

Review Article

Welfare, Austerity and Social Citizenship in the UK

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Viewed within their historical context, recent cuts to public social spending and increasingly governmental welfare reforms reflect and beget a shift in the praxis of social citizenship in the UK. This review article demonstrates how greater conceptual attention to the constitutive features of social citizenship can help clarify some of the claims made about its relation to austerity and welfare reform within the existing literature. Through schematic consideration of the emerging evidence, this article suggests that welfare austerity is undermining the ‘effectiveness’, ‘inalienability’ and ‘universality’ of social citizenship in the UK.

Keywords: Welfare, austerity, social citizenship, sorites paradox, rights.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, successive rounds of welfare reform have altered the status and praxis of social citizenship in the UK. However, the current period of austerity has instigated a shift in the pace, direction and character of welfare reform. Through schematic consideration of the existing literature, this review article outlines the significance of these developments for the changing extent, content and depth of social citizenship in the UK (Isin, 2008).¹

The first section of this article briefly situates recent policy developments within their historical context to establish the extent of continuity and change observable over time. The subsequent section examines what bearing these changes have had on the character of social citizenship. To do so, this article demonstrates how greater conceptual attention to the constitutive elements of social citizenship can help clarify some of the claims made about its relation to austerity and welfare reform within the existing literature. The final section summarises the emerging evidence on the modalities of welfare reform and austerity. Despite the critical and invaluable contributions already made, this article suggests there is a need for more social policy analysis that makes use of citizenship as a theoretical lens through which to examine the significance and impact of ‘welfare austerity’ (MacLeavy, 2011: 360).

Welfare reform and austerity: continuity and change

Despite the ebb and flow of welfare entitlement,² the reform trajectory was characterised by a remarkable degree of continuity between 1979 and 2010 (Wright, 2012; Stewart and Wright, 2014).³ During this period, the broad direction of travel can be seen as one

of 'creeping conditionality', whereby welfare reforms reduced the extent and level of welfare entitlements and increased the use of conditional entitlements across a range of policy domains (Dwyer, 2004b). As a result, the language of social citizenship shifted further away from 'rights' and more towards the concept of 'employment assistance' and 'support' (Carmel and Papadopoulos, 2003). In addition to this, a substantial number of individuals were incorporated into the tax-benefit churn through the introduction and expansion of in-work social security for low-income individuals and families with children (Dean, 2004).

During the years of New Labour, welfare conditionality was extended to target more and more individuals who were previously exempt from activation measures (Griggs and Bennett, 2009; Dwyer and Wright, 2014). Alongside this, means-testing became an increasingly prominent feature of working-age social security (Hood and Oakley, 2014b). Benefit uprating varied according to the target group in question and the real-term value of working-age social security fell over time (Hood and Oakley, 2014a). There was also an increasing trend towards selectivity and targeting of social security provisions, with working-age, childless and low-income groups losing out the most (Hood and Oakley, 2014b).

By the 2010 general election, there was broad political consensus on the need to 're-vision' the welfare contract, with each of the three main political parties competing to be the 'toughest' on welfare reform (Patrick, 2012). Beyond a desire to go 'further and faster', there was initially little to distinguish the Conservative Party's approach from the 'policy paradigm established by Labour' (Lister and Bennett, 2010: 102). Coming into power in 2010, the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government sought to procure a political and policy mandate for welfare state retrenchment and fiscal consolidation by citing the profligate welfare system as the principle cause of welfare dependency and public sector debt (CSR., 2010; DWP, 2010; Clarke and Newman, 2012). In keeping with previous political administrations, it mobilised a range of discursive strategies that problematised 'cultures of worklessness' and sought to tackle 'welfare dependency' (Garthwaite, 2011; Slater, 2014). Such strategies have proven particularly effective at cultivating an 'anti-welfare commonsense' amongst the general public, including those receiving low-income social security (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013; Jensen and Tyler, 2015).

