postmodernity and the fragmentation of welfare

edited by john carter

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Postmodernity and the Fragmentation of Welfare

Postmodern ideas have been vastly influential in the social sciences and beyond. However, their impact on the study of social policy has been minimal. *Postmodernity and the Fragmentation of Welfare* analyses the potential for a postmodern or cultural turn in welfare as it treats postmodernity as an evolving canon – from the seminal works of Baudrillard, Foucault and Lyotard, through to recent theories of the 'risk society'.

Already disorientated by globalisation, new technologies and the years of new right ascendancy, welfare faces a significant challenge in the postmodern. It suggests that, rather than universality and state provision, the new social policy will be consumerised and fragmented – a welfare state of ambivalence.

With contributions from authors coming from a variety of fields offering very different perspectives on postmodernity and welfare, *Postmodernity and the Fragmentation of Welfare* also keeps social policy's intellectual inheritance in view. By exploring ways in which theorisations of postmodernity might improve understanding of welfare issues in the 1990s and assessing the relevance of theories of diversity and difference to mainstream and critical policy traditions, this book will be an essential text for all students of social policy, social administration, social work and sociology.

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Postmodernity and the Fragmentation of Welfare

Edited by John Carter

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By their very nature conferences do not always hatch into good books. However, in this case, contributions by writers working at the top of their form have created what is hopefully an interesting treatment of postmodernity and welfare.

Chapter 1

Preludes, introductions and meanings

John Carter

INTRODUCTION

Postmodern ideas and attitudes have been rattling around the social sciences and humanities for a number of years now. Thus far, however, they have gained little purchase on the field of academic welfare, particularly in the United Kingdom. That domain has seemed at once both resistant and indifferent to what has elsewhere become intellectually established and influential. Not surprisingly this collection seeks to question that situation and argues that indifference is no longer an option. A non-engagement with significant ideas smacks of isolationism and limits the topics of conversation we can enter into with adjacent intellectual disciplines. Social policy then should at least explore the postmodern – but in doing so should subject it to a *critical* gaze. Recognising the need for a cultural turn in welfare does not imply that that literature be awarded the status of biblical text. Moreover, any sortie between social policy and the postmodern must keep the former in view as a developed intellectual field with its own concerns and constructs. Such a debate therefore needs to be conducted in both directions and may serve ultimately to enrich our conceptions of both welfare *and* postmodernism.

Throughout, the volume addresses the diverse and contested meanings of postmodernity and the postmodern. These include of course the contributions of Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida and others who, over the last thirty years, created what should properly be understood as a new perspective. Their value has been not only in the addition of specific new theoretical insights, but in critiquing and expanding the very notion of theorisation itself. Yet just as postmodernity did not begin with, say, Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), neither did it end there. Writers such as Giddens, Beck and Bauman continue to map our present condition and so feature heavily in this volume.

Mention of Beck and Giddens leads on to a parameters question. These writers would not necessarily regard themselves as postmodernists but might prefer to say that they are charting the later reaches of modernity. This sits happily and easily

within the scope of the book which is really the wider 'epochal thing' rather than just the ideas of those authors who claim the title of 'postmodernist'. Indeed the often contradictory mix of the late and post-modern to be found in recent welfare reforms is a substantive theme of the volume.

Of course the book is also about social policy itself – how it theorises, how it understands a changing world and how it meets intellectual and political challenges. The issue of whether postmodernity and its associated conceptions of power and identity can act as the midwife of a new, radical welfare politics is taken up by a number of contributors. In an age where real people are increasingly poor and exploited this is a far from abstract question.

Nevertheless, abstract and conceptual issues *are* posed for social policy by postmodernism. Even without ruling on the 'late' versus 'post'-modernism conundrum we should note that what we used to call the welfare state has passed through *something.* We are no longer living in the crisis years of the 1970s wherein welfare capitalism ground to a halt (more with a bang than with a whimper). Neither for that matter are we quite at the epicentre of Conservative and new right responses here and abroad – the 1980s – though of course the process of creative destruction still rumbles on. That which we also used to call reality has moved on as conservatives from Thatcher to Blair seek to translate globalising (and other) forces into a new welfare settlement. Despite any lingering emotional and indeed occupational attachment we might feel, that world has vanished up its own contradictions. It belonged to an earlier conjunction of political, economic and cultural forces. Anyway it has become commonplace to point out that the welfare of Beveridge and of our own social administration tradition was marbled through with its own conservative assumptions and hierarchical power relations. We are of course reminded quite forcefully that this was no golden age by the postmodernists.

What then is the new world in social policy – a subject constructed and developed amid the apparent certainties of modernity and the twentieth century? To what extent should we assume that all bets are off and that a postmodern welfare template has been forged for the new age of anxiety? Not surprisingly the different authors included here offer different answers and vary in their interpretation of the new times. They also come at this from different directions and from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. This issue of intellectual allegiance is itself significant. It may be that those outside of the social policy tradition feel able to apply postmodern ideas to that realm in a reasonably direct and clear way. For those writers working in welfare, the directional dynamic may be somewhat different. Their problem is one of matching postmodern predictions and propositions with an existing canon of welfare writings and a subject that has developed its own intellectual and political concerns over the years. There may therefore be a relationship between disciplinary background and conclusions drawn on 'postmodernity and welfare' (reflected in a creative tension which runs throughout this book).

