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Author:

Taylor-Gooby, Peter

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by
Peter Taylor-Gooby



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Peter Taylor-Gooby

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Peter Taylor-Gooby is Professor of Social Policy at the University of Kent, Canterbury, UK. This paper was first presented at the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales in July, 1993. I am grateful for the comments made at that seminar.

Abstract

Postmodernism claims that the universalist themes of modern society (society-wide political ideologies, the nation-state, the theme of rational planning in government policy, the large-scale public or private sector bureaucracy) are obsolete, to be replaced by a plural interest in diversity and choice. These ideas have strong implications for the theory of social policy, which typically stresses universal themes of inequality and privilege, and for the practice of social policy, which relies on rational analysis to inform society-wide government provision. This paper suggests that such an approach ignores the significance of market liberalism and the associated trends to inequality, privatisation, retrenchment and the regulation of the poorest groups. From this perspective, postmodernism functions as an ideological smokescreen, preventing us from recognising some of the most important trends in modern social policy. It is unfortunate if, at a time when the results of increasing inequality are everywhere apparent, one of the dominant approaches in social science obscures the issue.

1 Introduction: The Relevance of Postmodernism to Social Policy

The term 'postmodernism' refers in this paper to a loose cluster of ideas ranging across the main themes of social science, including culture and the arts, the development of ideas, economic and political life, individual and social experience and our understanding of the role and future of the state. It incorporates the analyses of the role of intellectuals and of high culture discussed by Bauman (1987) and of ideas in society discussed by Lyotard (1984); of changes in industrial processes and in the world of work (often termed 'post-industrialism' or 'post-Fordism') discussed by commentators from Bell (1974) to Pixley (1993) and their implications for government; the issues of legitimacy and citizenship discussed by Turner (1986) and Giddens (1990); and the implications for individual life discussed by Beck (1992), and for collective political action discussed by writers like Touraine (1981) and more recently in relation to welfare by Martin Hewitt (1993) and Fiona Williams (1992).

This is a broad field. The justification for bringing this work together is threefold. First, it shares common themes (the declining significance of universalism across many aspects of social life, decentralisation and diversity). Secondly, the treatment of these themes at the various levels interlinks, so that the analyses of intellectual life explain the currents of ideas expressed in material changes and the economic and political changes provide a foundation for the shifts that influence intellectual activity and individual life-experience. Thirdly, the work has strong implications for future developments both in social policy practice and in social policy studies.

Bauman contrasts typical modern and postmodern 'intellectual practices' as follows:

The typical modern view of the world is one of an essentially orderly totality ... an explanation of events which is simultaneously a tool of production and...of control. Control ... ('mastery over nature', 'planning') is...associated with ordering action. Effectivity of control depends on the adequacy of knowledge of the natural order...effectivity of control and correctness of

knowledge are tightly related...between themselves they supply criteria to classify existing practices as superior or inferior... A postmodern view of the world is...one of an unlimited number of models of order...upheld by the habits and beliefs of a 'community of meanings' and admitting of no other tests of legitimacy. (Bauman, 1987: 3,4)

The relevance to social policy is obvious. Social policy research is concerned to generate high quality objective knowledge that can be deployed in social planning. Social policy practice involves the realisation of society-wide programs containing implicit views about priorities and needs and how to meet them in health services, pension systems and so on, whatever the views of particular groups. The notion of a universal and ameliorative social policy conflicts with the postmodern emphasis on diversity and pluralism in views of what is desirable.

Postmodern developments are also relevant to social policy in three other ways. One of the strengths of social policy studies is **interdisciplinarity**, drawing on both the interpretive social sciences, typified by sociology, and the analytical social sciences, typified by economics. The rapid expansion of interest in postmodernism is confined to sociology. This shift may disturb the balance of disciplines that has been maintained in the subject, and dislocate communication between them.

Secondly, postmodernism summarises some of the key themes in contemporary social policy discussion. The stress on particularity reflects the concern with the interests of service consumers that has developed over recent years (see Williams, 1992: 206 for a careful examination of this issue). The emphasis on the declining significance of the nation-state fits with the renewed interest both in localism and in decentralised administration and in supra-national institutions such as the European Community or the World Bank (Deacon, 1993). While these themes have originated primarily in sociological discussion they are concerned with issues that are analysed from both sociological and economic perspectives.

