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# Themed Section on History and Policy

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## Introduction

In the past many of the leading figures in social policy writing had interests in history – for example Richard Tawney, T.H. Marshall, and Richard Titmuss. However, social policy has lost its 'historical imagination', with many students – Thatcher's children, and in a few years Major's children – not being exposed to social policy history, and with many publishers believing that anything before 1997 or even 2001 belongs to 'history' rather than 'social policy'. The papers in this section were originally delivered to the ESPAnet conference in Copenhagen in September 2003. As will be evident, contributors take rather different views of how the historic past can help in understanding or informing policy formation and implementation, although what unites them is that historical understanding is important in social policy analysis.

At the heart of John Macnicol's article is a discussion of how the concept of 'age discrimination' has emerged historically. To take one aspect of this, the 1950s saw a debate over the role and status of the aged, which was 'uncannily similar to the arguments of today'. From a variety of angles, the postponement of retirement was widely touted as a desirable policy objective. On the other hand, at times of economic restructuring, such as the 1930s and 1970s, quitting the labour market was seen as economically and socially beneficial. Macnicol then goes on to show the tensions and ambiguities in New Labour's approach to old age as it apparently seeks to balance these two approaches. As he remarks, current discussions of age discrimination are but one chapter in a 'long saga'. The clear message here is that we can only understand these current discussions by knowing their historical origins and through discerning patterns over time.

Sophia Carey's essay examines social insurance in post-war Ireland, focusing particularly on the 1952 Social Welfare Act. As well as providing material on this neglected area of Irish welfare history, it provides three further themes. First, Carey shows how Irish politicians and policy makers tried to adapt the Beveridge blueprint to the circumstances of their own country, an example of the cross-national influences we allude to further below. Nevertheless, it is equally clear that Irish politicians at this point rejected key aspects of Beveridge, not least universalism. As Carey remarks, despite the essential structures of Irish social insurance being based on the British, pre-independence, 1911 National Insurance Act, 'the Beveridge Report did not map easily onto Irish conditions'. Second, in our later discussion of important works on the history of social welfare we look at the work of Peter Baldwin. While, as Carey acknowledges, it was not Baldwin's primary aim to attempt an 'agrarian' account of social policy formation, nonetheless his work does draw attention to the importance of agrarian interests in certain European societies. Third, Carey contends that a fuller understanding of the role of agrarianism in Ireland, and thereby in social policy formation and implementation, will allow the Irish experience to be more fully integrated with the broader European experience and



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contribute to a fuller understanding in general of the relationship between agrarianism and welfare state formation.

Robert Page takes yet another historical approach – 'counterfactual' history – to examine 'what if' the Labour Party been returned to power in 1951 and remained in office until 1964? While in government in 1945–51, Page discerns signs of a rethink in Labour's economic and social strategy, but not necessarily in terms of a 'forward' movement in welfare. Indeed he argues that had Labour been in government the internal divisions which characterised the party in opposition during this period would have continued to have played themselves out. Further, he suggests that just as in 'real' history, the revisionists around Tony Crosland would have won out and this would 'effectively have signalled the end of (Labour's) transformative ambitions'. Improvement, rather than fundamental change in or extension of the welfare state would have thus been the order of the day – there would have been no 'attempt to create a socialist commonwealth'. Page's account, therefore, tends to support the broad view of a 'consensus' around the welfare state as constructed between 1945 and 1951; and, perhaps more contentiously, that 'New' Labour has deeper historical roots than is sometimes imagined. Such counterfactual analysis also illustrates constraints facing reforming administrations; and the need to see the 'achievements' of the Attlee government in a longer-term perspective.

In his essay on the 'wars on poverty', which took place in both the USA and the UK in the 1960s and 1970s, Pete Alcock raises the question of how, if at all, policy transfer might operate not just geographically, but also over time. He draws to our attention the ways in which legacies of the past can shape perceptions of contemporary policy initiatives. In a comment, which might be construed as both worrying and an argument for some measure of historical understanding of social welfare, Alcock remarks that 'it is far from clear that current policy planners have an approach to historical policy transfer that is as reflective as their twentieth century predecessors'. Alcock's particular concern is with area-based approaches to poverty. These were first adopted in the US in the 1960s, and came to Britain shortly afterwards, not least because of what Alcock describes as 'a deliberate attempt at policy transfer'. Underlying this piece is the idea that politicians and policy makers are happy to 'raid' the past of policies that suit their own ideological assumptions, but are equally prepared to ignore the lessons of history when these pose uncomfortable questions.

Finally, Silvia Ferreira examines the impact of historical experience on the formation of the Portuguese social security system. She locates the Portuguese welfare state in a particular 'regime' context – that of the Southern European model – and suggests that in fact its development has not been 'path dependent'. This is an important argument with wider implications. The social science hypothesis of 'path dependency' can be seen as a modern variant of the much older notion of 'historical determinism', but Ferreira here suggests that characteristics particular to Portugal – 'the specificities of Portuguese state and society' – have resulted in a much more complex history. So, for instance, the Portuguese welfare state has been influenced, at various points in the past by German, British, Italian, and French examples, culminating in the acceptance of broadly European norms in the 1980s. Ferreira's essay is a useful antidote to over-schematic interpretations of welfare state formation, to over-rigid use of the concept of 'regimes', and to over-reliance on hypotheses such as 'path dependency'.



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