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Postmodern frameworks and social policy

We begin Part I with my chapter's view that the very notion of a postmodern social policy itself needs to be deconstructed, contextualised and understood as an interaction between established intellectual communities. Of these, social policy has rightly been criticised in the past for its narrow focus and theoretical calcification. Whilst this is less valid now, academic welfare has demonstrably failed to parley with the postmodern. This in turn reflects a shortcoming on the part of the postmodernists, in failing to consider *what social policy is* and the conceptual tools it has developed. Ironically, though, the very construction of welfare as a field of study may itself have erected barriers against the cultural realm and thus a postmodern turn.

A more wholehearted account of postmodernity's potential role in social policy is offered by John R. Gibbins. He particularly promotes the possibilities of a poststructural and deconstructionist variant for welfare – itself a creature of the Enlightenment. Against traditional notions of academic 'coherence' stand ambivalence, eclecticism and diversity – postmodernity's Holy Trinity. Taken together, these not only open up new theoretical possibilities but also hint at a new thought style for social policy.

Martin O'Brien and Sue Penna are similarly upbeat about the postmodern, which they display as a diverse field of meanings. Their chapter distinguishes between the different conceptual strands which make it a contested but dynamic intellectual endeavour. This perspective is deployed to critique the modernist assumptions that underpin 'anti-oppressive practice' in social work and training.

Finally in this part, Barbara Fawcett and Brid Featherstone focus on the postmodernism located within feminist analysis. However, notions of quality assurance and evaluation (as currently used in social work) actually form part of a modernist project applied in a postmodern era. In this, the large confidences of the past are supplanted by the 'small certainties' of modernism in an effort to try to retain fixed points of reference within the fluidity of the postmodern scene. This is illustrated through a case study of the supports provided for a disabled woman and her family.

Critical social policy and postmodernity

Kirk Mann turns the tables on the post- and late modernists, suggesting that they have things to learn from academic social policy. This can be seen in the works of Bauman and Giddens, which display an overly traditional and limited conception of welfare itself. Contrary to received wisdoms, the 'orthodox' welfare tradition

has of late converged with its more radical cousin, critical social policy. Anyway, the latter has itself raised interesting questions about identity politics and the operation of power. This in turn challenges the presumed newness and uniqueness of the postmodern critique of welfare.

Ambiguity about the postmodern case also characterises the contribution of Suzy Croft and Peter Beresford. At first glance, by its very nature, a post-modernist position appears to offer opportunities for users' groups and other marginalised and previously unheard welfare voices. However, these same groups are interpreted rather than engaged with in postmodern discourses – a process of tokenisation. In this way, ironically, the postmodernists repeat one of the failings of 'orthodox' social policy.

Social divisions and social exclusion

By way of a contrast, Jean Carabine sees a more positive role for the postmodern in debates about social exclusion. She argues that sexuality should be used as a theoretical framework in social policy rather than simply as a bolted-on extra topic to study. In particular, Foucault's notions of normalisation and regulation illuminate the inequalities and assumptions that have created a heterosexual welfare logic. This logic in turn interacts with and reinforces the other social divisions of gender, race, age and disability.

Chris Smaje notes that postmodern critiques undermine the normative universality of older philosophical traditions, but finds this problematic as a way of advancing debates about race and identity politics. Accordingly he is less keen to abandon all aspects of modernist thought and particularly revisits Richard Titmuss's notion of the 'gift relationship'. This typifies an approach to be found in many of these contributions: responding to the catalyst of postmodern analysis, we need not abandon our intellectual past, but can instead reinterpret and retune it.

Drawing on the work of Beck and Giddens, Sarah Nettleton and Roger Burrows smuggle the concept of reflexive modernisation into social policy debates. In an era of economic insecurity, reflexive modernisation illuminates a society dominated by uncertainty and the search for 'ontological security'. Various policy instruments have served to privatise forms of risk and have emphasised the choices that individuals must make to secure their own wellbeing. This is particularly evident in the realms of housing and health.

Governance and new technologies of control in the new social policy

John Clarke develops the notion of *managerialism*, to be distinguished from the idea of management as a neutral 'skill' or tool. Managerialism acts to transform

welfare structures, provision and relationships and thus to realise that which the various narratives of socio-economic change only sketch or imply. Indeed Clarke expresses concern that analytic frameworks such as Fordism/post-Fordism and now modernism/postmodernism are expressed as simple developmental binaries. Such a framing may serve to encourage 'post-modernism wars' in social policy in which contributors are forced into 'for' or 'against' positions.

Stephen J. Ball also reveals the unevenness of actual development. Recent educational changes in the UK have left the system perched between modernity and postmodernity, an uneasy mix of the old and the new. Ball uses Lyotard's notion of performativity to organise what would otherwise seem to be random trajectories in educational management – the disciplinary rise of the market, total quality management, inspection, forms of self-evaluation, etc. Collectively these are aspects of the shift from a welfare state to a competition state.

The theme of unevenness and epochal boundaries is developed in Robin Bunton's account of the changing management of drug use. In this, he charts a shift from the addiction model to more flexible forms of governance centred on the body and the regulation of habit. Drawing on Foucault he suggests that the pertinent transition here is not necessarily or directly from modernity to postmodernity. Instead, drugs policies and approaches indicate a move between different modernist disciplinary regimes.

Brian D. Loader considers the significance and impact of the explosion of new information and communication technologies. From their origin in the private sector they show signs of invading both the organisation and provision of welfare and of creating more 'self-serviced' forms. This adds to general individualising tendencies in social policy and to the fragmentation of public services. However, the progress of these new technologies is not yet determined and will be played out on the palette of welfare's social divisions.

Citizenship amid the fragmented nation state

Paul Hoggett and Simon Thompson seek to combine the universalism of old labour with the particularism of the new social movements. Drawing on Hirschman's distinction between exit and voice they assess the potential of the new 'associationist vision'. These new ways of coming together – at present putatively represented by the voluntary sector – may over time become the primary sources of welfare and social policy. Moreover, they contain more inclusive and participatory possibilities and could serve to reanimate welfare's pre-collectivist tradition.

Beginning with Marshall's seminal account of post-1945 social policy, Allan Cochrane goes on to consider the possibilities of a local welfare citizenship amid conditions of globalisation. In this context he also acknowledges that the new associationalism appears to have radical possibilities. However, these forms of

'intermediate government' are far removed from present conditions in which the apparatus of local democracy has been dismantled as opposed to reconstructed. How we can move from here to there is accordingly an awkward tactical and political question.

Norman Ginsburg concludes the volume at the supra-national level. Just as the domestic welfare state was an essentially modernist leviathan, so too was the original vision of a social Europe – a vision of social cohesion based upon class. Ginsburg detects the fading of this Delors dream and signs of a post-modern turn in recent European Union policy documents. This is particularly so in the recognition of non-traditional family structures, but can also be seen in the way that labour flexibility has been deployed of late. However, interpretative caution is still in order and it may be that this reflects no more than the reassertion of capital.

SOME DEFINITIONS

This section seeks to introduce the very notion of the postmodern and its attendant concepts – particularly to those for whom this is relatively new territory. Further explorations of this material can be found in John Gibbins's chapter and indeed in a number of texts which present and chart the post-modern. Of these, Bertens (1995) is particularly useful and readable.

As much as anything my purpose here is one of reassurance. Those new to these debates may feel they have failed to catch hold of a totalising definition of postmodernity or even some neat and comforting encapsulation. Yet this is the very nature of what has become an increasingly prominent but amorphous beast. Whilst it does contain specific and important ideas from seminal thinkers, postmodernity has transmuted as it has extended into more and more intellectual fields (and indeed into wider public parlance). It now stands as both a generalised motif *and* an incisive framework for academics. In these circumstances we will all have to learn to live with definitional ambiguities. We are therefore faced with the same problems as Uspensky's policeman: 'Quickly I seized the rascal by the collar! But what do I see? The confounded fellow has no collar!' (Luxemburg 1970: 78).

Of course this background does not make postmodernity definitionally untouchable. One point of entry is the way in which the term has been used as a form of periodisation or epochal shorthand. In this way writers in different fields have deployed modernity and postmodernity as somewhat reductionist organising concepts, to distinguish between historical eras and patterns. Of course these same authors see different dates and turning points and some prefer 'late-modern' to postmodern as a label for the present. Nevertheless treating postmodernity as an account of historical change allows access to many important issues produced under that wider canon. The following sketch is therefore an attempt to present the

main aspects of that case and to set out the general postmodern position. It is presented without critique (for the moment) and may therefore cause opponents of the very idea to bristle. My own powder remains fairly dry, however, and I allow myself no more than the ghost of a cynical smile as I type:

Modernity was a child of the Enlightenment (Science 1, Superstition 0) which developed through the industrial revolution to reach its highpoint in the twentieth century. This 'victory' saw its predominance in the structures and thought systems of western societies and, at least from the perspective of Max Weber, was near universal. The story for non-western cultures is more complex – with regard to both modernity and postmodernity – but is not really the subject of this book (which might be sub-sub-titled 'our little corner of globalisation'). The essential characteristics of twentieth-century modernity begin with widespread industrial and economic development. These in turn have been supported by different types of planning regime or, to be more specific, the belief that things *can* be planned. Organisationally, this saw the predominance of the bureaucratic-hierarchical form and a belief in the rational ordering of human affairs. Society itself was separated along a number of fault lines (gender and class most notably), though these divisions were presumed to be objective and stable. The identities clustered around region, religion or even race were taken to be hangovers from the preindustrial era that would fade under the march of progress. In Britain this produced a particular kind of class politics and saw labourism fill in for socialism. Socialism itself largely shook off its pre-industrial and Utopian origins and became an 'ism' of modernity in the twentieth century. Other ideologies too made their peace with the machine age, the secular and the scientific. This optimistic view of history was of course challenged by world war and the vileness of totalitarianism, but seemed still resilient into the second half of the century. Modernity believed the truth was out there, if only the scientist or philosopher could look in the right place and use the right tools.