Thirdly, and perhaps most important, postmodern approaches appear at first sight to deny some of the most significant changes occurring in the modern world. On a politico-economic level, the current seems firmly set in the direction of economic liberalism - a doctrine which does not represent a new

departure but can trace its roots back to the origins of economic analysis at the dawn of the modern era. This theme is reflected at the ideological level in what Fukuyama in his Hegelian account of 'the end of history' refers to as the 'ultimate triumph of Western liberalism' (Fukuyama, 1989: 3,4). It is implicit in the world-wide thrust to the freeing of markets embodied most significantly in the 1993 Uruguay round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) negotiations, in the extension of market principles and of privatisation throughout Eastern and Central Europe sponsored by the dominant capitalist powers and agencies like the World Bank, in the emphasis on privatisation in government policy in first-world countries (Veljanovski, 1991; Graham, 1991), and in the general movement towards limiting the scope of state intervention in OECD member states. This is summed up in a recent report as 'broad agreement that the brunt...of strategy should be ... reductions in expenditure rather than tax increases' (Oxley and Martin, 1991: 146). It is reflected in the emphasis on sound money and on the freeing of markets in the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty.

The trend towards economic liberalism is the nearest approximation to a universal theme in world affairs. At the level of welfare the theme is reflected in financial constraint, the privatisation of services, the moves towards the deregulation of labour markets and the increased inequality between population groups that is evident in many countries, and especially in the UK. If postmodernism denies the significance of such broad developments and substitutes a language of particularism and diversity, the approach may obscure one of the great reversals for the most vulnerable groups in a cloud of detail, may ignore the wood through enthusiasm for bark-rubbing.

This paper will first trace the development of postmodern approaches at the level of ideas, and then analyse accounts of change in social and political life.

2 Postmodernism: The Level of Ideas

The easiest approach is through the influential work of Bauman (1987) and Lyotard (1984). Both locate the emergence of the central themes of the modern approach to intellectual life in the explosion of scientific, philosophical, social and analytic thought of the Western European

Enlightenment between two and three hundred years ago. The guiding principle in the great current of Enlightenment thought was the claim that human reason could understand and ultimately control the natural world, and could analyse and resolve the problems of human society. Science offered a royal road to knowledge and to progress. The rejection of traditional modes of thought and control in religion, feudalism and the monarchy offered an opportunity to reshape the world guided by the light of reason. This philosophy assumed concrete form in the early aspirations of revolutionary France. The Revolutionary Committee founded the Institut de France in 1795 to develop and promulgate the ideas of the Enlightenment and in 1797 Napoleon became an honorary member.

The story of the tragedy of the revolution (at least as a step forward in the application of reason in human affairs) and of Napoleon's rejection of the Institut in 1812 as he came to rely on the traditional powers of church and state legitimation to sustain his imperium is well-known (see Larrain, 1979, chapter 2, for an account that draws out the relevance to social science). The point for the analysis of modernism is that the theme of science and reason as progressive forces set against religion, tradition and metaphysics was, as it were, loose in the world. This theme exerted a powerful influence on the development of modern ideas about government and about the possibility of social planning (McLellan, 1986, chapters 1 and 2).

The link between reason, progress and the state immediately introduces a duality into the notion of modernism conceived in the Enlightenment. On the one hand, progress is linked to the application of reason in both social and natural science, and in other aspects of human affairs. Technological mastery over nature is demonstrated in the capacity to map the human genome, and to deliver nuclear warheads to the inner planets of the solar system. In social science, Enlightenment thought led to the analyses that produced the two great doctrines of socialism and liberalism, with their conflicting accounts of the policies most likely to nourish human betterment.

Liotard (1984) understands the linkage between the application of reason and progress on the technological or social level in terms of 'Grands Narratives', which have directed the main currents of thought through the modern period. The central feature of these 'narratives' is their universality. Science offers an objective account of nature and of the laws governing

physical reality. The claims of universal social theories offer a corresponding attempt to chart the relationships that underlie human affairs.

