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The origins and essence of US social policy: on taxonomies, time and transfers

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In the social sciences it has not been acceptable to conceptualise an area of social life in terms of essences, or even origins, since the ‘constructionist turn’ that stressed the plastic and contingent nature of social institutions and processes. Recursive practices that give rise to the structures that we find in social life are often hidden from view and, it is argued, have in the past misled us into thinking that those structures were more permanent or anchored than is in fact the case. This is not confined to social science. In *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, Douglas Hofstadter (1979) showed how recursive processes occur in a wide range of phenomena, but that they are difficult to identify: they lie at the heart of Bach's intricate canons, Escher's self-engulfing pictures, and mathematician Kurt Gödel's radical “Incompleteness Theorem” (1931), which stated that every closed system contains propositions that are not provable within the system itself. We seem to have an uncomfortable choice: to examine a system from the outside, which may help us to understand recursive processes that reproduce it, but that has tended to reduce each case to a fairly undifferentiated “essence” or type; or to examine the system from the inside, which may help us to appreciate its complex and contradictory make up, yet blind us to those recursive processes that reproduce it.

There is a vast range of scholarship on US social policy, yet it exhibits something of this analytic dilemma. As a social institution that is to be explained, social policy in the USA has been the subject of a wide range of analysis that has divided between those approaches that view the USA “from outside the system”, such as comparative sociology, and those that view the USA from “within the system”, such as the historical sociology of the USA as a single case. The comparative view has often fixed the USA as a residualist, liberal welfare model. From this point of view the essence of US social policy is that it is an “exceptional case” driven by a number of unique aspects of US society, such as high wages, early democratisation, weak labour mobilisation, and a highly fractured federal structure. The historical view, however, has attempted to unpack different recursive processes that have both shaped early welfare policies, and also explain the recent paths that US social policy has taken. In particular, this approach has attempted to identify different recursive generators of an uneven pattern of social policies within the US, not all of which have been residual in extent, indeed some of which have been exceptionally generous.

In this paper these two approaches to understanding US social policy will be contrasted. The comparative view has placed the US in the context of other

industrialising nations, where it has been seen as a reluctant or late welfare moderniser, and subsequently a welfare regime type of its own. In this case the key focus has been on the construction of *welfare taxonomies*. The historical view in contrast has attempted to understand US social policy on its own, but with a detailed appreciation of its uneven nature, and in particular the reasons for the developmental patterns that different parts of social policy have exhibited. In this case the key focus has been on the analysis of social policy *over time*.

Finally, in view of the influence of US social policy around the world, the consequences of these two analyses for our understanding of the way in which policies travel outside their own country will be reviewed through a brief excursion into *policy transfers*.

Taxonomies

What are taxonomies, and why are they a problem in analysing social policy? The first point to notice is that there are many areas of science that suffer from multiple dimensions that are difficult to resolve into clean and clear types. For example, one of the earliest, and probably the most extensively reworked is the classification of plants. Initially these were grouped on the basis of limited commonalities, such as medicinal utility, or the synthesis of multiple natural characteristics. But the biggest change was the identification of evolutionary connections around the time of the Darwinian revolution. Two key aspects became the organising principles: plants with common ancestors were linked, and in addition the assumption that simple=primitive enabled time to take a central place in the classification, for example in separating unisexual from bisexual plants. Recent developments, such as genetic de-coding, have built on this system, but not challenged the general analysis.

A more recent example, but one that illustrates the difficulties of dimensions that also interact is the attempt to classify types of galaxies by de Vaucouleurs (<http://bama.ua.edu/~rbuta/gvatlas/node2.html>). This uses three dimensions, rings, spirals and bars. However these do not separate cleanly, and there is, as with plants (and welfare states), a tension between the classification system and the empirical reality. Nevertheless astronomers are now trying to unpick the underlying processes that give rise to these patterns through the measurement of the composition and density of the gases involved, and the modelling of the evolution universe, particularly its rapid expansion immediately after the big-bang some 14 billion years ago which gave rise to the uneven spread of matter across space.