As a result, the policy agendas of welfare reform and fiscal consolidation became tightly intertwined with each deriving its political legitimacy and policy imperative from the other: 'the age of irresponsibility is giving way to the age of austerity' (Cameron, 2009). In many respects, welfare reforms implemented since 2010 can be seen as an extension, personalisation (according to individual circumstances and needs) and intensification of welfare conditionality (Grover, 2012; Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Johnsen, 2014; Stewart and Wright, 2014). Whilst there is a great deal of continuity in this regard, there are two key developments that indicate a shift in welfare politics 'which is unprecedented' (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011: 14). These are the scale and regressive nature of the cuts to public social spending and the elevated role of welfare withdrawal and sanctions.

Regarding the former, welfare state retrenchment has frequently been used to impel public service reform and recalibration (cf. Pierson, 2001). Historically, it has tended to exist more in political and policy rhetoric than in reality. However, public spending fell from 47.1 to 42.7 per cent of GDP between 2009/10 and 2014/15 in the UK (Lupton *et al.*, 2015). Since 2010, public social spending has consistently fallen in real-terms and is set

to fall further over the coming years (OBR, 2015). Contributing towards this, are a series of changes to the tax-benefit system, including the introduction of a benefit cap for social tenants, 'removal of the spare bedroom subsidy' and cuts to working tax credits for many low-income lone parents and families. Despite assurances that 'those with the broadest shoulders should bear the greatest burden', public service reforms as well as tax-benefit changes have been highly regressive (De Agostini *et al.*, 2015). Alongside this, benefit sanctions and financial penalties now have an increasingly prevalent role with these being used much more widely and frequently than ever before in social security, but also other welfare domains. This has led to the suspension and withdrawal of public social assistance for a substantial number of low-income individuals and vulnerable groups (Fletcher, 2011; Watts *et al.*, 2014). For example, the number of JSA sanctions grew by 69 per cent from 351,440 to 594,865 per annum between 2008 and 2014 (DWP, 2016). The number of ESA sanctions grew by 84 per cent from 18,846 to 34,710 per annum between 2009 and 2014 (DWP, 2016). The new sanctions regime introduced between 2012 and 2013 has increased the severity and frequency of sanctions, which has had the most deleterious effects on young people, lone parents, disabled people and recently homeless individuals. During this period, 'almost one million individuals were referred for sanctioning, and more than half a million (528,000) received an adverse decision' (Watts *et al.*, 2014: 5).

Whilst a systematic trend towards liberal paternalism in welfare reforms has been observable in the long term, a sharper shift has occurred since 2010 (Wright, 2016). In light of these developments, the UK welfare system can be understood as entering a 'new phase' of 'fundamental restructuring' (Taylor-Gooby, 2012; Hastings *et al.*, 2015). The emergence of 'welfare austerity' can be seen as instigating 'a new, more constrained and qualitatively different deal for citizens than that envisaged by the architects of the post-war welfare state' (Dwyer and Wright, 2014: 33).

Welfare austerity: clarifying its implications for social citizenship

Cumulatively, welfare austerity has made the material and symbolic benefits of social citizenship 'increasingly conditional, exclusive and selective' (Lister, 2011: 78). Crucially though, it remains unclear at what point, if any, the diminishing value of, and increasing conditions attached to, welfare vitiate its character as a right of social citizenship. This is principally due to the conceptual indeterminacy of citizenship and its consequent lack of clear boundary limits and definitions. Here, social citizenship can be understood as something of a Sorites Paradox. A Sorites Paradox refers to the problem of conceptual vagueness, or rather the indeterminate applicability of key terms. Consider a heap of sand; if one grain of sand is taken away, a heap still remains. If another is removed, the same applies, and so on and so forth. However, at some point the collection of grains becomes so small that the sand can no longer, logically, be considered a heap. The difficulty comes in trying to define and identify the particular point at which this occurs.