On the other hand, the duality of modernism is expressed in the emergence of new structures of social control alongside the 'grand narratives' of human control over nature and of emancipation. Bauman puts it rather bluntly:

The Enlightenment was not a huge propaganda exercise on behalf of truth, Reason, science, rationality..instead, an exercise in two ... parts. First in extending the powers and ambitions of the state, in transferring to the state the pastoral functions previously exercised by the church, in reorganising the state around the function of planning, designing and managing the reproduction of social order...secondly in the creation of an entirely new and consciously designed mechanism of disciplining action, aimed at regulating and regularising the socially relevant life of the subjects of the teaching and managing state. (Bauman, 1987: 80).

The notion that reason can fulfil the function of legitimating social forms which in fact restrict the lives of those who participate in them formed a central theme in the work of Max Weber. While Weber's theories have sustained considerable controversy, his analysis has furnished many of the key ideas that have informed subsequent social science and social policy writing on government and on the organisation of the social services. The introduction to his work on *The Sociology of Religion*, written nearly at the end of his life in 1920, sums up his analysis of Western society as distinguished by the application of reason in fields as diverse as mathematics, the inquiries of science, historical scholarship, music based on known and precisely calculated intervals, an architecture to which mathematics was essential, an economic system based on exchange, investment and accounting, in fact, throughout social, cultural and economic life (Weber, 1964). 'A rational, systematic and speculative pursuit of science with trained and specialised personnel has existed only in the West in a sense at all approaching its present dominant place in our culture' (Weber, 1930: 15-16). The application of rationality involved the creation of a particular class as the key personnel of Western political economy: 'above all is this true of the trained official, the pillar of both the modern state and the economic life of the west ... government officials' (Weber, 1930: 15-16).

His concern with the human consequences of the dynamic of rationality focuses on the ambivalence of the modern system of legitimate and structured authority. In the closing pages of the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* he describes the 'tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order...which today determines the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism' as 'an iron cage'. Capitalism is 'victorious', and reason in human affairs has belied its promise: 'the rosy blush' of 'the Enlightenment seems also to be irretrievably fading' (Weber, 1930: 181-2). Elsewhere, one of Weber's principal contemporary interpreters presents the vision of humanity as 'like sheep', and of bureaucrats as 'mere cogs' in the modern economic order wherein the lives of individuals are determined with 'irresistible force' (Turner, 1992: 187). The modern state offers an ordered structure of rights, entitlement and obligations. The price it exacts is the regimentation of individuals to fit the rules of a routinised bureaucratic order. Social policy is a creature of the modern state and the sophistication of the mechanisms of social control, especially in the surveillance of dependent groups, has formed a central theme in recent analysis (Hewitt, 1992; Dean, 1990).

The claim of postmodern theorists is that the development of the set of ideas which links the application of reason with human progress, and seeks to express this in recipes for how societies should organise themselves is now exhausted. This has resulted from internal rather than external processes - 'inner transformations' as Bauman terms them. Beck writes:

just as modernisation dissolved the structure of feudal society in the nineteenth century and produced the industrial society, modernisation today is dissolving industrial society and another modernity is coming into being. (Beck, 1992: 10)

The central themes that sustained the administratively rational state and the mass-production industrial system can no longer deliver the goods.

The process of transition from modernism to postmodernism is thus analogous to the three-step of the Hegelian dialectic. A particular viewpoint, confronted with its negation in reality is transformed into a perspective following a different logic.

Lyotard suggests that the grand narratives of natural and social science have failed. In relation to the former, his arguments are based on reference to developments as diverse as Godel's theorem and Chaos theory, seeking to identify an indeterminacy at the heart of modern scientific theory. It might be pointed out that, whether or not this analysis is convincing, the triumph of technology in the modern world, demonstrated with murderous conviction in the Gulf war, is not similarly contestable. The approach is on stronger ground when it suggests that **confidence** in science as offering a pathway to the solution of human problems has been undermined by experience of the consequences of scientific progress.

Ulrich Beck draws on evidence from the ecological impact of technological change, the problems of nuclear power, job obsolescence and the effects of urbanisation to suggest that the enormous success of industrial society in 'wealth production' is paralleled by 'risk production' which undermines the security we can feel in an assured control over nature (Beck, 1992: 11-12). These arguments have more force.