These two examples illustrate the way in which classifications are constructed: first some potential dimensions are identified, then empirical observations are made as to fit and completeness, then the possible meaning (usually involving a model or theory of causality) of the types is examined, and finally the types are settled. This process has been systematised as “general morphological analysis” by Fritz Zwicky (1969). He argued that analysing complex policy fields presents us with a number of difficult methodological problems: many factors are non-quantifiable; uncertainties are often in principle non-reducible; and the actual process by which conclusions are drawn in such studies is often difficult to trace - i.e. we seldom have an adequate audit trail describing the process of getting from initial problem formulation to specific solutions or conclusions.

Morphological analysis identifies and defines the dimensions (or parameters) of the problem complex to be investigated and assigns each of these a range of relevant values or conditions. A morphological box - known as a Zwicky box - is constructed by setting the parameters against each other in an n-dimensional parameter space. Each cell of the parameter space contains one particular value or condition from each of the parameters, and thus marks out a particular state or configuration of the problem complex. (See for discussion, <http://www.swemorph.com/ma.html>).

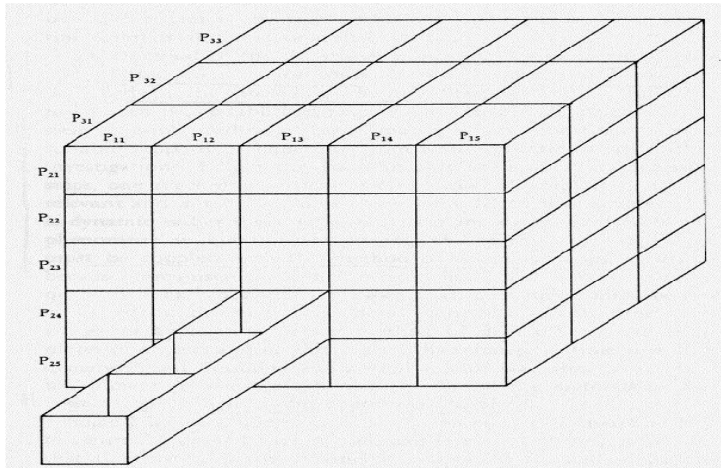


Figure 1: A 3-parameter Zwicky box containing 75 cells or "configurations" (Zwicky, 1969, p. 118.)

The point is to examine all of the configurations in the field, in order to establish which of them are possible, viable, practical, interesting, and so on, and which are not. In doing this, we mark out in the field a solution space. The solution space of a Zwickian morphological field consists of the subset of configurations, which satisfy some criteria.

We could illustrate this for example with Esping-Andersen's (1990) typology if we were to divide his dimensions into 5 levels of de-commodification, 5 levels of stratification, and 3 levels of state intervention. This would give us 75 different possible solutions, even though Esping-Anderson only identifies three. Have the other 72 possible types been properly thought through and decision criteria established as to their viability? If not, there may be alternative formulations, or at least, particular states may fall into different compartments of the draws that can be pulled out of the box.

The comparative analysis of welfare states has operated from the assumption that each welfare state can be characterised as a whole unit – traditionally measured by the proportion of GDP devoted through state expenditure to social security and other public programmes. This in itself raises questions about private, non-state expenditure, and about the coherence of social policies across the state, which we will return to (Kasza, 2002). In this tradition of analysis, states were compared in terms of their "welfare effort" (Wilensky, 1975), and this was regressed on to other possible factors, such as level of GDP, demography, and so on. Clearly the sample chosen was

likely to affect the findings; in particular a large variation in GDP was likely to crowd out other possible factors. Indeed it was this effect that led to a “politics matters” turn in comparative analysis: when states with relatively similar levels of GDP were analysed (eg OECD members) it was found that political rather than economic differences were crucial (Castles and McKinlay, 1979).

