal and democratic forms of provision that emerge from within the playing field itself (Waltzer, 1990; Miller, 1990). In this respect, social policy provisions should be organised on a civil society system (Keane, 1988) and inspired by a complex system of distributive justice (Waltzer, 1983).

Similar to complex equality is “differential equality” where plurality and diversity penetrate within the principle of equality. This is a kind of postmodern equality that mainly responds to the increasing influence of new social movements and focuses on differences related to gender, ethnicity, disability, age and so on. Differential equality combines the traditional welfare provision covering basic needs with a democratization of welfare services geared towards differentiated needs empowered by differential identities (Nicholson, 1990; Young, 1990). The key point is to develop social, economic and political processes that reconcile the concepts of equality and difference.

Last but not least, a controversial form of social justice geared towards wealth creation and economic efficiency versus redistribution of wealth was promoted during the 1990s –namely “equality of obligation”. It was initiated by the New Democrats in the United States and it has epitomised the Centre-Left’s drift away from welfare egalitarianism by the project of the “Third Way” of the New Labour in Britain (Fitzpatrick, 2001). Equality is neutralized by terms such as “fairness”, deregulated markets are not an anathema and flexibility replaces security in the area of employment. The welfare state is now regarded as a source of exclusion itself and as a potential instrument for forcing the excluded back into the disciplines of

paid employment. Egalitarian aims are substituted by a focus on social inclusion, the emphasis is on equality of obligations and not on equality of rights, differences in class, social background or income are no legitimate reasons to skip their social responsibilities (Giddens, 1998). The aim of equality of opportunity is still alive but in a different “third” way. It is the poor who have to change their values and habits rather than mainstream society reconsidering its values and habits in order to accommodate itself to the needs of the poorest.

In sum, even though equality and freedom are in perpetual tension, one can never extinguish the other utterly without destroying basic humanity (Crick, 1992). Societies have to be concerned with equality of consideration, adequacy of opportunity, absence of special privilege, response of primary needs (Laski, 1969). Equality of opportunity in the sense of social, economic and political inclusion in fact supports the notion of the free market. Certainly people will develop different skills and capacities, make different choices, will have differing aims, and these differences may be called “inequalities” (Drake, 2001). Certainly also, people deserve to be given equal means to develop their capacities in a satisfying way, but this requires a “restructuring” which attempts to match social roles to individual capacities (Baker, 1987).

One fundamental aim of social policy is to facilitate this kind of restructuring towards rebalancing competing ends. In this direction, policies may be designed to achieve a redistribution of resources towards higher degrees of equality. This may include the reduction of the liberty of some, a loss of freedom mainly in terms of general taxation and participation in compulsory social insurance schemes. There must be a point of balance between individual freedom and communal equality as well as between a free market and an inclusive society. Inequalities must be attached only to offices to which all may aspire under conditions of fair equality of opportunity – the so called “fair inequalities” (Rawls, 1972). In this respect, social policies allocate resources in a way that benefits most the least advantaged, and offices will be allocated on the basis of fair equality of opportunity.

IV. EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

Given social policy’s emphasis on individual welfare, equality of opportunity embraces policies that ensure both equality of liberty and fairness in the distribution of inequalities (Fitzpatrick, 2001). It is accepted both that justice defines the boundaries of individual liberty (Rawls, 1972; Nozick, 1974)

and that there must be at least one kind of equality, that of universal social inclusion (Walzer, 1983). In other words, Rawls's perspective of justice which deals with ultimate outcomes and fair distributions of social goods somewhere meets with Nozick's view for the contractual understanding of justice, while Walzer argues that differences in definitions of justice emerge in different social spheres drawing in differing criteria and make an abstract formulation of justice feasible. Membership of a society is vital in order to participate in the negotiation for the boundaries of justice for each social sphere and equality of opportunity is one tangible way to reach higher levels of equality of outcome.

Even in childhood, different social classes are distinguished by sharp contrasts of health, environment, and physical well-being (Tawney, 1931). The core idea is therefore, that individuals have differing capacities and there is a need to ensure equal chances in their life and career. Fair chances of development and competition as well as affirmative action to compensate for previous disadvantages are provided to enforce meritocracy (Baker, 1987). Minimum interpretations concern equality of opportunity as securing fairness in the procedures used to fill offices and positions, maximum ones go beyond immediate decision making and assess the broader context in which such procedures occur (Blakemore and Drake, 1996). Equal opportunities go also beyond the meritocratic and industrial approach to include equal chances in health, education, environment and many other aspects of the society.