In relation to the narratives of social science, Lyotard suggests that the universalist approaches of the past century and a half are no longer tenable. He has most strongly in mind the themes of Marxism and of the approaches that have developed from it, such as the 'critical theory' of Habermas. Such themes no longer carry the credibility they had before the experience of Stalinism and of the failure of communism to match the economic growth rates of the capitalist societies. Here he may be on stronger ground, as the declining significance of communist parties throughout Europe testifies, although it is arguable that the transformation in question may be explained as the unification rather than the fragmentation of political discourse. The decline of communism reflects the growing dominance of market liberalism.

Lyotard (1984) argues powerfully that the universalist 'grand narratives' have failed both as explanations of social developments and as guides to social action. Scientific and social analysis must now move to a more intimate and convivial level: the search for understanding must be conducted on the level of 'little narratives' in 'the outline of a politics' that embraces both 'the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown', but acknowledges that the machinery of reason is unable to supply them (Lyotard, 1984: 67). He is particularly concerned to challenge Habermas' universalist approach. Habermas argues that the possibility of attaining

rational agreement is implicit in all our attempts to communicate, and that this provides a basis for the development of universalist principles of social organisation (Habermas, 1978). For Lyotard, the whole approach is simply an appeal to 'an outmoded and suspect value'.

At the level of ideas, postmodernist approaches suggest that universalist discourses are now obsolete. They are replaced by particular approaches in relation to the application of technology and in relation to social science that originate in the interests of particular social groups. Such perspectives express the demands which these groups seek to make on society. In social policy we may think, for example, of women's collective interests, of the demands of unemployed people and the balance between these and pensioners or middle-class tax-payers, who may feel they will be compelled to pay for social programs. Policy debate must reconcile such conflicts, and Lyotard is suggesting that the appeal to an overarching doctrine of citizenship or redistribution to justify a settlement without reference to those whose interests are involved is no longer seen as legitimate.

The claim is, in its most useful form, a claim about confidence. There is considerable force in the argument that trust in expert opinion, in the Wellsian dream of science as a roadway to a better life for humanity, in government policies as serving mass interests, in professional bodies as meeting rather than dictating the needs of consumers is in decline. Such a view has strong connections with a range of developments in the organisation of government services that stress the role of the service user and seek to decentralise administration to the local level (the Decentralisation Act in France in 1984; the internal market reforms in the UK; the new regime in the Swedish health service - see Baldock, 1993, for a review of these changes in Europe).

The theme is reflected in discussion of the emergence of 'new social movements' in welfare, pursuing particular goals related to their own interests (Williams, 1992: 216). The result is a shift in the way people discuss welfare policy, directing concern towards the level of the individual service user and away from the Weberian emphasis on confidence in the rationality of state administration.

The focus on social movements raises issues at the level of politics which will be discussed later. First, however, the question of relativism emerges.

Writers like Doyal and Gough, who set out to develop a self-consciously holistic discourse for social policy based on a universal account of social need, spend considerable energy attacking relativist approaches (Doyal and Gough, 1991, chapter 1). If postmodernism is suggesting that the intellectual trajectory of the modern state has arrived at a position where different values and the theories that support them associated with different interests, are to be seen as of equal validity, and if the possibility of developing a method to choose between competing claims is abandoned, the approach is vulnerable to criticism: if nothing can be said with any certainty, it is perhaps better to say nothing.

This may be misleading. While postmodern commentators assert that social discourse has reached a stage where a range of positions associated with different groups are available, and that the theorist can no longer claim the authority to adjudicate between them, this does not imply that agreement on social arrangements between those who are involved is impossible. After all, Lyotard, in the concluding sentence to his influential study quoted earlier imagines that the politics of 'little narratives' includes the 'desire for justice' as well as the uncertainty of the 'desire for the unknown'.

The point is that what will be acceptable as justice cannot be laid down in advance by the theoretician or the government agency existing independently from the various groups involved in the issue. Rorty in his essay on *Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism* writes:

we have to work out from the networks we are, from the communities with which we presently identify. Postmodernism is no more relativistic than Hilary Putnam's suggestion that we stop trying for a 'God's-eye' view. (Rorty, 1991: 202)

Hewitt in a careful analysis of the implications of the work of writers like Touraine (1981) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985) on the implications of postmodern accounts of the politics of the new social movements suggests that underlying the stress on particularism is a recognition of 'the universalisability of some of the needs of social movements' (Hewitt, 1993: 72). This is to be found in the logic of a politics which is concerned with how claims originating in the interests of diverse groups can be reconciled and integrated. This is a matter for political debate and not for *a priori*

grand theory. Thus postmodern accounts of politics do not immediately dissolve into relativism.

