

Robert Pinker, the Idea of Welfare and Social Policy Studies: On Unitarism and Pluralismⁱ

Robert Pinker continues to write on social policy. However, his contributions began in the 1960s, when the publications of Richard Titmuss at the London School of Economics were the dominant influence on the study of social policy in the United Kingdom.ⁱⁱ Half a century or so on it thus seems appropriate to acquaint ourselves with his main ideas, as expressed in the 1970s and 1980s, and consider afresh their significance in discussing social policy today. His earliest research work concerned the commonly neglected development of health care within the poor law (with Brian Abel-Smith) and also, with Peter Townsend, the experiences of the staff and ‘inmates’ of local authority ‘care homes’ for elderly people into which form many former poor law institutions had mutated (see Johnson *et al.*, 2010). His *Social Theory and Social Policy* of 1971 rapidly became essential reading where social policy or ‘social administration’ was studied.ⁱⁱⁱ Two further books were published, *The Idea of Welfare* (1979) and *Social Work in an Enterprise Society* (1990), together with many articles on complementary topics.

This paper explores four of Pinker’s chief concerns: narrowness in the focus of social policy studies; taking informal care seriously; problems with Titmussian welfare unitarism; the preconditions of ‘faring well’.

New Questions in the Study of Social Policy

Pinker’s critical comments on social policy studies in the early 1970s followed three guiding principles. First, a focus in the study of welfare and policy on the ‘welfare state’ was not in itself sufficient. Second, ‘theory’ should not be confused with ideology or rhetoric. Third, how people in their everyday lives thought about and practised securing the welfare of themselves and others deserved close attention: this area was important both in its own right and because it yielded insights which were of assistance in understanding the differing principles, ends and means displayed in comparative and historical terms in ‘welfare states’, themselves at the time not well understood. Academic perceptions and analyses of social reality had become confusingly equated with the social reality of actual service users and members of a society in general. In the process assumptions were being made about the motivations and moral dispositions of persons. For Pinker, intellectual development was not to be confused with practical activity or political commitment.

To advance a contextualised understanding of social policy itself the pressing need was to renounce a reliance upon assumptions, and undertake instead the actual study of the applications of altruistic thought and practice by ordinary people in their everyday lives, in their aspirations for social change, and in their conceptions of for what and on what principles the state, as opposed to markets, families and community organisations, should assume responsibility.^{iv}

Pinker never advocated ‘going native’ in respect of prescriptions about social policy. He wanted instead a more sociologically-grounded kind of inquiry into how welfare (and not just a ‘welfare state’) was reasoned about and came to possess the meanings it did in everyday life.^v The development of research and social theory in this manner would redirect the discipline of social policy and administration away from one

in which ‘too much is prescribed, too much indicted and too little explained’ (1971: 166). While Pinker acknowledged that user consultation and local participation had merits in connection with the evaluation of the aims and provisions of services, he noted there was a linked risk of introducing further forms of unexamined and possibly oppressive normativity (1971: 130-132). The position he adopted was neither a dogmatic anti-statism nor an apologia for any normatively popular status quo: it was held because he anticipated that the study of ‘subjective states of social consciousness’ would facilitate a supply of evidence enabling a genuine dialogue to arise about perceptions in conflict, offering, in turn, enhanced legitimacy to the development of social reform in democracies (1971: 131-132).

Pinker distinguished between ideas of a ‘welfare state’ and a ‘state of welfare’ (1973: 2). The first concept concerned specified forms of intervention by governments in the processes and outcomes of unregulated or ‘inadequately’ regulated market operations, while the second referred ‘to the subjective feelings of ordinary people about the nature of welfare’ – reaching beyond their attitudes to the ‘welfare state’ – and also ‘to the complete range of activities by which they seek to enhance their own well-being through individual and collective endeavour’. In the interests of understanding and explaining ‘faring well’ as social phenomena ‘[t]he way in which ordinary citizens define and seek to enhance their own state of welfare merits as much attention as the ways in which academics define the welfare state’ (1973: 3).

These points for Pinker applied to comparative studies as well as UK studies (Pinker, 1973; 1986). More was required by way of change than ecumenical nods towards the mere existence of differing ideas of moral or social progress. One step essential to the new approach was to distinguish between ‘those modes of enquiry which seek to establish the criteria by which one system of welfare can be deemed morally superior to another and those which seek to explain why there are similarities and dissimilarities between the welfare systems of different countries’. Pinker argued that while it was difficult in practice to keep these two ‘forms of intellectual enterprise’ apart, ‘the fact of their qualitative difference needs always to be borne in mind’ (1973: 2). Within social administration and policy in the 1970s Pinker detected a default normative position, ‘strongly collectivist in value orientation’, in which ‘social welfare is assumed to be almost synonymous with institutional variants of what we term “the welfare state”’. Many historical accounts of social policy had fallen into line, describing its growth as a ‘kind of pilgrim’s progress towards a promised land’ (1973, 2).^{vi} One consequence of conflating the perspectives Pinker had distinguished was to mistake moral judgement for social understanding. As a result, the academics’ conception of the ‘real’ ‘moral society’, in itself unexceptionable, had led them not only into assuming the role of ‘guardians’ against the ‘immoralities’ of the ‘economic market’, but also to ignore or find pointless the need to study the in fact demonstrable social reality that ‘some citizens believe that the social market generates its own forms of injustice’ and that there is ‘a vastly complex range of human aspirations and activities ... within and between different societies’ (1973: 2).

One contemporary commentator, Roy Parker (1974,) highlighted the value of Pinker’s distinction between concepts of the ‘welfare state’ and ‘states of welfare’: ‘Whereas the notion of a welfare state may provide a unified and unifying concept, states of welfare are individual and often irreconcilable. As he goes on to say,

social administration has not shown much interest in this distinction, nor in the subjective definition of well-being'. Were the interest to grow, 'some challenging discoveries might be made obliging us to reconsider conventional views on how improvements in "welfare" might best be achieved' (1974: 568). Pinker himself had already noted in *Social Theory and Social Policy* that social policy studies lacked an understanding of 'why individuals define their needs as they do, and why these definitions so often appear to be at variance with those of the social scientists' (1971: 106).

Pinker indeed emphasises that we need to improve our understanding of public attitudes towards social services. To achieve this, we need 'better maps of the current levels of satisfaction and discontent and more convincing explanations of why people hold the range of attitudes and expectations they do' (1971: 110). This way, social theory and intellectual ideologies remain distinct, in due course enabling, perhaps, a well-grounded understanding of social life to enter public discourse and in turn bring a change in everyday understandings and meanings: 'Sociological theory does not enable us to distinguish "goodness" from "badness", although it may provide new forms of knowledge and insight which can be used for a variety of moral purposes' (1971: 130).^{vii}

Pinker's overarching concern was to rethink the *study* of social policy. One important achievement of *Social Theory and Social Policy* was to establish a framework for thinking about welfare and policy in which it became obligatory to consider familial and other sources of 'informal care' as priority areas of research.^{viii} As yet, however, Pinker had specified few details about the research required.

Social Policy, a Sociology of Morals and Marrying Formal and Informal Care

During the 1970s Pinker made explicit the areas of study he had in mind, under the heading of what he described as a 'sociology of morals':

One of the tasks of a sociology of morals would be to clarify the nature and consistency of individual and public attitudes towards the varieties of mutual aid practised ... within families. We need to know far more about the preferred and actual forms of reciprocity and obligation which occur between strangers sharing a common citizenship and members of the same kin. A second task would be to re-examine the extent which the values and assumptions which are implicit in social legislation support, weaken or modify the moral beliefs and practices of ordinary people (1974: 8-9).