Similarly, let us turn to the example of social citizenship. Analytically, it is worth thinking of social citizenship, in its paradigmatic form, as a heap of sand. As the value of welfare provision diminishes and the conditions attached to its receipt increase, the grains of sand that comprise the rights and status of social citizenship diminish over time. However, the difficulty comes in identifying the minimum conditions that safeguard the status of social citizenship, that is, the crucial difference that distinguishes citizenship

from non-citizenship.⁴ Whilst the multidimensional phenomenon of citizenship makes an exhaustive theory problematic, a 'systematic' sociology of citizenship is necessary to understand the material and symbolic implications of welfare austerity.

Given broader historical reforms and the more recent policy measures implemented since 2010, there are three key considerations of relevance: the 'effectiveness', 'inalienability' and 'universality' of contemporary social citizenship. This should help in some way to establish at what point the grains of sand comprising citizenship become so diminished that we can no longer reasonably consider someone to be in possession of the rights and status of social citizenship. In other words, at what point might we consider welfare austerity to have rendered the rights of social citizenship ineffectual in safeguarding an equality of status notionally guaranteed through membership?

Turning to the question of effectiveness, T.H. Marshall (1950: 10–11) suggests that, at their most basic level, social rights should provide 'the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security'. Whilst this is by no means the most expansive conception of social rights, it can be seen as the basis from which to build to ensure an effective participation standard. All those who do not possess this:

could not be considered a citizen in any meaningful sense . . . their continued exclusion from many of the day-to-day practices that are taken for granted by the wider population indicates that the full promise of social citizenship remains a distant dream. (Dwyer, 2004a: 84)

Crucially, the real-term value and degree of social protection that is available independently of the labour market has fallen in the short and long term.⁵ Since 2012, spending on working-age benefits has fallen as a proportion of GDP (Hills, 2015). Stagnation in the real incomes of those in the middle of the income distribution has tempered the effects on inequality and relative poverty in the short-term (DWP, 2015). However, absolute poverty has risen for children, working-age adults, pensioners and households affected by disability (DWP, 2015). If the constitutive relation between the rights and status of social citizenship is broken, those in a condition of material deprivation cannot logically be considered social citizens. In light of this, the hollowing out of welfare rights, particularly for those reliant on low-income social security, has undermined the status of social citizenship.⁶ It seems then that the term 'social citizen', or even 'citizen' may actually serve to obscure the experience and significance of welfare austerity for those most perniciously affected by it.

Turning to the second question of 'inalienability', conditions attached to welfare provision have been a longstanding feature of welfare states (Goodin and Rein, 2001). Whilst some suggest that the mere imposition of conditions attached to social rights undermines their status and efficacy, the point at which this occurs is less clear (King, 1999). Clasen and Clegg (2007: 171–5) develop a distinction between three different types of welfare conditionality: conditions of *category* (socio-demographic and employment categories of support); conditions of *circumstance* (fulfilment of entitlement criteria on the basis of eligibility and/or need) and conditions of *conduct* (fulfilment of behavioural requirements). Elaborating on this distinction, Watts *et al.* (2014) suggest that there has been a steady increase in welfare conditionality, but particularly conditions of conduct, since the 1970s. Building upon the principle of welfare contractualism that pervaded dominant political and policy thinking during the years of New Labour, the Coalition government and incumbent Conservative political administration have sought

to strengthen work-related and social obligations attached to welfare provision since 2010 (Wiggan, 2011; McKay and Rowlingson, 2016). The elevated role of these conditions of conduct is not only observable in the area of social security, but also in other social policy domains. Increasingly, non-compliance with these conditions results in the suspension, reduction or termination of entitlement to public social assistance and provisions (Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Watts *et al.*, 2014). Alongside a strengthening of the conditions of category and circumstance, conditions of conduct have weakened the inalienability of welfare entitlement bound up with the praxis of social citizenship in the UK. Within such a context, it becomes increasingly difficult to characterise those subjected to such reforms as 'social citizens'.