For Hayek (1960), people enjoy equality of opportunity in a free market. If a market remains free, rather than becoming rigged governed by cartels and monopolies, then individuals within it are able to make genuine and free choices. For Barry (1965), people should be equal if their opportunities for satisfying their wants should be equal. For Frankel (1983), such wants should be only satisfied insofar as they do not infringe the liberty of others and are affordable. In other words, the extent of liberty depends on the legitimacy and the cost of such wants. Equality of opportunity must also worth the cost. Under this conditional rationale, equality of opportunity is conceptually associated with the rarely free and hardly fair market.

Equality of opportunity is about providing fair chances for each individual to develop to his maximum potential personal skills and capacities. It is an intervention to ensure a fair chance for all those who have been unfairly disadvantaged. The opposite thinking considers that equalising opportunities in education, access and employment means a desire for the lowest common denominator, as requires the holding back of the most ca-

pable (Joseph and Sumption, 1979; Green, 1990). In sum, providing equal opportunities is about past, present and future fair conditions in people's lives and societies' destinies so that both better and worse off develop to the utmost of their potential.

V. SOCIAL POLICY AND SOCIAL EQUALITY

It is of vital importance for social policy analysis, the priority given to the purpose of social equality. This embraces research questions for the history and the outcome of contemporary social policy, namely the emergence and the evolution of the welfare state. Social equality was a primary aim of the instigators of organized welfare provision. This includes academics, intellectuals and politicians in modern capitalist Europe –mainly in U.K., Germany and France. This also embraces a number of social movements ranging historically from the worldwide labour movement and traditional interest groups to protest groups that have developed in recent years.

It appears that at the beginning of the 20th century, there was a widespread desire for a “strategy of equality” (Tawney, 1931; Deakin, 1987). The traditional aim of “socialist social policies” was to achieve greater social equality (Abel-Smith, 1984). This meant the introduction of welfare services that would provide equal access to the least advantaged. One radical approach defined “classlessness” as the ideal aim of social organization and declared education as the appropriate field to achieve it in the long-run (Tawney, 1931). Another more compromising view, proposed that the welfare state should equalize status and reduce unjust inequalities (Marshall, 1950). In other words, either in the radical form of eliminating inequalities or in the moderate type of leaving just inequalities, a motivation for more equality was laid in the foundations of the welfare state and social policy analysis interfused with class analysis. However it seems that, although an impulse for greater social equality characterized many welfare architects, it would be simplistic to interpret the welfare state as a straightforward strategy for equality (Fitzpatrick, 2001).

In every respect, the impact of social policy on equalizing wealth, income and power is far than overwhelming. It appears that the welfare state has failed to deliver on major aspects of equality – of public expenditure, of final income, of use, of cost, of outcome (Le Grand, 1982). In practice, welfare services are weakly egalitarian – only one-quarter of what it delivers is a kind of vertical redistribution (Hills, 1997). One possible explanation is that the welfare state embodies a vital contradiction. It was intended

by many to integrate “an ethos of equality” without challenging in depth the inequalities of the capitalist society (Hindess, 1987). If the welfare state were to equalize resources too much, it could lose the support of the middle classes – those from whom these resources are taken (Goodin and Le Grand, 1987). On top, by pursuing modest redistribution, the welfare state has been able to retain this support and to survive the radical Right onslaught of the 1980s and 1990s (Fitzpatrick, 2001). Consequently, social policy is mainly concerned with equality of opportunity and occasionally affects dimensions of equality of outcome.

So, we are rather left with a feeling of disappointment for the relationship between social policy and social equality. The interfusion between policy and equality depends on the purpose of policy and on the understanding approach of equality. This is an interpretation of the ways of theorizing the relationship between social policy and society considering the reality of class stratification. According to pluralist theory, the welfare state is a compromise between classes, an accommodation or alliance between competing class interests negotiated within a liberal democratic framework (Fitzpatrick, 2001). Contemporary social policy reflects a necessary settlement between classes. In a meritocratic society of social rights and entitlements, class distinctions would become less significant to the organization of the polity and the economy (Marshall and Bottomore, 1992). According to the elitist theory, the competition is for state power and the focus is on the dominant class interests and on the political and economic structures involved.

In this respect, the social policy process depends on which is the powerful class. If it is the middle and upper class, social policies should perpetuate both privileged access to the state and everlasting inequalities. If it is the working class that is able to define the terms of collective action, social policies should redistribute social wealth and power in favour of the less privileged and the least empowered. According to functionalist theory, social policy is an interpreted function of modern socioeconomic organization having a particular role in this framework. Functionalism can only offer orderly explanations to social processes by homogenizing the objects of its analysis (e.g. Parsons, 1961). Social policy is a contribution to the integrity and cohesiveness of the social order. This reconciliation, namely welfare capitalism, might be condemned by radicals and welcomed by conservatives.