In the initial comparative work there was an implicit classification of states between high and low spenders on a single dimension. With the turn to political explanations, more dimensions came into play: the strength of the left, the weakness of the right, the nature of inter-class alliances, the centralisation of state institutions, and so on. Titmuss (1974) and Wedderburn (1965), for example, identified three or four types of welfare state. With the Esping-Anderson (1990) “three worlds” publication, there was a powerful resolution of this analytic work around a classically Weberian ideal typology, which extracted pure forms of welfare state types, with empirical examples of states that were more or less closely aligned with these types. This has been the dominant solution space of a Zwicky morphological field for comparative social policy analysis since the subset of configurations (three worlds of welfare capitalism) satisfies in certain respects both an economic and a political set of dimensions. Much work has been undertaken to develop the classification (for example, Abrahamson, 2000; Andreß and Heien, 2001).

However, this process doesn’t necessarily stop at one solution. We have seen how plant classifications have taken on board an increasingly powerful and compelling causal model to tie the classification together (evolution and genetics). Astronomy has done the same through the analysis of gas composition, and the modelling of the post big-bang rapid expansion of the universe.

The relevance of these processes to the classification and analysis of US social policy is compelling. Historians of US social policy have dismissed welfare state classifications as “comparative statics” (Orloff, 2004). The implication is that the system has yet to derive a satisfactory Zwicky solution that entails a plausible causal model. The unspoken problem is that this is not a “theory driven classification”. The critical issue is the evolutionary assumptions that underlie the classification of any welfare state, and in this case the USA.

The original model for the USA was that it was “exceptional” (from a European perspective). It had a different economy that delivered high wages in the north and a slave based planter economy in the south. It had a different polity, highly federalised, with an active constitution. It had a different society, without a feudal past, and with an ideology of liberal individualism, and a weak labour movement. Pierson (1990) has collected twenty examples in this genre. However a number of problems have been raised in the case of the USA. The list of exceptions is not systematically theorised, with no clear means of attributing causal weight to the factors, or detailing their specific and general effects on social policies. Indeed the very notion of exceptionality implied that the USA was not a viable system in its own right.

This was a one-solution Zwicky box. However Esping-Anderson solves this by suggesting there are alternative Zwicky solutions to the normal dilemmas for welfare states such as market insulation, inequality, and political intervention. In turn, a growing number of writers have been rummaging in the box; some have argued that

where states fit into other parts of the box (eg the “latin” rim, or socialist states) there should be more solutions; others have argued that the the box’s three dimensions should be expanded to a fourth (gender issues – particularly de-familialisation), or a fifth dimension (race).

Of course, as Abrahamson (2000) has argued, this “welfare modelling business” can continue for a very long time, since the number of potential solutions in the box expands rapidly as dimensions are added. What is the way to sort through the options? As we have seen, the approach in plant science and astronomy was to identify an evolutionary process which combines both time and classification. For example, Amenta, Bonastia and Caren (2001) suggest that it would be useful to combine both comparative and historical work, to try to identify the way in which US social policy has evolved, particularly to trace the paths along which both unsuccessful and successful, policy initiatives have travelled, and why.

Time

The idea of including evolution within taxonomies suggests that our understanding of types of welfare state, including US social policy, will be enhanced to the extent that we understand the evolution of those policies over time. Historical work on US social policy has grown out of a wider tradition of historical sociology, for which social policies have provided a useful empirical field of study, but which is not *per se* focussed on this area. This work has elevated the significance of time for social policy analysis to a central position.

An early example of this point can be drawn from Merton’s (1936) essay on the unintended consequences of “purposive social action”. Policies over time may not bring about the changes intended. He observes that there are a number of reasons why action as intended does not always result in anticipated outcomes. The first two—and the most pervasive—were ignorance and error. The third was wilful ignorance of the unanticipated, because of an overwhelming commitment to the intended consequence. The fourth was where value commitments are self-contradictory, for example asceticism leading to the accumulation of unspent wealth. Finally the self-defeating prediction can result from changes that are themselves brought about by the prediction itself. All these sources of error can divert policy intentions over time.