Finally, it is necessary to consider the extent of universality inhered in social citizenship during times of welfare austerity. According to T.H. Marshall (1950), the shared entitlements and duties conferred through citizenship status must, at the very minimum, uphold equality of status, thereby promoting a sense of collective belonging and identity. Beyond the provision of social rights then, citizenship should operate in a way that moderates material and status differentials between citizen members. Having said that, the heterogeneous operation of citizenship is needed to accommodate a plurality of needs, capacities and applications. The variegated nature of social citizenship is perhaps a necessary feature of its efficacy in this regard. However, at what point does citizenship become so variegated that it can no longer be considered to uphold equality of status between its members?

A great deal of research has outlined the regressive distributional impact of austerity and welfare reform implemented since 2010 (e.g. Lupton *et al.*, 2015). Overall, low-income households have been worst affected by real-term cuts to working-age social security. According to De Agostini *et al.* (2015: 31), the distributional effects of changes to social security and direct taxes 'were regressive. Against a price-linked base, the poorest 30 per cent lost or broke even on average and the top half gained, with the exception of the top 5 per cent'. As such, the evidence suggests that wealthier households have disproportionately benefited from policy developments, whilst poorer households have lost out in relative and nominal terms. This is by no means a novel development in social policy: wealthier households are 'frequently able to make better use of the common services of the welfare system' (Vincent, 1991: 181) and of those forms of occupational and fiscal welfare that operate alongside social welfare (Titmuss, 1958). However, at least in the UK context, these social divisions of welfare have tended to develop during times of welfare state growth and expansion (Mann, 2008). The current consolidation of social divisions is occurring alongside highly regressive cuts to public social expenditure – particularly in the domain of social welfare. Within such a context, the increasingly variegated praxis of social citizenship propagates rather than moderates material and status inequalities and undermines the collectivisation of social risk and return. In this regard, social citizenship can currently be understood as implicated in the continuation and growth of inequalities in the UK.

To summarise, measures implemented since 2010 have undermined the 'effectiveness', 'inalienability' and 'universality' of social citizenship. As noted, due to the indeterminacy of the central term it is difficult to identify the exact point at which an individual is deprived of the rights and status of social citizenship. However, for those most negatively affected by welfare austerity, it is becoming increasingly difficult to characterise these individuals as in possession of the constitutive elements of social

citizenship. Their dispossession of the same entitlements as other members of the citizenry not only compromises their equality of status but also the internal coherence of social citizenship in the UK context.

Lived realities of welfare austerity

There is a strong heritage of social policy research exploring lived realities of poverty, social exclusion and welfare reform in the UK (cf. Pemberton *et al.*, 2013). For the purposes of this themed section, this article focuses principally on the more recent empirical contributions to this area that demonstrate the exclusionary dynamics of social citizenship within the current context of welfare austerity. Research confirms that the most deprived areas and communities have been hardest hit by cuts to central and local government spending (Beatty and Fothergill, 2014). Combined with this, welfare reforms are having compound negative effects on the pecuniary position of low-income households (Aldridge and MacInnes, 2014; Drinkwater *et al.*, 2014). According to the empirical evidence, day-to-day experiences arising from this have been characterised by fuel poverty, food insecurity, social isolation, insecure tenure, social and familial breakdown and ill health (Athwal *et al.*, 2011; Cooper, 2014; Garthwaite, 2014; Pemberton *et al.*, 2014; Perry *et al.*, 2014; Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015; Garthwaite *et al.*, 2015).