These arguments at the level of ideas mesh into debates about concrete economic and political developments.

3 Postmodernism and Economic Change

Postmodern accounts of the economic transformations that underlie the shift from a modern economic order draw together interlinked themes relating to developments in the spheres of work and particularly employment, management, the significance of information-processing, the scale and structure of enterprises and the demands for flexibility in the organisation of industry and in the lives of workers. Many of these themes have emerged in the debate about post-industrial society.

Daniel Bell in the conclusion to his seminal work *The Coming of Post-industrial Society*, argued that technical change is producing social changes:

The post-industrial society is primarily a change in the character of social structure..in the economic sector, a shift from manufacturing to services; in technology, the centrality of the new science-based industries; in sociological terms, it is the rise of the new technological elites and the advent of a new principle of stratification. More generally ... a changeover from a goods-producing society to an information or knowledge society. (Bell, 1974: 487)

This work takes an optimistic view of social change. It argues that social change provides the potential for an abundance of commodities and of leisure and the extension of the authority of the technocratic and intellectual elites in the information-processing society. The last point runs counter to the claims of writers like Bauman that the transition from modernity erodes the status of intellectuals, since the widespread awareness of the shortcomings of the various theories and of the problems of science undermines their control over information. A number of other writers have also developed optimistic approaches. Illich (1977) stresses the democratising effect of the availability of knowledge and the breakdown of professional authority. Gorz (1985) suggests that social change offers the

possibility of the emergence of a mass leisure society and the dissolution of the social barriers of class society.

Other accounts are more pessimistic. Alain Touraine (1971) and Barry Jones (1982) stress the potential for the surveillance of work and of everyday life available from the new technologies. At the same time, shifts in the scale of enterprises allow for the development of trans-national corporations beyond the effective reach of any democratic government.

Alongside these debates about developments in the organisation of work, other commentators have focused on the organisation of enterprises. Here the principal transition is seen as a shift from 'Fordist' mass-production as the dominant theme in industrial organisation to a more flexible and responsive structure. This reflects the theme of transition from a modernist 'rationalisation' of social life through the bureaucracies of private capital and the state analysed by Weber, to a more decentralised structure, representing a plurality of interests traced out earlier. Lash and Urry (1987) suggest that the key development at the level of political economy is the shift from routinised and highly structured capitalism, characterised by large, bureaucratically-organised enterprises which seek to rationalise working methods throughout their structure to a more fragmented 'disorganised capitalism'. A more optimistic version of this approach is contained in Piore and Sabel's claim that the latter half of the twentieth century is witnessing *The Second Industrial Divide*:

The first industrial divide came in the nineteenth century ... with the emergence of mass-production technologies ... and limited the growth of less rigid manufacturing technologies ... Our central claim is that we are living through the second industrial divide ... which ... leads back to those craft methods of production that lost out at the first industrial divide ... flexible specialisation. (Piore and Sabel, 1984: 5-6)

This view implies that there are real opportunities to be grasped in the abandonment of traditional methods of organisation.

The basic argument underlying this work is that a concatenation of circumstances favour the breakdown of mass-scale routinised production processes into smaller more technically-advanced components. This does

not necessarily imply that enterprises must themselves become smaller - although they may choose to do so, through an extended use of sub-contracting - simply that they need no longer organise on the model of the bureaucratic hierarchy. Within enterprises, the relevant circumstances include the availability of techniques of managerial control in part based on new information technologies and on developments in accounting, that allow the centre of an enterprise to monitor developments at the periphery without incorporating agencies concerned with the supply of raw materials, the manufacture of components, marketing, product developments, after-sales service and such activities into one centrally-organised structure.

The circumstances external to enterprises are the increasing diversity and uncertainty of markets, subject to the possibility of rapid technological change and competition over a wider and wider geographical range and the increasing capacity of consumers to demand more differentiation in products as real incomes, at least in much of the advanced world, rise. These shifts are reflected in the emphasis on subcontracting, decentralisation of control and the demand for a more flexible and multi-skilled work-force who can be redeployed across a 'flatter hierarchy' of roles in the management literature - see for example Handy's influential analysis of the change from 'employment organisations' to 'contractual organisations' (Handy, 1984: 80) or Kanter's (1985) account of the imperative of organisational change. This theme also emerges within the welfare state, in the trend towards 'quasi-markets' (Le Grand, 1990; Hoggett, 1990).