In *The Idea of Welfare* Pinker maintained his argument that policy makers, welfare professionals and academics often adhere to ideas of social and individual welfare that are substituted for but in fact related problematically to the ideas of social and individual welfare held in ordinary life. In effect there was a tendency to ascribe moral and epistemological superiority to particular ideas of welfare. However, the soundest way of advancing our understanding of the meaningfulness of social reality for the actors involved would be the non-normative and sociologically informed study of *the plurality* of ideas, with each idea accorded an equal epistemological status. If the basic point was an amplification of his earlier position of the concept of welfare this position was now complemented by studies displaying contextual sensitivity in relation to cognate concepts (Dingwall on the concepts of health and illness, 1976; and Carrier and Kendall, 1973 and 1977, on a range of policy-related concepts). He expressed reservations, however, that

ideology was displacing theory in sociology (1979: 244). In his writing Pinker always eschewed explicit references to 'phenomenology' and 'ethnomethodology' as models but a concern with everyday meanings and practices, on 'the meanings of morality – and rules in general – in everyday life', (Douglas, 1970: 9) was nonetheless shared.

Pinker discussed in specific terms the topics which an approach focused on a 'sociology of morals' illuminated. Family life, as a realm in which desert as well as need were followed as principles of resource allocation, was adjudged in *The Idea of Welfare* 'one of the most potent sources of what might be called the "counter-policies" of social welfare' (1979: 41). In some detail Pinker explored the conditions of reciprocity, in particular how the interplay 'of self-interest and familial, communal and national loyalties places institutional limits on people's notions of felt obligations and entitlement. These loyalties', he added, 'will be seen to have a limiting effect if the idea of welfare is defined in internationalist terms, but from an alternative and more conditional point of view they can be seen as providing the moral justifications and the welfare resources by which our boundaries of obligation and entitlement can be extended from the narrowest of familial loyalties to include at least an awareness of national interests' (1979: 66; see also 1990: 45). Everyday ideas of 'faring well' are exhibited in what he has called 'conditional forms of altruism' (1979: 40-41), whether exercised within families, towards strangers or across nations. Under such scrutiny a universalisable 'welfare ethic' appeared to be more of an aspiration than a reality.

Arising from Pinker's review of the history of these loyalties and the well-being associated with them in Russia and America, as well as in the UK, two important themes emerged, in due course developed in his later work: the salience of access to land and its ownership, and migration. On the first Pinker observed: 'in Russia the question of land reform dominated all other issues of social welfare. ... As late as 1917 eighty per cent of the Russian population were still peasants for whom the ultimate form of welfare was the possession of land' (1979: 142). On migration, Pinker concluded that for ordinary people emigration was a traditional means by which they 'tried to provide for their own welfare on their own terms' (1979: 230). At the level of government action, discriminatory migration policies, together with tariff policies, may be counted as among the means by which 'modern welfare states continue to enhance the well-being of their subjects' (1979: 230).

During the 1970s Pinker had theorised the space on which he hoped substantive sociological research studies into informal welfare practices and everyday attitudes towards and expectations of 'formal' social welfare services would come to shed light. Much such research was indeed undertaken and published in a short span of time (see Parker, G., 1990; Offer, 1999), and on occasion Pinker's discussions were acknowledged as a factor shaping the research (for example, Cecil *et al.*, 1987: 2, 14-15). Knowledge was growing about a 'hierarchy of caring obligations' utilised in everyday theorising and practice by family members as they negotiated their caring responsibilities. These fell mostly to women, though research also highlighted the contribution of young carers and married men caring for chronically ill wives. The research of Philip Abrams (see Bulmer, 1986) and others on neighbourhoods and care in the United Kingdom indicated, as Pinker later noted, that a policy of 'closer interlinkage between formal services and informal

care' risked the creation of tensions, through the formal sector "colonising" the informal sector' (1990: 103). Attempting to 'interweave' the contrasted nature of 'natural' Gemeinschaft and bureaucratic Gesellschaft social relationships might yield mutual incomprehension and dysfunctional consequences (Pinker, 1982: 12. See also Pinker's contribution to the Barclay Report on social work of 1982).

The case of Titmuss

This part of the paper deals with the difficulties, moral, political, social and economic which Pinker associated with Titmussian welfare unitarism. In important respects Pinker's work presented novel and fundamental challenges to the framework for social policy studies associated with Titmuss (that other writers pursued different kinds of criticism is not here in dispute (see Wilding, 1983). In his Preface to Reisman's book on Titmuss of 1977, Pinker suggested that Titmuss's polarisation of economic interests and social interests, with social interests regarded by Titmuss as morally superior because they were uniquely altruistic, was misleading and unfortunate. In *Social Work in an Enterprise Society* he regarded it as prompting social policy analysis to give, firstly, 'undue attention to the redistribution of wealth and not enough to the creation of wealth', with social policies thus expected to aim 'at greater equality ... based on the assumption that economic growth could be taken for granted' and, secondly, to neglect the possibility that 'through a competitive market economy ... both freedom and welfare could be enhanced' (1990: 40-1). Pinker added that, although Titmuss was in favour of 'community care', 'he would have had little time for our present notions of decentralised, participatory community action which must be based on the assumption that equitable policies of positive discrimination and redistribution can be realistically pursued in the absence of firm administrative direction and control' (1990: 37). Indeed Titmuss in his famous essay 'The social division of welfare' (1956) had distinguished statutory social services, occupational welfare (work-placed benefits) and fiscal welfare (allowances and concessions through the tax system), but took no account of either the voluntary or the informal sectors of care (Pinker, 1990: 100-101; see also 1985: 101). In fact, in his commitment to an institutionalist philosophy of welfare provision Titmuss was a welfare unitarist (though with scope for selectivity). It was his view that the statutory social services 'constituted the most important institutional feature of a civilized society because the egoism of the private market alienated people from each other whereas the altruism embodied in the statutory public services united and elevated them' (Pinker, 2008: 9). As Pinker noted, this was a form of analysis which Titmuss developed in depth in his *The Gift Relationship* (1970). Titmuss was convinced that the state should be the main funder and provider of social services 'because only the state had the authority to implement, without fear or favour, the redistributive policies that he considered necessary' (Pinker, 2008: 9). In Pinker's judgement Titmuss's 'hostility to the mixed economy of welfare was uncompromising'. For Titmuss, it would 'undermine the principle of equity, increase inequalities and weaken social solidarity' (1992: 276). When Pinker later reviewed *The World of the Gift* by Godbout and Caille, he noted sympathetically their view, contrary to Titmuss's analysis of statutory social services as embodying a gift relationship, that 'the state as the prime agency of service provision inevitably transforms the gift relationship into "an anonymous

circulation network between strangers” (2000: 151). For Pinker, Titmuss used sociology and economics selectively, mining congenial theoretical perspectives and evidence rather than testing out his normative commitment to an expanded welfare unitarism (2008: 11).

The freedoms and benefits offered by markets and the need to recognise the contextual and conditional nature of altruism in all social life, including statutory services, remained undigested in Titmuss’s form of idealist social analysis: the structural composition of his way of thinking focused on the means to the end of what he took to be ‘moral growth’ and the ‘good society’ and seemed to preclude engagement with the everyday production by people in their ordinary lives of what they regarded as their own and others’ welfare (Offer, 1999, 2006; Mann, 2006). For Pinker, Titmuss was adamant that freedom as a value was secondary to a guarantee of material welfare by the state (1995a). He was to suggest that Titmuss’ ideal of social welfare

would impose nothing less than an intellectual and normative straightjacket on the diversity of policy ends and means that ought to characterise a free society. I preferred the idea of a pluralist mixed economy of welfare which took more account of the ambiguities and paradoxes of human nature and gave more opportunities for us all to pursue what *The Book of Common Prayer* describes as ‘the devices and desires of our own hearts’. Titmuss, in his preoccupation with ‘opportunities for altruism’, would undoubtedly have endorsed the whole of this quotation which goes on to confess that ‘we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts’ (2008: 20-21).^{ix}

Pinker himself considered his two books of the 1970s, *Social Theory and Social Policy* and *The Idea of Welfare*, to have been written ‘largely as critiques of Titmuss’s analysis of the moral dynamics of welfare institutions, the uncompromising distinction he drew between egoism and altruism, and the unitary model on which his analysis was based’ (2008: 20).