Faced with increasing financial precarity and uncertainty, households and communities are regularly engaged in the hard work of 'getting by' on low-income social security in an attempt to secure, or at least come close to meeting, their basic needs (Lister, 2004; Patrick, 2014). The coping strategies drawn upon include borrowing money, reducing fuel and food consumption, 'going without', seeking support from family and friends, making use of foodbanks, restricting expenditure to the 'basis necessities' and not engaging in social or recreational activities (Cooper, 2014; Patrick, 2014; Pemberton *et al.*, 2014; Dermott and Pomati, 2015; Garthwaite *et al.*, 2015; Main and Bradshaw, 2016). Whilst these coping strategies help overcome exigent barriers to meeting human needs, this appears to come at a significant physical and psychological cost to those affected by welfare austerity. Research reveals that many feel that their everyday experiences are damaging to their sense of self-worth, and describe feelings of alienation, degradation, shame, stigma and depression (e.g. Chase and Walker, 2013; Baumberg, 2016).

Drawing on a large qualitative examination of 'Life on a Low Income in Austere Times', Pemberton *et al.* (2014: 37–9) find that many of these findings resonate with previous research exploring lived experiences of poverty, social exclusion and welfare reform. However, the authors note increased feelings of pressure, insecurity and marginalisation articulated by those subjected to welfare austerity. A number of other studies also highlight how low-income households are 'finding things tougher than in previous years' (Chase and Walker, 2013: 4). Through the accounts, experiences and outcomes of low-income households, this evidence suggests welfare austerity is undermining a common sense of citizen belonging, identity and entitlement for many, particularly low-income households.

Conclusion

Just as welfare systems are no more than a collection of services and transfers, citizenship is no more than the sum of its parts. Regressive cuts to public social spending and

increasingly governmental welfare reforms reflect and beget a transformation in the praxis of social citizenship in the UK. This review article has demonstrated how welfare austerity is undermining the 'effectiveness', 'inalienability' and 'universality' of social citizenship in the UK. This not only has distributional consequences, it also has repercussions for the status and rights of those (tacitly or otherwise) conferred and denied citizenship status. With this in mind, this themed section includes a range of contributions that employ social citizenship as a theoretical lens through which to better understand the implications of the current reform trajectory.

Notes

1 It should be noted that these developments are far from centralised or unitary. In reality, devolved contexts and localised settlements are playing an increasingly prominent and heterogeneous role in mediating the character of austerity and welfare reform across the UK.

2 The term 'welfare' is used here to refer to the social rights of citizenship. This includes the provision of services, goods and transfers, such as housing, healthcare, social security, education and personal social services. Whilst all domains of welfare activity have a significant bearing on the social rights of citizenship, the ability to fully exercise other social, civil and political rights is greatly dependent on a minimum level of income (Marshall, 1950). As such, this review is limited in scope and focuses principally on how the rights of social citizenship are articulated through the social security system.

3 Whilst far from linear or unproblematic, the period from 1948 to 1979 is often vaunted as an era of social democratic welfarism, characterised by an unprecedented extension and enrichment of social citizenship in the UK. Given the shift in the trajectory of citizenship that occurred in the 1970s, this section briefly situates more recent developments within the historical context of welfare reform and 'permanent austerity' (Pierson, 2001).

4 In part, this is due to the fact that citizenship is constructed in relation to a plurality of needs and preferences within a given polity. Individuals may occupy multiple and divergent subject positions that can make their claims-making complex, contradictory and overlapping. However, consideration of how citizenship is conferred and governed through (socially embedded) institutions offers some opportunity to examine how the rights and status of citizens are constituted and potentially threatened.

5 Not only has it become increasingly difficult to secure material well-being outside the labour market, but also within it. In this regard, the increasingly prevalent role of in-work social security demonstrates the failure of citizenship structures to ensure actors and institutions across civil society (including employers) are effectively engaged in the satisfaction of material and social needs.

6 This is by no means isolated to the current period of welfare austerity but should be understood as the latest development in a broader trend of public service reform that has weakened the right to 'a modicum of economic welfare and security' since the 1970s (Marshall, 1950: 10–11).

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