Policy analysts are familiar with the effects of the non take-up of discretionary benefits (and the converse – the over-consumption of welfare goods, such as health care, by zealous claimants), or the high marginal tax rates generated by benefit withdrawal. A second order of such effects can be seen where policies generate feedback that diverts the original aims, such as the producer capture of public services by self interested professionals, or free riders, or the expansion of risky behaviour by individuals who feel insurance brings them security. Those on the right of the political spectrum have used such arguments to suggest that intervention should be abandoned, for example Murray’s (1984) thought experiments over smoking or welfare interventions, Sieber’s (1981) enumeration of “fatal remedies”, and more recently a series of books by Furedi (2001, 2002, 2003); however these observations have been used more rigorously to suggest that interventions and the policies that support them may generate their own politics (Orloff, 2004), and that our understanding of social policies cannot be adequate unless we understand the way that they have evolved over

time. Why do some policies remain remarkably intact, even in the face of severe pressures, while others seem to fade away without trace?

Of course there has always been history; but a new body of scholarship has been building a more detailed argument that change over time is essential to understanding policies. In this work, perhaps best known through the idea of path-dependence, the way in which specific “mechanisms” result in particular patterns of subsequent actions has been used to give a more complete, and indeed in many cases a new, explanation.

The general starting point is that “time matters”. In his new book on *Politics in Time*, Pierson (2004) begins with a presentation of the “Polya Urn” thought experiment, drawing from the economics of North (1990), Arthur (1994) and others. In this demonstration, there is a large urn with two balls, one black and one red. One ball is removed, and then returned with an additional ball of the same colour. This is repeated until the urn is full. The result is that small changes in the balance of colours in the urn early on will have a powerful effect on the final mix of balls that are in the urn when full. This idea illustrates the effects of path-dependence. Arthur (1994) suggests that this process of positive feedback can be characterised in several ways. It is unpredictable because random early events have large effects on the end state, and these early events do not tend to cancel out. It is also increasingly inflexible as time passes, and can lead to an inefficient path, alternatives to which can no longer be reached. Positive feedback typically exhibits rising rates of return, such that the costs and likelihood of changing paths, once one has been set, reduce over time. This is particularly the case where set-up costs are large at the beginning, and where benefits grow in use as a result of growing knowledge, the coordination of others onto the path, and the self-fulfilling character of expectations for future gains from staying on the path. For example, the chance of which party was in power when the stock market crashed in 1929 may have been crucial to subsequent events and the birth of the New Deal in the 1930s. The Republicans had dominated the 1920s; but with the crash this was sufficiently discrediting not only to hand power to the democrats, but to give them the political space to fashion a new path, the New Deal, that was to last for the rest of the century. However, technological examples of path-dependence are more commonly presented in this literature, such as video systems, information technology platforms, and the humble QWERTY keyboard.

Pierson suggests that path-dependency is particularly relevant to politics and policies, and that these can have effects over long periods of time, that are difficult to include in cross-sectional analyses typical of comparative models of welfare state explanation. For example slow demographic changes, such as life expectancy, or family size, or migration patterns can have cumulative impacts over time that tend to be missed in conventional studies that try to build causal models by linking contemporaneous variables. Moreover, it is not merely that time matters; sequences, that is the order in which changes occur, are also held to be a neglected mechanism of effect in this literature. Abbott has made this point strongly in his work on professions (1988) and a more general review of methodology (2001). It may be that some sequences have strongly path-stabilising effects, while others will tend to disrupt paths and lead to change. Thus those occupations that are successful in developing their professional status appear to have gone through a common sequence of development. The “natural experiment” of the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe has

provided vivid examples of alternative sequences of economic and social change. For example Poland opted for deep labour market adjustments and high unemployment which led to high inequality but a rapid return to economic growth. The Czech Republic was more cautious in this respect, and has lower inequality, but slower growth. Russia was at the opposite end of this sequencing, with a retention of labour market protection, but poor economic recovery (Manning, 2004).