How we got from all of this to the 1990s is of course a long story. From today's vantage point the premises of modernity appear naive and almost quaint, in ways that do not need to be elaborated here. Expectations have been dashed, particularly with regard to technology; problems remain unresolved and the only political 'ism' that thrives is nationalism. Similarly, modernity and all of its works have been challenged positively by feminism and the new social movements, by environmental critiques and by a range of intellectual positions.

But what *is* postmodernity? As Bertens (1995) shows, the term developed within various artistic and cultural debates in the 1950s. Since then it has spread virally to the humanities, social disciplines and beyond, making it more difficult to pull out core meanings and absolute definitions. However, we can identify strands, claims and tendencies – particularly the issues that most impinge on the social sciences.

A starting point is the view that the 'truth' has gone out of fashion. At its most

fundamental, postmodernism asks questions about the way we see the world and denies that something called reality actually exists in a form that can be directly and simply observed. In Baudrillard's term, reality is a constructed simulation, a 'Disneyworld' representing the victory of the image. Everywhere is irony – reality is done by mirrors – and truth is what you make it. Ideologies, philosophies and grand narratives that seek or are premised upon ultimate notions of truth or justice are not only flawed but dangerous – 'terroristic' even. There is no universal design and the watchmaker is dead. Nature itself may be less patterned than scientists from Newton onwards have assumed and the cosmos is chaotic.

This fraying of the old certainties is particularly evident in the decline of the nation state and in processes of economic globalisation. These in turn are both facilitated and promoted by the rise of new information and communication technologies beyond the control of any one government. The same technologies are implicated in the valorisation of 'flexibility' as the totem of the new order, particularly in the workplace. New production techniques and organisational styles – post-Fordism – serve to reject the rigidities and failures of bureaucracy. The customer is empowered and sovereign and comes in diverse packages unrecognised in the mass production era. The successful enterprise therefore is that which can respond quickly and imaginatively to this supposed new consumerism.

People themselves are also less predictable and are no longer tethered to permanent or absolute identities. The postmodern self is multifaceted and collaged from a person's multiple locations and attributes. Moreover, these identities are also subjective constructions – designer lifestyles – chosen by the wearer rather than imposed by the sociologist or policy planner. Our vision of 'society' is thus affected, if the term survives at all. Rather than an obvious entity composed of definite and established groups, it becomes a web of shifting communities, coalitions and individuals. Politics too is transformed and no longer plays out economistic battles over resources centred on the workplace.

Although set out without comment, this intentionally generalised presentation of postmodernity as a historical trajectory still needs to be slightly unpicked at this point. It was indeed valid to exhibit this as an emergent paradigm, one which has moved osmotically into the different branches of academia over the last thirty years. Indeed, it has now achieved the status of truism and is at least the starting point for many debates in the social sciences. Ironically, postmodernism has become something of a fixed point in the study of human affairs, just as it has become almost impossible to debate issues in entirely modernist terms (though perhaps social policy has thus far kicked its heels on the sidelines of all of this). However, it would be wrong to suggest that postmodernity was conjured out of nothing by a band who called themselves 'the postmodernists' to the exclusion of all other badges. In fact social scientific postmodernism owes much to the French poststructuralist influences of Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard and others. Indeed, one reading would be that postmodernism is really post-structuralism with its name changed by deed poll (plus a liberal dose of feminism).

In a general introduction of this kind it would be unwise to get into arbitration questions as to what is and what is not postmodernism. However, its relationship to poststructuralism is a live issue. Hans Bertens (1995) is keen to separate the two traditions out, whilst the majority position in this volume is probably that poststructuralism should be regarded as a school or variant *within* postmodernism. This is certainly contestable and one could just as easily describe the relationship the other way round. That, however, can safely be left to those who delight in chicken-and-egg debates.

