

Social Policy under threat.

Paul Spicker

Published in SPA News, May, 11-12

In the last SPA News, Tim Clark writes that “social policy has never been well defined”. Yes, it has. Social Policy was widely understood, in the 1960s and 70s, as a multi-disciplinary field of study concerned with social welfare services (e.g. Donnison, 1965, p.1). It was an applied subject, studied mainly by professionals in welfare fields. Titmuss expanded the field of interest to include distributive and allocative issues (Titmuss, 1968, pp 20-24). Social Policy is still concerned with social disadvantage, with social problems, with needs, and with the collective response to those issues (Spicker, 1995, ch 1).

Redefining Social Policy

Social Policy used to be called 'Social Administration'. The change in name was settled in 1987, when the Social Administration Association changed its name to the Social Policy Association. Those with long memories may faintly recall that I was one of only two people who voted against the change of name. The other was Howard Glennerster. He was concerned that dropping administration was not just symbolic, but a statement of intent about the direction the subject was going to go in (Glennerster, 1988). He was absolutely right.

The Social Policy community didn't just take its eye off the ball; it punctured it, stamped on it, threw it away and then, in a magnificently Thatcherite gesture, sold the stadium. A range of breakaway subjects, like Housing Studies, Health Studies and Community Care, developed to continue in microcosm what many Social Policy academics were no longer interested in. As Tim Clark comments, the subject has been hollowed out. Of the main social services, only social security now falls squarely into the area of Social Policy - and much of the work there is being done by economists. One head of social policy wrote to me that, in his institution, Social Policy was "in danger of becoming a rump discipline with the expanding area of Social Policy surgically removed from it".

If social policy was not to be about social services, what was it? Michael Cahill, in *The New Social Policy* (1994), sets out an agenda covering issues like communications, leisure and shopping. Cahill is quite right to argue that our social lives are intrinsic to our well-being, but social policy is not concerned with every aspect of well-being. While the areas studied make perfectly good sense for people with a general interest in politics or society, they do not touch very directly on the kind of issues which have generally been considered in the field of social policy, and I am not persuaded that I ought to be more interested in them than I am in any other social, economic or political issues, like international affairs, media studies or energy policy. Michael Hill

has written about his 'awakening' and dismisses the limited scope of his previous work on social policy. He argues for the inclusion of environmental policy, because trying to compensate people for diswelfare may be 'besides the point in an unsafe environment'. (Hill, 1996, p.232) One could say the same about defence, agriculture, industrial production, or many other areas of human endeavour. If Social Policy is about everything, it's about nothing.

Ironically, many of the most interesting developments in the subject since the 1980s have been in Social Administration. They include, for example, empowerment, voice, user control and social inclusion partnerships. If the important work still gets done somewhere, does it matter if it's not done by people working in Social Policy? I think it does. Social Policy offers a wide-ranging but distinctive set of perspectives: the cross-referencing of material relating to different services, a literature relating to service delivery, and the opportunity to work and train people in a wholly multi-disciplinary, applied subject. The fragmentation of different subject areas means that much of that has gone by the board.

Sociology or politics?

Sociology and Politics are large, well-founded disciplines in British universities. Both have their own established areas of work and interest. In recent years, sociology and social policy have drawn much closer; sociology has moved away from the supposedly non-normative examination of society, while many people in social policy have focused on areas of established interest to sociologists, like gender, race and sexuality, where we had have little distinctive to add. Sociology has a different range of interests from social policy, and different methods and approaches. A focus on sociology excludes much of the important material on management, administration and processes of delivery. It also subordinates the applied focus of the subject.

Political science has become more influential in social policy courses in recent years. Many social policy books now feature essays of commentary about institutional structures and processes, often on a comparative basis. Political scientists are interested in ideology, policy formation, implementation and institutional structures. There is a different in approach, but also in subject matter. Political scientists tend to be concerned with process: social policy academics, with the substance of policy. Attempting to treat social policy as part of politics largely excludes the kind of material on needs and problems, and the redistributive impact of policy, which has been characteristic of Social Policy; it also cuts out skills-based teaching for practice.

The redefinition of the subject area has undermined the case for the independent study of social policy. To the outside world, Social Policy must either be Social, in which case it's Sociology, or Policy, in which case it's Politics. If Social Policy is to survive, it has to be distinct from both.

The institutional assault on Social Policy

The SPA's recent initiative to respond to the problems is a welcome, if belated, response to a fundamental problem. Social Policy has been closed in several UK universities, or swallowed by other disciplines. Gary Craig's analysis of the RAE

submissions suggests that 13% of Social Policy staff were removed from assessment between 1996 and 2001. In many institutions, social policy sits as an adjunct to other subjects, either sharing a department or as a minority interest in another department. People working in social policy may be employed to work in a range of departments, offering a particular perspective on a field of study; it is not unusual to find individuals with interests in social policy in social work departments, medical schools, or management. This kind of arrangement - common where appointments are determined by the demands of teaching - can militate against collaborative work, or even an awareness of developments in the subject. Existing units, meanwhile, are under pressure to combine with other subjects, often to reinforce larger subjects which otherwise lack an applied focus. A member of one such unit wrote to me that there have been "recent attempts to reduce our independent status and to press-gang social policy staff into 'co-operation'."

The implications for social policy of being treated as a sub-branch of other disciplines are first, that large and important areas of the subject cannot be covered. There are also practical implications: appointments cannot be made on the multi-disciplinary basis essential to the subject; a department of sociology or politics cannot reasonably expect to appoint an economist or a psychologist with an interest in Social Policy. And the literature of the subject is not supported, except in so far as it falls within the remit of the major discipline.

My view is admittedly somewhat unbalanced. One of the universities which has closed social policy was one where I worked. Correspondence with other institutions seemed to suggest that similar discussions have been taking place in other institutions. Just because some of us have had water up to our necks doesn't mean there's a flood, and even if there was a flood there would be institutions which are high enough not to be touched by it. There are those on low ground, though, who would like some help baling out.

M Cahill, 1994, *The new social policy*, Oxford: Blackwell.

D Donnison et al, 1965, *Social policy and Administration Revisited*, Allen and Unwin 1965.

H Glennerster, 1988, A requiem for the Social Administration Association, *Journal of Social Policy* 17(1) pp 83-4.

M Hill, 1996, *Social policy: a comparative analysis*, Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.

P Spicker, 1995, *Social policy: themes and approaches*, Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.

R Titmuss, 1968, *Commitment to welfare*, London: Allen and Unwin.

Paul Spicker is Grampian Chair of Public Policy at the Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen.