

A critical appraisal of the impact on social injustice of the welfare

[Sociology](#)



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' The most obvious division of society is into rich and poor; and it is no less obvious that the number of the former bear a great disproportion to those of the latter. The whole business of the poor is to administer to the idleness, folly and luxury of the rich; and that of the rich, in return, is to find the best methods of confirming the slavery and increasing the burdens of the poor.'
(Edmund Burke 1756 in Jordan 1998 pg 74)

This essay will attempt to explore the social injustices that are perpetrated by government policies surrounding the welfare state and how this links into social housing allocation and the resulting effects on those who receive such benefits. It argues that the poorer in society are held back and demonised as a result of these policies, whilst those in a more privileged position, whether it be as a result of occupation, education or family inheritance, are able to, on the face of it, profit immensely, with no apparent consideration for the needs and resulting poverty of the majority.

The main part of the essay will explore ' how and why?' a small minority have more than they could ever hope to use or need and poses the question as to whether or not a fairer system could be developed aiming to ensure that everyone within society maybe afforded equal opportunity for success and growth.

It explores the problems associated with this utopian view and how these could be overcome to ensure a more just society for all, including a society where every child, regardless of family circumstances, would be afforded the same opportunities in regards to education, employment, life expectancy and potential earning.

Finally, it will look at the implications for a society of equals, i. e. is this type of society realistically possible in a 21st century context.

The welfare state in Britain was introduced after the Second World War in order to tackle the problem of mass deprivation and squalor that existed within the country. It was introduced by the Liberal politician, William Beveridge, who identified the issues facing the nation as being poverty, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness and in order to 'defeat these giants, he proposed setting up a welfare state including social security, a national health service, free education, council housing and full employment'.

Whilst this was a much-needed provision in post-war Britain, the policies developed, are still actively in place in modern Britain, yet they are no longer serving the interests of those people whom they initially set out to assist.

The policies have been redefined and modified over the years, yet the basic ideals are still in place, as it is believed that basic human rights such as food, shelter, health and education are still as relevant today as they were back then. Whilst these may still be relevant, the extent to which the relevance is true has shifted greatly. What one person may define as a basic income is not necessarily what is required for another person to exist. What one policy may determine as an adequate home for a family or individual may not necessarily be seen as adequate by that specific family.

Essentially it comes down to need versus want and how the two can be reconciled in order to create policies that assist those whom they are allegedly developed for, in the first instance.

For example, what started as an inclusive policy regarding welfare within the UK, has now become a stigmatisation that excludes the majority from what we class as 'society'.

In today's world, it seems that the poor become poorer and the rich become increasingly richer - Where is the equilibrium that was initially identified?

In today's society where those individuals who exist on welfare benefits and live in social housing are increasingly demonised by the rest of society as perpetrating all the ills and problems that exist within society - Does something revolutionary need to be done to redress the economic imbalance that exists between the rich and the poor?

This topic has been explored by Reiman in his essay entitled 'Rich get Richer and the Poor get Prison' wherein he explores economic bias and identifies the unjust system citing 'crimes unique to the wealthy are either ignored or treated lightly while the so-called common crimes of the poor, lead to arrest, charges, conviction and imprisonment' ([www. answers. com/.../the-rich-get-richer-and-the-poor-get-prison-ideology-class-and-criminal-justice-by-jeffrey-reiman](http://www.answers.com/.../the-rich-get-richer-and-the-poor-get-prison-ideology-class-and-criminal-justice-by-jeffrey-reiman)). These are the poor who live on state benefits and are housed on council estates with no visible or real incentives or chances to succeed to enable them to gain parity with the rich in society;

the rich whose crimes are glossed over and largely ignored or, in some instances, financially rewarded.

This can be seen all too well in the recent economic crisis with bankers such as Fred Goodwin not being held accountable for massive losses from the Royal Bank of Scotland, which subsequently had to be bailed out by the UK Government bank rescue package whilst Mr Goodwin was able to step down with a final pension of approximately £350, 000 per year and cleared of any wrongdoing by an internal RBS inquiry. This particular case angered society so much that an attack was carried out on his house with a statement from the group responsible that advised:

“ We are angry that rich people, like him, are paying themselves a huge amount of money and living in luxury, while ordinary people are made unemployed, destitute and homeless. Bank bosses should be jailed...’.

If we look at the Austrian film ‘ The Edukators’(2004) we can see the idea of the inequalities of wealth within a society starkly portrayed. The film portrays, those characters at the lower end of the financial scale taking drastic action against the elite rich members whose actions force them into further poverty illustrated in one scene where a car accident leaves one of the main characters, Jule, homeless and deeply in debt. The money that she owes to the rich Hardenberg would not have had any significant effect on his substantial wealth, but owing it leaves her destitute and at the mercy of friends for shelter.

Whilst the main theme explored in this film is that of the great gap between the rich and poor within society, in particular the German aspect of the division between East and West and the inequalities that existed before reunification and how many view this as immoral and unethical, the youths leave Hardenberg a note that states ' Die fetten Jahre sind vorbei' (The days of plenty are over), (The Edukators 2004), it also explores the idea of how realistically possible their ideals are. The realization for these young people is that Hardenburg, the cause of Jule's downfall, was himself a leftist activist in his youth but the lure of riches and all that accompanies such wealth, had caused him to abandon his ideals for a life of luxury and he ultimately looks back on his experience as some youthful folly.

The audience is left to ponder whether or not the same will be the case for the three young protagonists, should they fall prey to the lures of a lucrative career and the accompanying riches. This forces us to question whether or not it is possible to have a society where those who are better off in financial terms, could use this benefit to assist those who, through no fault of their own, are unable to become financially secure and independent of state help. It begs the question as to what amount of money is too much? What some individuals may see as adequate to live on, others may see as wholly inadequate and therefore this is always going to be subjective. What isn't subjective however, is the vast gulf between those at one end of the spectrum and those at the other - the haves and have not's?

This gulf needs to be addressed before a fairer and more inclusive society can emerge. To have a society where every person within it holds equal

finance would be to hold a utopian ideal that would be virtually impossible to realize; but to have a society where the gap between the top and bottom of the financial scale is greatly reduced would appear to be more realistic and ultimately, achievable.

In terms of welfare benefits, two quite disparate arguments exist which underpin the main theories behind the fundamental question as to whether or not this is beneficial or not to the people that these 'benefits' serve.

The initial ideals behind the thinking of the liberal collectivists like Beveridge, argue that 'social insurance could eradicate poverty without destroying individual initiative or the duty to provide for one's dependents' (Jordan 1998 pg 78), whilst on the other hand the neo-liberalist attitude, as reflected by Malthusian and Benthamite, raise doubts regarding the sustainability of such welfare and 'appeal specifically to the fear that the poor would be feckless, idle, improvident and fecund if not subjected to the 'natural' law of the labour market, in which those who did not work could not eat, find shelter, rest or breed' (Jordan 1998 pg 79).

It would appear then that these two disparate points are poles apart and wholly irreconcilable. If we take on board the idea that poverty eradicates civil rights and liberties, then it can be seen how a welfare state is essential for all individuals to be able to claim citizenship within a society, however, the restrictions around these benefits can, in themselves remove this right.

This is clearly evident in relation to housing provision for those in the poorer section of society. Whilst we might argue that everyone has the right to

choose where they live and what type of home they live in, demonstrated by local councils with the 'Choice Based Letting' system, it can be seen that this 'choice' is limited by their economic circumstances. The choice that is available is limited due to a lack of social housing and an increasing demand for the housing available.

The restrictions that ensue as a result of this, mean that a family with two children of different sexes, under the age of 10, for example, are limited to a choice of 2 bedroom properties and not a 3 or 4 bedroom property.

If we consider a similar family with much more disposable income, it would be highly unlikely that they would 'choose' to live in a 2 bedroom property. The obvious point here being that due to financial restrictions, certain individuals have restricted choice and may ultimately be forced to accept much less than they would choose if their circumstances were different. Can we categorically state that this is in fact a just society?

Taking into consideration the original purpose of this essay, it can be seen that those in power who take advantage of the financial benefits that they reap from their employment or from inheritance, have a moral duty to ensure that the rest of society are able to benefit also in order for a more equal society to emerge where all those who are members of the particular society are working for the good of those who may, for whatever reason, not be as capable of helping themselves.

Whilst I would not argue that inherited wealth should be redistributed via the welfare state, it could be argued that some of this wealth should be used in a

manner that doesn't only benefit the recipient. For example, investment in community based initiatives which would ensure that jobs are created within a more local environment, thus benefiting a larger group of people and in the process assisting those who are living on welfare benefits back into employment, as opposed to merely benefiting the individual.

In terms of employment payment, it is necessary that this is more rigidly monitored especially regarding high bonuses paid to those within the banking industry and expenses claimed by those working within the government, which has caused a media frenzy in recent times. It is important that stricter regulations are imposed so that public money is not needlessly wasted but assists those where it can be of the most benefit.

In a society that claims to be diverse and inclusive, it is important that all members within such a society reap the benefits of these ideals. In a society that has experienced the 'drive to become a nation of homeowners' (Hughes and Lowe 1995 pg 57) it is important that this does not overshadow the real needs of the more vulnerable members within this society.

Instead of continuing this trend by promoting the 1980's 'Right to Buy' ideal, it is more important to focus on better housing for those who do not have the financial wherewithal to achieve this status and removing the stigmatisation that still increasingly exists around social housing tenants and those on welfare benefits. Instead of, by and large, demonising a growing group within society, it is important, especially in the current financial environment, to actively promote social housing as a constructive alternative to owner occupation and in the process giving all members a realistic choice over their

futures. This is not to say that all members will actively participate in a fairer economic society as, inevitably, there will always be individuals who will take advantage both within the richer and the poorer sections of society and a greater monitoring system needs to be put in place to ensure that this doesn't happen.

It is not realistically possible to create a society where everyone within that society is on a financial par, a point highlighted by Patrick Colquhoun who states that ' without a large proportion of poverty there could be no riches, since riches are the offering of labour, while labour can result only from a state of poverty.... Poverty therefore is a most necessary and indispensable ingredient in society, without which nations and communities could not exist in a state of civilisation....' (Pierson & Castles 2006 pg 35).

Whilst this may be true to some extent, the level of poverty needs to be relative to the level of riches. However, the main problem that exists in this ideological thinking is that the rich will always have the upper hand in relation to maintaining the status quo, whereby the poorer in society are controlled by their standards and power. Just like in the Edukators, when the young people feel that they can reach an understanding with their persecutor Hardenberg, the final twist proves that he cannot be trusted despite all his promises and apparent sympathy for their cause. In an allegory that represented the problems associated with the reunification of East and West Germany, it will always stand that the stronger will always rule the weaker regardless of the apparent equilibrium that social policies attempt to achieve.