A more pertinent issue regards the definitional shape of this foreign body as it begins to enter social policy discourses. For some, postmodernity is composed of several highly specific and incisive arguments and critiques, some of which were sketched above. For others, though, it is primarily a state of mind – a sceptical approach to truth claims and to grand narratives. Yet others deploy the word to do little more than indicate the newness of 'new times' in Britain and beyond. In other words postmodernism is a composite term – a rolling stone that has gathered moss aplenty over the years. It comes down to us as both a reductionist appellation, a dense ball of complex meanings, and also an exploded term in which definitional clarity has been lost. Different levels of conceptual coherence are therefore compounded in a single word. At times it can feel like walking through a multihued fog in which you occasionally bump your shin on a sharply defined object. Some of these objects are depicted in the following extended glossary.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism's provenance is more easy to trace – the 1970s French theorisings of Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, Barthes, etc. Unlike postmodernism it can be seen in rather specific terms; it developed as a response to what had been the orthodoxy of structuralism. The latter perspective had claimed that under the surface of everyday life lurked structures and realities which intellectuals could ultimately discover. Though often covert and concealed by ideology and other obfuscations, these frameworks determined life chances and social outcomes. A clear distinction could therefore be made between the notional human freedoms assumed in 'everyday life' and the ultimate constraints imposed by these fundamental structures.

Poststructuralists of course rejected the key assumptions of their structuralist predecessors. The search for these frameworks of power and social organisation just out of everyday sight was illusory. Indeed, the very notion that a single veil could be lifted or that existence could be dualised into 'surface' and 'reality' was rejected. Derrida preferred *meaning* to reality and argued that meanings and interpretations were themselves multifaceted, contingent and contested. Thus significant spadework was done for postmodernism.

Post-Fordism

The eponymous Ford Motor Company typified the mass production techniques that dominated much of the twentieth century. These were based upon a high division of labour, hierarchical factory discipline and the existence of mass markets. However as these methods reached their economic limits in the 1960s and 1970s new approaches were developed across the industrialised world – post-Fordism. This established changed working practices, facilitated by the arrival of new technologies. Decentralised and less openly hierarchical workplace structures were accompanied by more discrete mechanisms of control inherent in things like the 'quality' movement. Producers were thus able to provide an increased range of goods for the new niche markets and to respond rapidly to changed circumstances and fluctuating levels/types of demand. Post-Fordism, then, announced the arrival of a workplace and marketplace flexibility, but also that capitalism had sought to reinvent itself after the economic and industrial shocks of the 1970s. Some writers take this point further and see post-Fordism as a change in the state itself, and as its new way of regulating the economy and labour process.

Postindustrialism

Postindustrialism is also a loose coalition of ideas and shares some of the assumptions of the post-Fordist case (on the development and diversity of postindustrial models see Kumar 1992). Its origins are in the 1960s and 1970s contributions of writers like Daniel Bell and Alvin Toffler, who brought the concept to a wider audience with works like *Future Shock* (1970) and *The Third Wave* (1981). The key premise is again one of historical transformation – that we are seeing the decline/demise of the industrial society which produced 'things' using physical resources.

The emergent era is to be a postindustrial or information society. Its central resources are data and knowledge, the new raw materials. Greater information flows are central to the operation of commerce and manufacturing and enable rapid responses to customers and competition. This revolution needed the development of the microprocessor to speed up the exchange of data but does not end with it. Further momentum is provided by the Internet and other globalising technologies, which add a belated reality to Marshall McLuhan's notion of the 'global village'.

The consequences of this shift are various. The rise of new sectors and processes based on information technology heralds a changed industrial structure. Firms and indeed whole industries unable to adapt face threats to their very existence. Similarly, companies no longer need to be 'all in one place' and can use the new technologies to achieve a greater degree of functional decentralisation or disaggregation. In practice this adds further to globalising tendencies and the ability

of firms to chase cheap labour costs. People too are not immune and we are already seeing the emergence of the information rich and information poor. How this new social divide maps onto and interacts with existing societal divisions is a pressing question for policy makers.

Deconstruction

The notion of deconstruction is very much associated with Jacques Derrida. It relates to things as essential as writing, reading, communicating and the production of meaning. For deconstruction is about the process by which we use language and produce text. For Derrida these were not simple questions of authorial intent – what s/he 'intended to say'. Instead, to write is to deploy existing meanings developed by earlier authors in a constant process of accretion, to be subjectivised further by the interpretations the reader brings to the exercise. As a result of this 'intertextual weaving', the work is freed from the intentions of the writer whose name appears on the dust jacket – what Barthes called the 'death of the author'. Discourse therefore becomes a process of interaction and development, a collage of the different texts that have shaped the 'actual' text that confronts the reader. Moreover, the messages produced appear through an essentially unstable interaction of earlier works rather than some stately or formalised genetic inheritance.

If deconstruction itself has a message, it is one of sceptical readership, particularly when confronted by truth claims of a moral or political nature. Deconstruction is a process of laying bare and, in a very specific sense, a political act itself – perhaps the only meaningful postmodern political act.

This sceptical gaze connects with Michel Foucault's conception of power as a discursive strategy. The different ways that groups of people are represented serves to include or marginalise them. So just as conventional histories are said to be written by the victors, deconstructionist archaeologies can bring the excluded back into focus by revealing how they were initially peripheralised. Deconstruction therefore can have radical applications, whilst steadfastly rejecting the modernist categories with which the earlier left was constructed.