The significance of time for understanding the nature of US social policy has been of growing influence in recent years. Adams, Clemens, and Orloff (2004) in an extensive review have reflected on three “waves” of historical sociology, in which both the mechanisms of sequencing over time and the subject of social policy have come to occupy a central focus in the effort to develop satisfactory explanations of US society. The first wave is defined as the history of the US from the works of Kerr (1960), Rostow (1960) and Wilensky (1975) who are seen as identifying the growth of social policy as an inevitable outcome of industrial development (although to be fair, Kerr was careful to identify different configurations of elite industrialisers – the American, the Japanese, the Russian, etc). It is against this backdrop that the exceptional nature of the US as welfare laggard was remarked. The second wave took issue with the programmatic elements of the industrial society model, posing the challenge that in social science the quest for explanation must seek to identify the way in which real societies actually develop. In the case of the US, the challenge was to understand US social policy as it had actually developed, rather than as an exception to a general and abstract model of industrial society.

A common feature of the second wave has therefore been to seek ways in which US social policy has developed positively, rather than as a reluctant exception. Much of this writing has deliberately set out to identify and explain periods and areas of US social policy that are expansionist and progressive. A number of significant examples have now been written up. Skocpol’s (1995) celebration of welfare for soldiers and mothers has become a landmark study in defining the second wave. She demonstrated that the general model of ‘welfare laggard’ was entirely inappropriate in the case of veterans’ services, and mothers’ support. A number of other studies have followed in this vein. Amenta (2000) has analysed the generous reaction to the eruption of acute need generated by the early depression years, and the newly elected democratic President taking office in March, 1933, bringing with him experience of dealing with poverty as Mayor of New York since 1929: the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Civil Works Administration, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Roosevelt famously said that “we should quit this business of relief” precisely because the previous three years had generated such a generous welfare effort.

Making a similar point, but not in the same tradition, is the celebration of the upsurge in social policies in Lyndon Johnson’s Big Society programmes of the 1960s, where the number of those on welfare rose rapidly, and the amendments to the 1935 Social Security Act brought health care to the poor and the elderly (Schwarz, 1984). More recently, Pierson’s (1995) study of the resistance of social policies to retrenchment, followed by the expansion of newer innovations such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Lifeline Universal Telephone Service, dubbed “stealth welfare” by Newman (2003), have continued the theme of positive achievements in US social policy, that either explicitly or implicitly challenges the exceptionalism model. My own favourite example is the positive effect of the US constitution on rights for

people with disabilities, which in some respects have a security as yet unavailable in the UK or indeed in Sweden. The positive leverage of the US constitution on social policy would be a suitable case study in this tradition, and may well have been done.

However this optimistic combination of the injection of time into social policy analysis, and an appreciation of the hidden success of US social policy is of course insufficient. If this is indeed an advance in our understanding then it should also be able to reveal the dependent paths and sequences that have given rise to less progressive aspects of US social policy, and there are in fact a number of studies of this type. A cogently argued example was Quadagno's (1996) study of the way that race, and particularly the sequences of political interaction between the southern states, and the federal government in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the subsequent politics of race in the urban north, have been defining features of the stark bifurcation of social policies between welfare and the rest, and have shaped the politics of education (after the "Brown" cases) and urban planning. There has recently been an upsurge in this literature filling out the analysis in a variety of ways (see the nine books reviewed by Manza (2000).

Another strong theme in this tradition has been the effect of business interests on social policy. This can be traced in several ways. A key paper was the extended analysis by Gordon (1991) of the way in which business organisations, such as the American Association for Labor Legislation, worked to both extend welfare legislation to collectivise and limit business legal liability over workplace accidents in the 1920s, and also to limit the pensions liabilities that were under discussion in the build up to the 1935 Social Security Act. More recently Hacker (2002; Hacker and Pierson, 2002) has worked on the argument that there is considerable provision, and specific structuring, of social policy through the private market, which has been badly overlooked in the historical institutionalism of sociologists such as Skocpol and Orloff who have concentrated on state provision. Adding in private provision shows that the US is much more or a par with other industrial societies than appears to be the case for state expenditures alone. Although the USA only spends around 15 per cent of GDP on publicly funded social programmes compared with 25 per cent in Sweden and Germany, when publicly regulated private expenditure is included, these totals come to 24, 27 and 28 per cent respectively.

