

ISRF – End of Project Report

Jay Wiggan

Summary

Contemporary social security and labour market policy in the UK has been the subject of extensive academic research and commentary, be it focused on the effectiveness of policy reforms, the ideas driving policy change, and/or the institutions which have facilitated or constrained particular paths of development. The objective of this study was to situate 40 years of social security, and particularly employment programme reforms, in an explicitly bottom up framework of analysis drawing on an autonomist informed theoretical approach to invert top down accounts of labour market policy change since the 1980s. This involved examination of material policy change and its contestation together with the investigation of dominant and submerged discourses to draw out competing interpretations and representations of the necessity and/or desirability, or not of particular 'welfare reforms'. Through this the study has sought to more fully explore the interweaving of the material and the discursive to identify how these co-constitute the current and future shape of social security and labour market policy.

The aim was to break with studies that principally concentrate on 'official' actors, be these political parties, individual policymakers, organisations such as trade unions, and/or the influence of existing welfare state structures in the UK. While these are and remain important influences, the autonomist approach taken in this study re-situates the action of labour as the driver of social, economic and policy change. In practice the study oriented itself to the micro level in order to unearth how individuals and organisations working within and against the state engaged with and sought to shape the shift to a 'workfare' policy during the 1980s and 1990s. This was complemented by research with organisations currently involved in claimant rights activity to provide a contemporary labour centred perspective that enabled a comparative exploration of activity in the context of changed opportunities and constraints. Together these provided rich accounts of the contested nature of policy change on the ground and the forms and temporality of resistance from those who have been marginalised in more traditional accounts. In addition to the focus on the studying micro level past and present action the study has also engaged with identifying and unpacking the broader articulation of future welfare imaginaries articulated by government and autonomous claimant organisations. The return and rise of Basic Income in policy and popular discussion and its embrace and problematisation by claimant groups as an alternative path to punitive welfare reform stands in stark contrast to the continued commitment to expansive and firm benefit conditionality by the UK Government. As the study progressed I became increasingly interested in how the UK Government has begun to experiment with incorporating finance capital and financial rationality into the delivery of some employability services, potentially reconfiguring the terrain on which claimants and claimant organisations may contest the state. This led me to explore the nature of this emergent process of financialisation of new areas of social policy and its connection to labour autonomy and this continues to be a research interest.

Methods

My approach was to situate the specific reforms within a deeper historical class focused account in order to sufficiently understand the dynamics of (un)waged labour in shaping the origins and evolution of active labour market policy evolution and the changing micro-politics of the 'refusal of work' by autonomous organisations of the unwaged. Having spent the initial months exploring the relevant secondary academic literature on past and contemporary social security and labour market

reforms the project then shifted into data collection phase. The ISRF fellowship provided the time and resources to visit and consult well known repositories of mainstream sources of policy and political data including the National Archives and the People's History Museum and to dig into the wealth of material held on benefit claimant groups by libraries such as Sparrows Nest in Nottingham and the Scottish Radical Library in Edinburgh.

As part of the excavation of labour's resistance to and subversion of active labour market reforms during the 1980s and 1990s a series of interviews were conducted with people who had been active in claimant advocacy organisations in England and Scotland, and with people who had worked in the organisations delivering benefit and employment services. Through integration with both the 'radical' literature of the time and official material these oral history accounts provide a rich source for understanding the shifting focus of organisations over time and the various actions undertaken to contest state 'activation' policy. Given the contemporary intensifying reconstruction of social security policy in the UK, interviews were also conducted with people from claimant advocacy groups currently organising autonomously from the state or official labour movement. The fieldwork and analysis has taken somewhat longer than initially planned and so at the time of writing a few final interviews remain to be conducted, following which a scenario analysis workshop exploring different 'welfare futures' is planned.

Outputs

Talks

'A political reading of welfare reform'. Lecture presented to the Mental Health and Unemployment in Scotland Event, hosted by Employment Research Institute, Edinburgh Napier University, The Hub, Edinburgh, February 21st, 2017.

'The state and the reconfiguration of social security'. Short presentation to the Future of Work event hosted by undergraduate Discussion Group 'Work, Work, Work'. University of Edinburgh, March 23rd 2018.

'Recovering histories of resistance to conditionality in the UK: on the front line with autonomous claimant organisations in the war over 'welfare''. Paper presentation to the ESRC International Conference on Welfare Conditionality, University of York, 27th June, 2018.

Publications

Making markets: social impact investing, employability programmes and new spaces of financialisation in social policy (under review - chapter for edited book titled 'Spatialising Social Policies' with Policy Press, publication late 2018/ 2019).

Resistance to conditionality in the UK: on the front line with autonomous claimant organisations in the war over 'welfare' (In progress- planned submission in September 2018 to Social Policy & Society).

The Politics of Full Employability: a labour centred perspective (This manuscript will be the main academic output of the research and submission of a completed draft to the publisher for consideration and review is planned for early 2019).

Once the final fieldwork and analysis is complete this summer I will be writing shorter publication pieces for a broader audience to complement the academic focused work and anticipate additional presentations taking place following completion of the manuscript.