Normalisation

Foucault's concept of normalisation continues this same train of thought (for a fuller account see Jean Carabine's chapter in this volume). It relates to the process by which people come to be regarded as full members of society and argues that this process is not reducible to the concrete mechanisms of policy and legislation. Nations and communities use different techniques to differentiate between and designate behaviours/lifestyles as normal or abnormal. These discursive strategies

create models through which certain attributes such as heterosexuality become normalised, whereas others achieve the status of deviant.

This elides with Foucault's arguments about power/knowledge – that the way academics and others organise knowledge about different groups is actually a form of power. Classification itself adds to normalisation and thus to the panoply of controls and exclusions that are deployed.

Performativity

At one level performativity merely relates to the word 'performance' and operates in a fairly direct way. However, it had a more specific use in systems theory and indicated that which was needed to orientate an organisation to its environment. This was therefore about matching inputs to outputs and creating functionally stable operations. It arrives with us via Lyotard, who used the idea in his analysis of the postmodern condition (and is debated here by Stephen Ball). His objective was to identify the control technologies, the forms of governance that were emerging in these new conditions. In post-modernity, these fly under the flag of the 'new managerialism', with total quality management, charters, mission statements and the like. This apparent shift to more decentralised ways of working actually represents a new locus of control built upon self-monitoring and attitudinal change.

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Part I

Postmodern frameworks and social policy

Chapter 2

Studying social policy after modernity

John Carter

INTRODUCTION

Writing in that most politically symbolic of years for the UK, 1979, John Baker sought to expose social policy's intellectual and moral soul, with a survey of its undergraduate reading lists. This was an ideal way of isolating the subject's essence – revealing its orientation and the way in which it was packaged for students. In this fashion he demonstrated the ongoing vitality (and indeed predominance) of what he called the 'social conscience thesis' (Baker 1979). With this the welfare community retained a longstanding, benevolent view of the state, which itself responded to an unproblematic flow of information about social need, inspired by a warm and comforting idealism. The welfare state itself was evolutionary and irreversible and moved in the direction of ever greater generosity. The reading lists studied also confirmed this world view by what they did and did not recommend. The only works to be found in more than half of these documents were, of course, Marshall's *Social Policy in the Twentieth Century* (1970), Titmuss's *Social Policy: An Introduction* (1974) and his *Essays on the Welfare State* (1958) (if anthropomorphised into a *Desert Island Discs* guest, social policy would choose the last of these as its lone book to spend eternity with).

Baker himself criticised this mind set, called for more critical and realistic research strategies and, in essence, painted the picture of a complacent academic subject. These, however, were the last days of Rome and complacency was not a viable option in the 1980s. Even those who had been blind to the gendered and racialised interests maintained and reinforced by the 'benevolent' state were to be shaken by the political, discursive and programmatic batterings of the Thatcher years.

Moving ten years on, Fiona Williams used an influential textbook to assess the state of academic social policy further. From this vantage point of late Thatcherism she too provided a retrospective critique of the older social administration tradition

and found it to be empiricist, idealist, overly focused on the state and with too much faith placed in experts and professionals (Williams 1989: 8–9). Social administration in turn had been confronted by the rise of feminism and a new political economy in the 1970s and subsequently by the emergent new right. However, the result of these challenges, *circa* 1989, was a reformulation and updating of the older tradition, rather than a truly new conceptual design. In particular it had failed to incorporate the social divisions of gender and race into its core theoretical frameworks or its thought collective.

This kind of critique was well made and has probably gained widespread acceptance within the social policy community. It noted theoretical deficiencies and illustrated the social biases inherent in a major field of academic endeavour. The present chapter moves on to the most recent charge made against the social policy community – that it has failed to take account of that which is, somewhat reductively, referred to as postmodernity. It argues that the 'postmodernity and welfare' debate already shows signs of collapsing into a for-or-against, accusatory discourse in which boundaries are reinforced rather than permeated. Ostensibly, I appear to accept the substantive arguments of both sides: social policy *does* need to treat with both the substance and the deconstructive, sceptical body language of postmodernity. However, it also has to keep in view that which is distinctively its own and which distinguishes it from other academic fields. Up to this point the juxtaposition of these two positions – the debate – has merely acted to disinter that old chestnut of a conundrum: what *does* happen when the seemingly irresistible force of postmodernity meets the apparently immovable object of social policy? Mired up to the axles in this paradox we therefore need to go beyond the apparently simple and direct question, 'What can social policy learn from postmodernity?', towards an analysis of the terms and conditions of such a debate. All too often the much-vaunted interdisciplinarity of the social sciences begins to resemble truculent neighbours shouting at each other over the garden fence. For this not to happen here, family traditions and perspectives must be mutually respected and contributors adopt a self-reflective approach. This point will be returned to in due course.