However business interests are not stimulated by the meeting of social needs; or at least they are not stimulated unless there are market opportunities to be had in the meeting of them. This is hardly a new point. Food and housing are for the most part privately produced and consumed in all societies. In the US this extends to most medical care, and substantial parts of education. The issue is not so much what is the state doing, but how are social risks overall being met in a society, and what is the balance between the collective and individual meeting of these risks. Moreover, there is the question of how new risks are being met (Manning and Shaw, 2000; Taylor-Gooby, 2004). For the US case, Hacker (2004) has argued that there is a dark side to the positive notion of "stealth welfare" in which new risks are being quietly and disproportionately privatised, while arguments about old risks draw our attention elsewhere, in a parallel process of "stealth privatisation". For example stable policies provide less and cover for the total risks faced by citizens, as new risks appear; and tax breaks and occupational welfare are expanded.

The impact of time, sequencing, and slow processes can therefore include contemporary developments as well as those from the past, in the quest to unravel a more complex view of the state of US social policy.

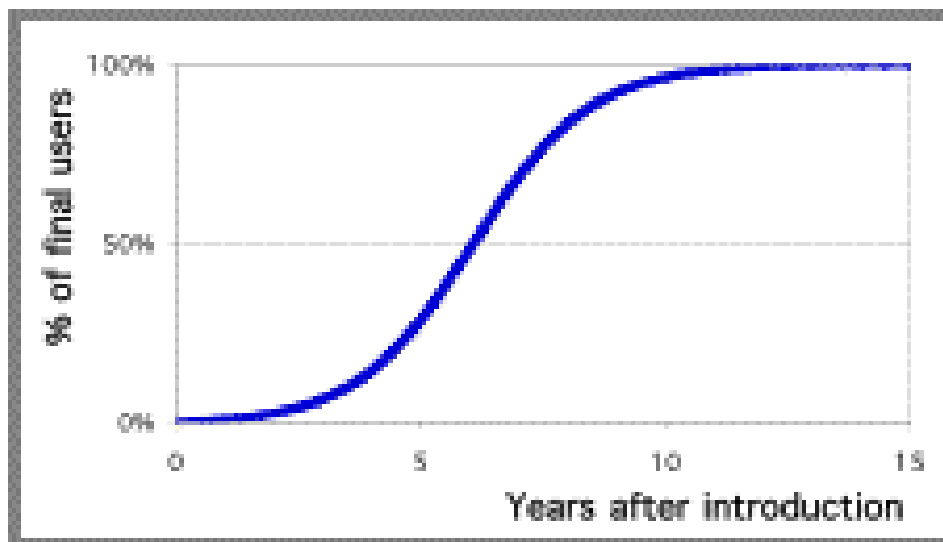
Transfers

The nature of US social policy discussed so far is of consequence not merely for those in the US, but for many societies that are influenced by the way in which the US has developed. The extent of this influence has become the subject of a relatively new specialism within the analysis of social policy – policy transfer. These remarks on taxonomies and time have much to offer here, but not until some preliminary remarks have been made about the nature of policy transfer.

Policies and innovations are manifold, but only taken up where they “fit” and solve local problems. This fit depends on the particular Zwicky solution that has been adopted in a society or, particular policy area. For example the injection of market mechanisms may or may not solve particular policy problems, or more specifically may or may not generate unanticipated consequences of “purposive social action”. Take for example the injection of markets into state socialism in the late 1980s, in the face of declining productivity and public disaffection with existing economic and social relations. In a society whose dictum was “we pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us”, markets were unlikely to transform existing industrial relations, because the additional Zwicky components of structural and behavioural supports that are the necessary conditions for markets to work did not exist, and they didn’t. The unanticipated consequences were far-reaching: initially a rapid growth of economic corruption, and before too long the collapse of the whole system.