The insistence on flexibility at the level of the enterprise corresponds to the demand for greater flexibility in the individual worker. With the transition from the full employment of the post-war 'long boom' through the oil shocks of the 1970s to the long-term unemployment of the 1980s and 1990s, post-industrial debates have tended to shift towards a concern with the impact of change on state policy for jobless people. This has developed in two directions. On the one hand, writers like Keane and Owens (1986) and Offe (1991) argue that the permanent unemployment economy requires the reconceptualisation of work and the re-thinking of social welfare. This approach suggests that essential and productive but unwaged social activities - most importantly, care-work carried out in the home, mainly by women - should be incorporated into the logic of waged work, so that the

link between individual independence and incorporation into the labour market is broken. This leads to the advocacy of social dividend schemes, extending incomes through a social wage. An interesting development in this direction is Atkinson's notion of a 'participation income' available to all who carry out useful tasks in a society and thereby earn the right to membership of a citizenship community (Atkinson, 1993: 11, 13).

On the other hand, there is concern that such an approach might lead to the abandonment of the possibility of ever reinstating full employment as a policy objective. Pixley (1993) suggests that the experience of government involvement in schemes designed to support alternatives to work in both Australia and US has simply led to 'a further marginalisation of the poor and unemployed' (1993: 10).

Post-industrial arguments trace out developments at the level of the organisation of enterprises and of the lives of workers that mesh with the postmodern themes in accounts of intellectual life traced out earlier. Just as the grand narratives of modern rationality are being (it is suggested) replaced by the particular narratives of various interests, so the themes of manufacturing sector assembly-line employment as the pattern of work and bureaucratic hierarchy as the model of rational organisation of enterprise are replaced by more flexible and polycentric ideas. In the new system manufacturing is no longer to be dominant, individuals are no longer treated as interchangeable units whose activities are dictated by the demands of the production process and life-histories are more likely to include a variegated pattern of training, retraining, leisure and unemployment. Just as the universalising themes of the grand narrative have fragmented, so the universalising archetype of the manufacturing enterprise has been replaced by flexible specialisation and the idea that workers are marshalled, unified and standardised as a class by the demands of the assembly line replaced by a pluralist pattern of communities of interest. This leads to political shifts.

4 Postmodernism and Political Life

The implications of postmodern approaches for political life appear at two levels. First a number of writers suggest that the traditional structures of class have broken down, so that politics is more a matter of competition between unstable alliances of interest groups. Secondly, it is suggested that

the nation-state is losing its place as the dominant focus of legitimate authority as a result of pressures from both international and sub-national forces.

The claim that social class is less significant in social life may be pursued along objective and subjective dimensions, concerning developments in stratification and developments in class consciousness and solidarity. The evidence of cross-national studies, such as the data base assembled by the Luxembourg Income Study, shows that income inequality increased in most Western countries in the 1980s, and this trend is likely to have continued in the recession of the early 1990s (see for example, Mitchell, 1992, Figure 1). In the face of growing inequalities between social groups, the notion that the consciousness of such inequalities is declining as a political force may appear surprising. However, the postmodern account of the declining importance of the manufacturing enterprise as archetype and of the growing diversity of the experience of employment provides the basis for the claim that political consciousness is becoming more fragmented. This argument is reinforced by the suggestion that new social movements concerned with a range of particular issues are gaining greater significance. The areas in which such movements are most active concern the interests of ethnic minorities, ecological groups and the women's movement (Pierson, 1991, chapter 4), although groups concerned with regional interests and with particular needs relating to such diverse themes as sexuality, housing and unemployment have had an impact on European political debate (Touraine, 1981). These needs have clear links with state welfare.

It is uncertain whether the new movements offer scope for a new universal politics, such as that implied in marxist analysis of the role of working class movements in the transformation of capitalism. Williams claims that 'welfare movements and the new social movements which spawned them have the capacity to combine particularistic interests with universal values' (Williams, 1992: 216). However, an exclusive focus on developments at the level of political consciousness rather than on inequalities between social groups may nourish the view that class is of declining significance, just at the time when class inequalities are growing bigger.