In similar vein, it would be unwise to leave our historical sketch of social policy as pencilled above. Anyone already disposed to see the subject as backward and ossified could take from this a picture of academic welfare still living in the Pathe News reels, imbued with the spirit of Harry Enfield's Messrs Grayson and Cholmondley-Warner. The range of papers presented each year to the Social Policy Association conference, however, illustrates a broadening of that which welfare academics study (also to be seen in the subject's literature – for example, Cahill 1994; Erskine 1996; Huby 1995). This moving beyond the 'five main services', at least by implication, re-raises some important questions about the nature and parameters of scholarly social policy (issues raised yet more forcefully through the

catalyst of post-modernity). Moreover, social divisions beyond class have been brought in from the conceptual cold and are now objects of study and analytical frameworks in welfare research. Indeed, as Mann has argued (this volume), it is now misleading to present the critical and 'orthodox' traditions as separate and distinct. The former has both influenced and enriched the latter.

This reinvigoration and updating of the subject was also noted by Wilding (1992), who showed how the 1980s undermined the comfortable, statist assumptions of the subject. In that same decade he detected a number of new trajectories, including:

1. a growing interest in state theory;
2. a developed and mature feminist analysis in and of welfare;
3. the shift from studying racial disadvantage per se towards the use of race and ethnicity as key analytic variables;
4. a nascent environmental critique of welfare, which questions the effects of economic growth and the central position it has been afforded within social policy accounts.

This historical detour is an unavoidable starting point from which to consider social policy's potential postmodern turn. It reminds us that previously the subject did have a rather narrow focus and bore a strong resemblance to its extended family of statism, familism, labourism and bureaucracy (Williams 1989). These intellectual and indeed ethical and political weaknesses have, however, been the subject of a vigorous internal critique from members of the social policy fellowship. Consequently, debates have moved on and new ideas developed, though this has not always been recognised by critics beyond the welfare fringe. Postmodernity is not the first challenge to welfare orthodoxy, and the way it responds will in part be shaped by previous encounters and skirmishes. That these exchanges are not just of *ideas* but are between self-interested intellectual *communities* should also not escape our attention.

SOCIAL POLICY AND POSTMODERNITY: THE STORY SO FAR

The other social sciences and humanities largely had their postmodern makeovers in the 1970s and 1980s. But have these tricky Gallic and American ideas reached the shores of 1990s social policy? One way to assess this would be through a laborious content analysis of journals and texts. Fortunately, an idler's methodology exists in the form of BIDS – the Bath Information and Data System. This electronic abstracting and indexing service allows us to chart the appearance of various concepts in the different journals. The approach I have taken is to do a simple electronic search for words and names that might indicate the social policy

community is at least engaging with postmodern propositions. Specifically, I have scrutinised significant journal contributions – those pieces carrying a full abstract – and have scanned only *titles*, *abstracts* and author-provided *key words*. By way of justification I would suggest that for an idea or theme to be genuinely influential in an article it would feature in one of these locations. A search of the full text and references might throw up other mentions of the postmodern canon, but these are likely to be incidental or peripheral appearances (in fact very few extra references are thrown up by such a wider net-casting anyway). This is therefore a conscious attempt to avoid the 'monkeys-and-typewriters effect' and a way of only catching real and significant usages of postmodernity in welfare. So, in what is essentially a quantitative study, this might be seen as the quality threshold that words and phrases have to pass in order to qualify as a 'hit'. This is not then a study with any great methodological pretentions, but one which might still reveal the fossil evidence of social policy's post-modern dalliance.

The following figures cover the five full years 1992–6 and show sightings of postmodernity within the search criteria described above (they list the number of articles in which mentions were made rather than the total number of individual mentions). In the *Journal of Social Policy*, of the eighty-one articles covered only four made reference to postmodernity. Of these, three were, to a large extent, responses to an earlier piece on postmodernity. When the search was widened to include all of the 'post-literatures' (modernism, Fordism, structuralism and industrialism) the number of hits only rose to five. In the same period the *Journal of Social Policy* did not have a single reference to deconstruction. Similarly there was only a single appearance for Foucault, and none at all for Lyotard and Giddens (chosen not necessarily as paid-up postmodernists, but as indications that articles which cite them are drawing on that whole theoretical realm – litmus indicators are, I believe, neutral but display the colour of that in which they are dipped).

If this record indicates a certain indifference to the postmodern, it looks almost garrulous in comparison to *Social Policy and Administration.* That journal also had eighty-one abstracted pieces – but not a single reference to postmodernity. When the wider category of post-literatures was assessed this ballooned to two mentions (in both cases by writers from outside of the UK), though deconstruction was still off the menu. Foucault, Lyotard and Giddens were similarly absent.

By way of contrast, the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* was also scanned. Its 119 articles saw a relatively modest five outings for the post-modern, but thirteen usages of the full set of 'posts'. Deconstruction appeared in four pieces and there were also two references to Foucault and three to Giddens.

Some might object to this comparison by arguing that the last journal is, by definition, a more theoretical organ and that this accounts for the increased visibility of postmodern concepts and authors in its pages. That line, however, implies that it is permissible for the social policy lot to take a *less* theoretical line or that welfare need not elide its own concerns with recent strands of social theory.