A recent detailed study of social policy advice by the OECD over twenty five years to sixteen countries, shows that in all these countries policy advice was almost universally rejected by countries unless they were already in the process of looking for that particular kind of solution (Manning, 2004). Why is this? Following our earlier discussion, we might surmise that policies will only fit depending on their place in policy sequences, dependent paths, and slow processes. A transferred policy might have quite different consequences depending on how, when and where it is adopted into a particular setting, and this cannot simply be read off from the particular welfare regime characterising the whole state, nor from what has worked elsewhere or in the past.

What are the key factors here? Much of this recent literature (Dolowitz, 2003; Daguerre and Taylor-Gooby 2004; Walker and Wiseman, 2003) draws without acknowledgement on the sociological study of the diffusion of innovations. This started from a classic paper by James Coleman (1957), reporting on a study of the adoption of innovations amongst American physicians. He identified a pattern, the ‘S’ curve, that was shaped by the three key aspects reported in the policy transfer literature: values for or against the innovation; networks of contacts between those interested; and definitions of the problem to be solved. This distinguished early, typical, and late adopters, and has been found to fit numerous studies of innovation diffusion:



Nutley et al (2002) identified 14,600 articles on the diffusion of innovation between 1990 and 2002. The seminal work on this area (Hughes, 1995), running over four editions identified eight dimensions of diffusion research, summarised by Nutley et al (2002, p.4) as:

- “1. *Earliness of knowing about innovations*: Addressing the means by which initial knowledge of an innovation is communicated within social systems.
2. *Rate of adoption of different innovations in a social system*: The classic studies aiming to explain patterns of diffusion focused on the nature of the innovation (e.g. seminal studies on the uptake of new agricultural practices).
3. *Innovativeness*: Empirical research that examines the characteristics of individuals or organisations perceived as being innovative.
4. *Opinion leadership*: Research focusing on the role of opinion leaders and change agents in ensuring diffusion.
5. *Diffusion networks*: Work exploring the social interconnectedness of the actors in the social system where diffusion is being examined.
6. *Rate of adoption in different social systems*: An extension of the work in the previous category, attempting to explain differing rates of uptake by the characteristics of the social system and the context within which it is embedded.
7. *Communication channels*: The focus here is on the various communication channels which seem to be most effective either at different times in the diffusion process, or with different categories of potential adopters.
8. *Consequences of innovation*: Research attempting to assess the potential impacts as innovations diffuse through social systems.”

Existing policy transfer research has focussed on 5, 6 and 7, but has overlooked the other elements. For example questions as to what innovativeness actually is, the rate of diffusion, the difference between early, middle and late adopters, and the consequences of innovation are yet to be explored in much detail.

The diffusion of innovations literature tends to focus on the rational adoption or rejection of innovation; it captures less well some other dynamics of policy transfer, especially ‘coercive’ and ‘ideological’ transfer. We can start with Weber: there might

be three types of authority under which policy transfer could take place: charismatic, rational/legal, or traditional. Etzioni (1961) has reworked these into a threefold model for organisational power in which actors might comply for three possible reasons: firstly, they strongly believe in the issue or principle, and are positively motivated to adopt any suggested actions (ideological); secondly, they can be entirely instrumental, and respond where they see some benefit/cost advantage in doing so; finally they can acquiesce because they have no choice, but are being coerced to comply. We can see immediately how policy transfer might occur under these different conditions. As Weber observed, there can also be movement between one of these aspects and another. Weber described the “routinisation of charisma”, suggesting that ideological commitment tends to decay into either instrumental use, or tradition over time.

Economists have also observed that policy advice on international trade (for example the innovation of lowering trade barriers, and the movement from import substitution to export as an economic policy for poorer states), either imposed or adopted instrumentally, tends to result over periods of repeated iterations of policy transfer into an effect they describe as “herding” whereby policy adopters converge on a common solution, not always or necessarily the best, because of the mutual influence of policy debates on each other (Milner, 2003; Morrissey and Nelson, 2003). This is in fact the equivalent of path-dependency.