According to conflictualist theory, the welfare state is a partial victory and a partial defeat of the working class (Fitzpatrick, 2001). Political power does not simply or necessarily reproduce that of economic power. Political

power might be gained through a mobilization of collective interests, that has historically favoured the interests of the working class (Korpi, 1983). Though social policies were initiated to “demobilise” the working class, gradually they were adjusted –by centre-left governments– to the interests of the less privileged. Consequently, social policies serve the working class interests and enhance the power of labour in its eternal battle with capital and the free market. This radical approach of class mobilization comes close to the way social democracy attempted to reorganize capitalist societies and has been influential in Scandinavian countries. A less optimistic account emphasizes on the structures of class coalitions and on the course of their differing particularities in each country (Esping-Andersen, 1990). An interesting remark of this analysis is that welfare retrenchment is more likely to occur in the least generous welfare states, since the middle classes there have little to defend.

Let us have a glance in health, in order to understand what happens when we draw in some empirical evidence regarding social policy and class. It is convincingly documented that health inequalities reflect the pattern of class inequalities (Townsend and Davidson, 1982; Townsend et. al., 1988; Wilkinson, 1996). For instance, mortality rates for working-age men was in 1910 twice as high in the poorest social class than in the wealthiest. This was three times higher by 1991. This means that mortality rates have improved much more for the richest classes than for the poorest while the same applies for morbidity rates. There is no agreement in the interpretation of this evidence. According to the left school of thought, class position determines health because low income leads to malnutrition, harmful housing and environmental conditions, deficits in skills, education and employment. This generates the need for egalitarian social policies to ameliorate the health inequalities of social class. On the opposite, according to the right side it is health that determines class position. It is the moral and not the money deficit which makes the poorest to maintain unhealthy living conditions and to waste their income in inappropriate expenses. Therefore, social policy should focus on individual responsibility and freedom and not on universal expensive health services.

The discussion becomes even more sophisticated when we come to the future social policy options to battle socio-structural disadvantages. Modern societies are so open that class origins no longer determine class destinations so that social mobility is more important than social stratification (Saunders, 1996; Fitzpatrick, 2001). Educational and employment opportunities enhance meritocracy but also individualism. A meritocratic soci-

ety is not necessarily an egalitarian one but one within which inequalities derive from individual efforts. Consequently, they are considered as just inequalities. An individualistic society means, among other things, that individuals are hardly concerned with social stratification or the mobilization of collective interests. Consequently, inequalities may flourish. In sum, this might describe not a classless but an one-class or middle class society -where talents and abilities are more important than social background and fair inequalities are on its merits.

In this context, social policy should primarily aim at meritocracy and not equality. Following the ideological starting point, this might be the outcome either of the welfare state or the free market. But, even if there is equal individual potential, meritocracy contains social inequalities in terms of fortune, fate or ability to succeed. Those who manage to prosper are able to offer an advantaged outset to their children. Meritocracy then, would soon revert back into a class system, even in the open forms of social mobility individuals experience at present (Fitzpatrick, 2001). This reflects the need for a social policy mix balancing between merit and mobility and eliminating sources of social inequality. However and so far, the impact of the welfare state in enforcing equality is far than inspiring.

Widening social policy analysis beyond that of class might offer a realistic alternative. This often means today a combination of class analysis with social movement theory. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the “party” and the “union” are widely considered as bureaucratic, hierarchical and old-fashioned institutions. Moreover, these forms of representation hardly promote just procedures of equal opportunity, pluralism or radical change. There is a widespread sociological argument that contemporary society consists of social movements rather than classes and/or that a class is one form of social movement. Social movement theories embrace in social analysis a focus on the specificities of formal or informal interrelated groups and associations, who share similar values, concerns, identities and objectives (Eder, 1993; Tarrow, 1994; Della Porta and Diani, 1999). The positive consequences of welfare capitalism –rising prosperity, educational opportunities and public sector– enabled the new social movements to emerge and its failure gave them something to fight against (Offe, 1987).