Acceptance of this argument would immediately restrict the subject's horizons and future development, and finds no sympathy here.

What this mini-survey does suggest is that postmodern ideas have been practically invisible in the pages of the central social policy journals – as research tools, theoretical frameworks or even the subject of negative critique. This position may be changing slowly (with, for example, the present volume), though here again the operative word is 'slowly'. Relatively speaking then, welfare's postmodern period – if it happens at all – is much later and less wholehearted than that seen elsewhere. This in turn betokens a certain isolationism from what has been one of the most significant intellectual movements of the last thirty years or so. I take it as self-evident that such a situation is not very healthy for welfare and that the subject should at least engage with and consider postmodern propositions and challenges. Regardless of conclusions drawn, it cannot be a very good idea simply to *ignore* a de facto intellectual revolution. Again, though, it is important to be clear about my charge. I am not making some sort of patronising claim that welfare writers just do not read the right stuff – they are as likely as anyone to have read Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Beck *et al.* However, we are still somewhat the prisoner of our history and of the political and academic foundations of our subject. This itself seems to have created intangible but definite barriers around a particular vision of welfare – encompassing what it is and is not, who provides it and in response to which kinds of force. In this way social policy can appear like a tightly walled city from which the inhabitants have found it hard to establish intellectual trade routes (or, for that matter, allow strangers into).

Carrying all of this baggage, we are inevitably left with a more complex question than simply whether social policy should go postmodern. It therefore demands a more considered and self-reflective approach to what is ultimately a question of interdisciplinarity: how *should* social policy respond to ideas developed almost entirely outside of its own borders?

PINNING DOWN THE POSTMODERN

This is not the place to debate the neatness of postmodernity's break with modernity or indeed whether we should be talking about late- as opposed to postmodernity. However, in a volume on postmodernity an iconoclastic starting point is probably in order. Whilst there has clearly been a discernible shift of direction and tempo in many fields, we are still unambiguously in the century of *modernity.* Artistically, Stravinsky, the Bauhaus, Picasso, Moore, Woolf, Lloyd Wright *et al.* have provided the essential components of our cultural vision. Even in the 1990s their influence remains immeasurably greater than the things Damien Hirst does to animals. Moreover, the appearance of postmodernity's supposedly ironic and self-referential art would have been impossible without the very modernist avant-gardes that they are supposed to critique and replace. It is therefore not always useful to

draw up restrictive boundaries between cultural epochs, and often it is better to explore the actual lineage of ideas and influences. All too often the 'new' in fact takes the form of renovation, redecoration and extension rather than the building of entirely new structures. We therefore need to be cautious about those post-modernities premised on the death of the past. This is of course as true in the social sciences as it is in the arts and humanities.

A further entanglement regards the word 'postmodernity' itself, which, as Bertens (1995) shows, was adopted at quite different periods in the various artistic and academic fields. Its different usages in architecture, dance, literary criticism and so on tend to collide in important ways (most notably with regard to timescales and the question of just when the modern became post-modern). However, it is usual to note that postmodern is typified by an approach that rejects the supposed modernist emphasis on the purity and autonomy of art (Lynton 1989: 339).

In the social sciences too the term has become both contested and congested and now conflates a wide range of insights and arguments – something of a problem when trying to assess its utility and applicability for social policy. Consequently it is wise to begin with the *kinds* of guise in which post-modernism is at large in academia and beyond, rather than some absolutist and therefore exclusive definition. This is therefore not an attempt to construct a typology, more an almost random illustration of the levels of definitional coherence to be found.

The first of these is the well-established social scientific usage of 'post-modernism', which traces its lineage back to poststructuralism. This was founded on the deconstruction of Derrida (1967, 1970) and a rejection of the notion that language simply represents reality. It also encompasses Foucault's power/knowledge axis (1977, 1980) and his exposure of the oppressions wrapped in discourses. For good measure this package might also be said to contain the death of both the author (Barthes 1977) and the grand narrative (Lyotard 1979). Of course, those of a forensic nature might want to argue that this designation of a poststructuralist postmodernism actually conflates a number of quite discrete ideas and epistemologies. My point, however, is that this collection of insights has over time gathered itself into what has become a focus for postmodern debates.

The second level at which postmodernism has become a common currency is along the academic/political boundary. This has seen scholarly critiques of class and other supposedly modernist monoliths extended and utilised into the politics of identity and the 'new social movements'. In this approach – most notably in *Marxism Today* – the artistic, cultural and commercial realms are the terrain on which identities are expressed and reformulated (Hall and Jacques 1989). Postmodernism here is seen as a way of transcending the fixities and impositions of labourism, patriarchy and nationalism.

A third and more explicitly popular usage (if such a specification is now admissible) is the postmodernism of the Sunday supplements. This has seen the term used in every feature on subjects from chaos theory to cookery and from multimedia to Madonna. Journalists, advertisers and lifestyle gurus seem