Freedom, civil war and migration: choice and welfare

More recently Pinker has explored what we may call the necessary conditions in social life for welfare. By 1973 Pinker considered that perhaps the ‘most neglected index of popular welfare preference has been the private ownership of land’. While kinship is the first focus of altruism it is predicated on security: the acquisition of property and its transmission across generations (with an associated sense of patriotism) is a search for security ‘which can only be checked or denied by force’ (1973: 23). Moreover, as noted when discussing *The Idea of Welfare*, he recognised a connection between the possession of land and everyday ideas of welfare. More recently he has remarked:

Conventional theories of welfare fail to take these kinds of issue into account because they are based on conventional definitions of welfare that typically include essential goods and services like health care, social security, education and housing. The land on which these amenities stand is, more or less, taken for granted. When issues of national sovereignty are involved, however, land becomes a unique welfare good. It represents the beginning and end of all our welfare aspirations (2006b: 37).

Pinker considered now that, while the twentieth century had created the concept of welfare rights, the secure ownership of land ‘has always been a key determinant of status, wealth and the prospect of welfare’ (2006b: 26):

Civil wars are not fought over the conventional issues of social welfare. Ordinary people are not prepared to kill or be killed in the cause of better social services. They are only prepared to do so once they are convinced that they will never become citizens on their own terms until they have won their national independence and the exclusive possession of whatever territories they associate with their ideal of nationhood. Since the land in question will always be the prime subject of dispute, neither side will ever enjoy the full benefits of freedom, welfare and peace until they are prepared to settle for some kind of territorial compromise (2006b: 37).

If the secure possession of land is absent, and thus a condition for welfare is not fulfilled, the phenomenon of migration becomes an issue. The control of immigration and the access of refugees and immigrants to the welfare arrangements of the host nation then arise as concerns related to the maintenance of the institutions of welfare in that nation, of considerable interest but probably less noticed than the plight of the refugees and immigrants themselves.

In the most recent years since retirement from academic life one of the driving forces behind Pinker's commitment to the work of the Press Complaints Commission has been his view that privacy required protection, unless there was convincing evidence to the contrary, since privacy too serves as a condition and source of personal and social welfare (in Deacon, Lipton and Pinker, 2010: 66). A full assessment of this aspect of Pinker's contribution to public life, however, would clearly require specialist consideration in a separate review beyond the limits of this article.

Conclusion

Pinker's characteristic insistence on the disinterested excavation rather than normative or ideological interpretation of the everyday ideas and practices of altruism and welfare led him to conclude that, in the context of a parliamentary democracy, these ordinary felt duties and obligations and the social understanding which they embodied would place a brake on radical proposals for social reform, whether they possessed collectivist or individualist origins: 'social services can only function effectively when their policy ends and means are based on, and developed out of, the customary values and expectations of the particular nation and people they serve' (2004: 6). Pluralist rather than unitarist forms of welfare action were most likely to connect with and foster informed popular sentiment. In a democratic and open society they offer the best prospect of finding sustainable if pragmatic compromises between the ineluctably contested valuations of personal freedom and collective well-being. Pinker, it should be remembered, acknowledged the value for his work of the precedent set by T.H. Marshall (Pinker, 1981, 2006a, 2006b, 2011) in finding a path between the polarities of collectivism and individualism (and welfare and freedom) with his concept of 'democratic-welfare-capitalism' (Marshall, 1972).^x The underpinning ideas for this reflective normative outlook, echoing John Stuart Mill's philosophical liberalism, to which Pinker added his own emphasis on the sociology of morals, complemented the broader understanding of welfare matters for which Pinker argued, including the scrutiny of the normative preferences of professionals and social policy academics themselves.