If the concept of social movements should be accepted, social policy has to develop a new more sophisticated and complex analytical paradigm. If social policy adopts a middle way flexible approach, the welfare state has to reconcile class and social movement theories and to reconsider the current complex nature of social inequality. Social movements influence

welfare systems by offering new perspectives and by embracing new areas of social interaction that enrich and up-date citizenship rights and entitlements. Social movements may enforce new forms of social provision related to gender, ethnicity, dis/ability, age and sexuality. Social policy must be concerned both with redistribution of economic resources and of cultural standing from dominant to non-dominant status groups (Fraser, 1997). In other words, the “collective rights” of minority groups must also be considered in a pluralistic society (Kymlicka 1995a and b). This reminds us to the concept of differential equality which reformulates the principle of equality at a deeper level applicable to postmodern societies. In terms of citizenship rights, this contrasts citizenship of diversity with that of sameness or equality. The former is based on disparity and divergence and adjusts the concept of citizenship to the nature of the community, considering that equal citizenship is misguided to reject the importance of difference. The latter prescribes similar treatment for all on the basis that we are all similar and that there is a core of sameness lying beneath the “surface” differences of gender, ethnicity and so on. However, differential citizenship appears to abandon universalism in favour of the local and the particular which seems to contradict what citizenship is about in the first place (Fitzpatrick, 2001).

What of the future of the social policy versus social inequality controversial relationship? Social policies should continue to provide for material basic needs through the redistributive instruments on the basis of the traditional class analysis. They should also consider non-material needs and develop new forms of provision as mainly expressed by the new social movements. This means that the public policy-making process should regard and respect pluralism, cultural diversity and change within civil society. There might be a postmodern social policy pattern combining traditional class theory and contemporary social movement analysis. This produces two alternatives. First the compromise option, which will incorporate social movements and welfare provisions in a form that perpetuates the current imbalances in fighting inequality. Second the radical option, where social movements will achieve social policy reform aiming at higher levels of multidimensional social equality.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Mostly on purpose and least due to incompetence, social policy systems are rarely egalitarian. By pursuing modest redistribution, the systems retain the support of the middle class and have managed to overcome

the neoliberal attack of the late 20th century. In our days, most systems enforce retrenchment reforms to overcome the global financial crisis of the capitalist system and the sovereignty of the markets. Contemporary social policy is primarily concerned with equality of opportunity, which is about fair conditions in people's lives and societies' destinies so that all individuals develop to the utmost of their potential. In a meritocratic society inequalities derive from individual efforts and are considered as just. An individualistic society is hardly concerned with social stratification or the mobilization of collective interests. Modern societies are hardly meritocratic and broadly individualistic.

The means of achieving a balance between meritocracy/equality and individualism/liberty reflect the way competing theories of social justice have been translated in social policy equalizing practice. Rawls advocated a system where each person should enjoy similar basic liberties and between absolute equality and inequality there is an acceptable point at which there exist fair inequalities. This point defines a situation where the opportunities available to individuals to benefit from privileges are fair, and surplus inequalities are so adjusted that greatest benefit is accumulated to those least advantaged. This requires a distributive mechanism for equalizing opportunities influencing both social processes and outcomes. Nozick restrained the concept of justice within the processes of exchange nearly irrespective of outcome, and argued that justice could be achieved simply by "letting people get on with living". In practice, differences in defining justice or equality are the dominant aspect in differing social policy approaches. Social policies might either intervene (regulate) to alleviate social inequalities, or not (deregulate) to accommodate injustice.

Social equality traditionally focuses on the recognition of the fundamental equality of each individual in social relationships and on eliminating injustices. Distributional equality embraces a range of social policies that are concerned with a fair reallocation of resources and opportunities. A decent minimum equalization of the major aspects of welfare cultivates a commitment to reduce inequality and a legitimization of equalizing social policies. Social equality promotes liberty and enhances freedom.

Postmodern analysis about social equality emphasizes on aspects such as complexity, differentiability and obligation. Following the concept of complex equality, social policy is to be organised by the civil society and is inspired by distributive justice. Differential equality combines the traditional welfare provision covering basic needs, with a democratization of welfare processes that reconcile the concepts of equality and difference.

Equality of obligation focuses on social inclusion, the disciplines of paid employment and social responsibilities accommodating the imperatives of capitalism. The new culture in the relationship between equality and responsibilities is seeking to enforce forms of duty and obedience. It fails to engage with a reflexively ethical notion of equality but it succeeds to interlock the anodyne term of fairness with the free market dogma. The component of equality becomes an even less fundamental principle of contemporary social policy.

Two broad social policy options seem to be in front of us. First, a compromise but realistic one, where moderate social policies effect some degree of social mobility and horizontal redistribution. Second, a radical but optimistic version, where social policies are geared towards social change and vertical redistribution. In any case, social policy has to develop a more sophisticated and complex analytical paradigm reconciling class and social movement theories and reconsidering the current complexities of social inequality. Postmodern social policy should incorporate social participation with welfare provisions and cultivate a social reform inspired by more commitment for less inequality.

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