Policy transfer thus interacts with taxonomies and time. Positive or ideological commitment is likely to lead to a rising rate of return: knowledge about the policy in use will grow; attitudes in favour of policy use will spread; there will be wider support across the policy community (“herding”, as remarked in the economic literature); and possible spin-offs will come to light. Alternative paths will, as a consequence, retreat. Detailed reviews of the adoption of US “welfare to work” innovations in the UK reveal all of these processes (Duncan, Pearson and Scholz, 2003).

Where transfer is for instrumental reasons, then the policies may or may not fit depending particularly on the sequencing of several factors. Possibly the most significant is the prior existence of a problem to be solved. The high rate of rejection of OECD advice was the result a mis-alignment between the problems identified by OECD staff, and the perceptions of local policy actors. There also have to be appropriate instruments in place. For example a key element in the passage of new members into the EU is the construction of policy instruments that can then convey and support EU policy innovations. This is clear in the period after the accession of Portugal and Spain, described by Guillén and Palier (2004) as “cognitive Europeanisation”, and can be seen already in the preparation of the Central and East European states before membership (Manning, 2004). A curious early example of this was the adoption of British and German social policies by the Bolsheviks in Russia at their 1912 convention, and subsequently implemented after the 1917 revolution (George and Manning, 1980). A negative example is the explicit fear of German ideas in the 1930s as potentially “contaminating” US health policy with instruments that might undermine established interests, and which effectively blocked the inclusion of health care in the 1935 Social Security Act (Anderson, 1968). Instrumental policy transfer will also be affected by local political coalitions and resources.

Finally there is coercive policy transfer. The OECD is a very mild version of this, which as we have commented has been widely rejected. There are stronger examples. Perhaps the biggest and most sustained example of coercive social policy transfer was the imposition of Soviet policies on republics within the USSR, and the nation states of Central Europe. This resulted in both relative uniformity, but also surprisingly persistent unevenness, and a remarkable diversity has reappeared within ten years of the collapse of state socialism (Manning, 2004). Mechanisms of path dependence such as the development of coalitions of support (eg the communist party), and rising rates of return do not seem to have sustained the old policies. The US has its share of such examples: the attempt by the northern states to impose citizenship in the south after the civil war, but which was effectively undermined well into the middle of the twentieth century, and for some analysts right up to the current period; the failure to organise health care insurance for the whole of the population, despite repeated federal attempts to do so. The use of coercive policy transfer by the IMF and the World Bank may thus in the longer run be futile.

Conclusion

What types of “essence and origins” of US social policy can we draw out of this review, and how might this relate to the way in which US policies transfer to other states?

The transferability of policies depends on their viability. But policies imported into any welfare state cannot just be grafted on – they won’t take effectively and may well be rejected without the right conditions. Holmwood (2000) has suggested for example that the tension between UK and mainstream European social policies is far more deeply rooted than a question of policy networks, general social values, or particular crises argued by Daguerre and Taylor-Gooby (2004). Similarly, Huber and Stephens (2004) suggest that economic policy change in Latin America and the Caribbean is not merely crisis driven, but also mediated by local political elites. And again, Orenstein’s (2002) study of international pension reforms in the same region strongly supports a diffusion of innovation model, with almost no support for crisis origins, and develops the idea of the “politics of attention” to highlight the idea that regional policy players are the key drivers of policy trends rather than national policy players, which explains the strongly regional pattern to policy change.

The EU accession process, whereby policy instruments and capacities are developed first, suggests a process of “stealth policy” transfer, in which prior conditions are exported first. For example, Prince (2001) has argued that the US has been more adept at exporting discursive practices about welfare, such “fiscalisation” and “marketisation” than specific policies *per se*, which would be compatible with Orenstein’s politics of attention model.

It seems clear, then, that arguments couched in terms of exceptionalism are now dead. Types of welfare state must include an account of their evolution, and increasingly their “DNA”, such as the mechanisms that can account for the paths on which their policies have travelled, the sequences of events involved in their development, and the slower changes shaping their underlying constraints. This is as true of the US as of any other welfare state.

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