The decline in the significance of national government arises from the suggestion that international political and economic agencies are eroding the power of the state. At the same time the pressures for a more decentralised

and responsive politics and the declining significance of the class system that is seen as sustaining a particular form of the state are undermining state power from below (Turner, 1986). The dwindling of the national corresponds to the postmodern emphasis on the fragmentation of overarching themes that draw together the separate aspects of life in a particular society.

This account of postmodernism draws together a range of arguments operating at the levels of intellectual, economic, political and individual life. The central theme is of deteriorating confidence in universalising approaches at all these levels and of increasing fragmentation and uncertainty of social life. These approaches succeed in reflecting some of the principal developments in recent social policies - decentralisation, consumerism, the use of the new technology to transform management, stress on the non-state sector, the decline in the status of professionals and experts and the growth of privatisation and individualism. The implications for social policy are both positive and negative. On the positive side, postmodernism highlights the significance of the individual and the interests of the group. Social policy approaches that attempt to impose the views of experts or are based simply on professional authority lose their legitimacy. Williams stresses the significance of this point for policies that reach beyond the traditional emphasis on social class, redistribution and inequalities of income to include needs based on age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability (Williams, 1992, fig. 11.2). These postmodern themes are reflected in the changes in social policy designed to reflect consumer interests that have emerged in recent years (Taylor-Gooby and Lawson, 1993: 136-41).

On the negative side, postmodernism denies traditional approaches to human betterment based on a logic of universalism and substitutes its own account based on particular interests. Assessment of the adequacy of the approach must rest on an evaluation of this account. This paper suggests that postmodern approaches are seriously flawed in some aspects of their social analysis. As a result the analysis of policy is misleading.

5 Postmodernism: An Evaluation

The claims made in the theories outlined here are often vague and sometimes apply to trends that are as yet incomplete so that empirical evaluation is uncertain. This paper comments on propositions advanced in three areas. At the level of ideas, postmodernism identifies a declining confidence in general theoretical frameworks and in experts and professionals; at the economic level, it stresses the significance of shifts in the labour market leading to a decline in the significance of social class; at the political level it argues that the authority of the nation state is in decay.

Developments in some areas of social policy serve to confirm this approach. There is a strong trend which questions the adequacy of bureaucratic service planning and the expertise of professionals who may claim to 'know best' and advocates the decentralisation of state power. This shift is evident in the work of writers from a broad range of political perspectives. For example, Doyal and Gough (1991), in a powerful restatement of social democratic arguments about the primacy of human need write that:

the ability of traditional welfare states to optimise need-satisfaction has been severely criticised in recent years from quarters other than the new right. These provide the foundations for a countervailing argument in favour of decentralisation and participation. (Doyal and Gough, 1991: 306)

They go on to cite the work of authors as various as Illich, Hadley, Plant, Bachrach and Pateman. The UK Labour Party think-tank, the Institute of Public Policy Research, has recently started to develop similar arguments. For example Anna Coote (1992) writes:

the idea of introducing individually enforceable welfare rights is part of a broader move to effect a shift in the culture of welfare ... from something which belongs to politicians, professionals and other experts, to something which belongs to the people for whom it is intended'. (Coote, 1992: 6)

Market socialists develop arguments that correspond to those of liberal right wing proponents of free markets (Le Grand and Estrin, 1989).

Analysis of labour market trends is beset with difficulties. The long-term trend to a decline in the significance of manufacturing sector employment in the most developed countries is well-documented, although it has advanced more rapidly in the UK and the USA than in Germany where some 40 per cent of the work-force are engaged in manufacturing (OECD, 1989, Table 5.1). The implications for inequality and for the decline of class politics are less clear.

An authoritative study of trends in European Community (EC) countries carried out by OECD describes employment in 'growing sectors of the economy' as 'more unstable than in declining sectors'. 'Non-standard' forms of work - 'self-employment, temporary work and part-time work' - are more common in the growing than in the declining sectors. However, there is no evidence of higher job turnover in the growing sectors. Earnings are higher in the expanding sectors for women and about the same as in the declining sectors for men, although the expanding service sector contains a complex mix of higher-paid and lower-paid jobs (OECD, 1989: 197-8).