Pinker in fact identified not one but two 'great unitary ideologies that have dominated welfare theory for the past two centuries' (1995b: 83). On the political right, some theorists of competitive market

individualism were ideologically committed to residualising the statutory social services and creating a unitary system of privatised welfare. On the left, anti-market socialists and collectivists were committed to residualising the private sector and creating a unitary system of statutory welfare. As a pluralist, Pinker argued that all such ideological approaches to policy making were ‘subject to a law of diminishing returns’. It was not possible for any single political ideology to encompass or reconcile ‘the diversity of human principles and desires that find expression in the institutions of a free society’ (1995b, 83). Such diversity is best met by following a middle way between these extremes, by sustaining a mixed economy of formal social services and respecting the distinctive institutional characteristics of the informal networks of mutual aid.

One of Pinker's signal efforts in challenging the foundations of social policy studies was to redirect attention towards the moral sentiments constitutive of everyday family and social life in order to provide the necessary context in which to understand public perceptions of actual or possible ideas and practices concerning social policy. New areas for research beckoned offering new kinds of evidence on ‘conditional forms of altruism’ and the ‘forms of reciprocity and obligation’ between strangers with a common citizenship and members of the same kin. Those efforts, this article suggests, contain insights we cannot yet afford to ignore.

Notes

ⁱ This paper is a shortened and revised version of my article ‘Robert Pinker, the idea of welfare and the study of social policy: on unitarism and pluralism’, *Journal of Social Policy* (41, 3, 2012, pp 615-634).

ⁱⁱ In his academic career Pinker was successively Head of the Sociology Department, Goldsmiths College London 1964-72, Lewisham Professor of Social Administration Goldsmiths and Bedford Colleges London 1972-74, Professor of Social Studies, Chelsea College London 1974-78, Professor of Social Work Studies at the London School of Economics 1978-93, and Professor of Social Administration at LSE 1993-96.

ⁱⁱⁱ References to Pinker became frequent: the index to Taylor-Gooby and Dale (1981), for instance, lists a dozen entries, mostly pointing to significant engagements with his ideas. *Social Theory and Social Policy* was translated into Dutch, Serbo-Croat, Japanese and Korean.

^{iv} Deacon and Mann curiously describe Pinker as ‘almost wholly’ neglecting ‘agency’ (1999: 415).

^v Pinker’s ‘Populism and the social services’ (1984) recorded reservations about appeals to an alleged populist ‘consensus’ as a sound basis for policy.

^{vi} It is only comparatively recently that this historiographical approach has been challenged comprehensively: see Finlayson, 1994 and Harris, 2002 (and also Offer, 2006).

^{vii} Given that Pinker had established his position with careful argument it was difficult to see a just basis for two charges that Peter Leonard advanced against him of an ‘emphasis on the *moral rather than the social science* base of the discipline of social policy and administration’ and ‘*frantic attacks* on Marxism and the radical Left in general’. Leonard admitted, however, ‘the controlled rationality of most of the book’ (1972: 91, italics added).

^{viii} Pinker took Spencer seriously as a sociological theorist relevant to social policy studies, but he overlooked his typological ‘division of welfare’ by source. ‘We have,’ Spencer had written in his *Principles of Ethics* of 1892/3: ‘the law-established relief for the poor by distribution of money compulsorily exacted; with which may fitly be joined the alms derived from endowments. We have relief of the poor carried on by spontaneously organised societies, to which funds are voluntarily contributed. And then, lastly, we have the help privately given – now to those who stand in some relation of dependence, now to those concerning whose claims partial knowledge has been obtained, and now hap-hazard to beggars’ (1910, ii: 376).

^{ix} See Pinker, 2011, for his associated views on the extensive and collectivist social and economic reorganisation envisaged in Peter Townsend’s *Poverty in the United Kingdom*.

^x Low (2000) has reappraised Marshall on ‘citizenship’ and ‘class’ (alongside of the Idealist philosopher Henry Jones).

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