This evidence provides some justification for the claim that shifts in employment are undermining a tradition of stability in the manufacturing sector, but also indicates that the picture of a shift from secure mass employment to a structurally divided workforce may be an oversimplification. Pay and conditions of work may be subject to similar forces in both the manufacturing sector which accounts for a declining segment of the labour market and the service sector which is expanding in importance.

It is difficult to draw strong conclusions about the political implications of the shifts. Discussion of political trends provides no definite evidence of a secular trend towards fragmentation in political parties in Europe (Lane and Ersson, 1991: 360). Regional movements in some Western European and Ex-soviet countries challenge traditional states. These shifts may be explicable in geo-political terms, rather than in terms of the exhaustion of 'grand narratives' at the level of ideas. It is certainly true that transnational companies and intergovernmental organisations play a stronger role than in the past.

These points provide some reinforcement for some postmodern claims. However, there are also counter-trends which merit particular attention from those interested in social policy. In ideas, the triumph of market liberalism

as an economic doctrine supporting a world-wide trend towards the privatisation of state enterprises and the de-regulation of labour markets, and in many countries to reduced intervention in international trade, constitutes something approaching a universal discourse. This tendency is well-summarised in a recent UN report on world economic conditions which notes approvingly:

There has been a major change in the approach to economic policy in the industrialised countries... [leading to] a new political economy founded ...in a growing aversion to government intervention in macroeconomic affairs and in ..doubts about the effectiveness of such intervention...The thrust is now for a reduction of fiscal pressure and the public sector, and attempts to keep unemployment low are regarded as both futile and inflationary. Monetary restraint is relied upon to contain inflationary demand. (UN, 1991: 7)

Such a philosophy has strong implications for the role of the nation-state in social policy. When allied with the emphasis on the restriction of taxation stressed by Oxley and Martin (1991), it endorses retrenchment of spending and increased reliance on the non-state sector together with the strict regulation of welfare for those on the fringes of the labour market. Such policies emerge in the rush towards privatisation in the advanced industrial countries, the incursion of market logic into the welfare sector, the stress on targeting and on the division between welfare for workers and for others evident for example in the Social Charter as sanctioned by the Maastricht Treaty, in the philosophy of labour force flexibility and in the arguments for free trade contained in the Uruguay round of the GATT talks. These developments, and the resulting trend towards greater social inequality are particularly evident in the UK (DSS, 1993).

The outcome of this argument is the suggestion that postmodern approaches contain a correct evaluation of some trends, but do less than justice to other developments, particularly those whose disciplinary home lies outside sociology, and in economics.

One of the most careful reviews of the debate is by Anthony Giddens. Giddens describes modernity as 'essentially a post-traditional order' (1990: 20). The traditions which underpinned community life are subject to the

rational critiques of science, indeed the very embedding of individual identity in a particular location in time and space may be dissolved by mass communications which make events elsewhere and at other times instantly available to us, and by the technology through which military, commercial or cultural events on the other side of the planet intrude into our daily lives. This analysis leads Giddens (1992) into a detailed study of the role of trust and ultimately of love in modern society.

He argues, however, that prophecies of a transition to postmodernity are premature. We live in 'high modernity' where the systemic weaknesses of a rationally-based order are increasingly apparent, yet the grip of industrial capitalism on everyday life is as vigorous as ever, and the capacity of national governments to control a technology of violence and to use increasingly sophisticated methods of social control is also evident.

This approach chimes in tune with recent policy developments. On the one hand, there is emphasis on individual responsibility, on consumerism, on decentralisation and on choice. On the other, the state pursues policies which reinforce inequalities and monitors the regimes of vulnerable groups such as long-term unemployed people with increasing stringency.

6 Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the debate about postmodernism, centring on the claim that universal approaches to social issues are of declining importance, and that this is reflected in a greater diversity of welfare politics and of social policy. It suggests that, while forces at the intellectual, economic and political levels support these claims, other developments contradict them. Postmodernism ignores in particular the sustained influence of market liberalism in international and in national political economy. This approach is founded in the work of the economic thinkers of the Enlightenment and is firmly rooted in modernity. The implications for social policy are that an interest in postmodernism may cloak developments of considerable importance. Trends towards increased inequality in living standards, the privatisation of state welfare services and the stricter regulation of the lives of some of the poorest groups may fail to attract the appropriate attention if the key themes of policy are seen as difference, diversity and choice.

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