

The new class and the well-being state

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By Stuart Waiton

Originally asked to look at what people thought about the welfare state, or the changing attitudes towards it, this paper has turned this question around somewhat, and asks what do welfare professionals, experts and policy advisors think of people? To help answer this question, Alvin Gouldner's 1979 sociological text about the *Rise of the New Class* will be adopted and explored in the context of twenty first century experiences and expectations. The argument being made here is that the best way to understand welfare in the UK is not to focus on the punters receiving it, but to look at those who are handing it out.

To give a brief response to the question, what do the *new class* think of the public, the answer this paper argues, is, not very much. (The *new class* is understood here to be the new political and cultural elite and the bureaucracy that sustains it).

However, today's sense that the public are not up to much is no longer expressed through the gritted teeth of outraged moralists, but is spoken with soft tones by the *new class* with empathy and understanding, and always with a desire to give us support.

It is, in part, this desire to give people support that is the focus of this paper: because if this is correct, it raises an old question in a new form, and the question we need to address is less one related to welfare as such, but a wider more all-encompassing question regarding the *new class's* creation of a culture of dependency.ⁱ

The New Class

Who and what are the *new class*? Gouldner's use of this term is far from straightforward, indeed a new 'elite' rather than class, may be more sociologically accurate. Nevertheless, the term and his definition does have its use, not least of all because since writing his book, the 'great classes' defined by Marx, have declined in their dominance in both political and public life. Consequently, the political vacuum has been filled by the accelerated growth of the *new class*.

For Gouldner, the *new class* was made up of professionals, some of whom were associated with the development of welfare. This was a class that could be traced back hundreds of years, encouraged by the rational secularisation of society and the development and growing significance of education. This is a body of managers, professionals, intellectuals and experts who are not defined by their relationship to the means of production but by their intellectual/professional hegemony: A universal class, in Gouldner's view, but a flawed one that was morally ambiguous and lacked grounding in communities.

This was a technically proficient, scientifically oriented body of experts and planners who became increasingly important for the managing of society. This was, and is, from a Marxist perspective, and perhaps even in relation to Baudrillard and Bauman's work, a classless

‘class’, unsullied by politics and interests – an abstract, clean, clipboard carrying *class*, that was necessarily (for good and ill) distant from the people. This was a *class*, Gouldner argued in 1979, that had a professional ideology, that promoted the autonomy of impersonal ‘technology’, and which ‘depoliticises the public realm’.

Since then, wider trends in society have elevated the significance of this *class* of people. The decline in ‘traditional’ class politics over the last three decades has led to a growing micro-managerial form of social policy:ⁱⁱ It has led to a more legalistic and proceduralised world, and, as we will illustrate, it has resulted in a more systematic development of therapeutic expertise. Indeed, within these changes we have seen the qualitative elevation of technical expertise, especially in the form of ‘evidence based’ policy developmentsⁱⁱⁱ and a more dogmatic reliance upon what The Science says. As ‘the aspiration for real social change’ receded in the 1980s, Bill Durodie argues, science and the use of science, for making decisions, increased ‘out of all proportion’.^{iv}

Discussing the legacy of the influential social theorist Michel Foucault, Mitchell Dean usefully noted how Foucault’s later ideas were developed in what he understood to be a ‘post-revolutionary’ era. This disappearance of the idea of revolution, or this ‘end of History’, meant that government was replaced by governance and ‘what is left belongs only to the order of administration, or management’.

The rise of therapeutic responses

This new managerial form of governing that focuses on micro-issues and relationships in society, has been assisted by the largely unquestioned rise of therapeutic responses within the *new class*. This is an approach that focuses on the emotional well-being of the public as a basis for creating a better society.

The rise of the therapeutic ethos within society’s ‘body of expertise’ is perhaps the most novel development within the *new class* since Gouldner wrote his book. This perspective fits into the *new class*’ approach: It is, for example, morally neutral, it incorporates a scientific (often psychosocial outlook), while also adopting an emotional form of ‘welfare’ expressed in the growing concern with our *well-being*. There is also a utilitarian, cost saving promotion within the therapeutic discourse, where intervention and support is understood to save money by preventing problems in the future that are understood to be caused by an emotional deficit, seen clearly in the discussion about early intervention.

The rise of what James Nolan calls a *Therapeutic State* comes with the development of new measurable concepts and categories that have been incorporated into institutions and government, like ‘happiness’ and ‘well-being’.^v From this perspective, more structurally grounded measurements like Gross National Product (GDP) can be interpreted as too one-dimensional. In comparison, the more therapeutically ‘grounded’ concept of well-being and the idea of a ‘happiness index’ are understood to be more all-rounded, more holistic, more empathetic, and therefore more caring and progressive: As the Office for National Statistics

notes, “by measuring ‘national well-being’ we gain a ‘fuller picture of how society is doing’”.^{vi}

We all may think we want to be happy, but as Ashley Frawley notes in *Semiotics of Happiness*, it is not the public that have promoted this concept and this problem, but professional claims-makers, experts and policy makers.

This more therapeutic approach is increasingly central to social policy in general and indeed to the way that institutions orient themselves, with the rise of concern with self-esteem in education for example, or with the growing problem and engagement with stress at work, and with the issue of bullying at both school and work. Our emotional fragility and the emotional abuse we may suffer has consequently become an increasing part of governance, and indeed law,^{vii} accompanied by an array of new and old experts who help us to understand our vulnerabilities, to be aware, and to seek help. Indeed as Nolan, and others, have noted, this therapeutic change has come about with the elevation of the citizen-victim as the key character in public life today.

The therapeutic outlook arguably both reflects and creates a different sense of the self, creating what Peter Ramsay calls a form of vulnerable autonomy. We are autonomous, Ramsay notes, but we are no longer the robust, autonomous, liberal subjects of past generations. Rather our very autonomy is understood to be problematic because of our essential fragility: we are post-liberal subjects, Helen Reece argues, who are understood to constantly need help and support to develop our reflexive selves and relationships.

For this paper, the importance of the therapeutic culture is not therapy itself, but rather the implied sense of vulnerability within the therapeutic discourse. The rise of the ‘victim’, seen perhaps most clearly in the approach within the criminal justice system, is in this context, illustrative of an approach that takes for granted the idea of the vulnerable subject as its starting point. As the criminologist David Garland has argued, the victim-subject has become universalised in not only criminal justice policies but within Western culture more generally. This helps to explain the development of the category ‘vulnerable group’ to define an increasing number of people across society.

If we are understood to be essentially vulnerable, the implication is that we will find it difficult to cope with various, indeed increasing, areas and aspects of life. Consequently, despite the financial imperative of the current crisis, and the apparent need for ‘austerity’, the wider cultural drive is to promote the need for ever more support for ever more areas of everyday life – to help us parent our children, to help us overcome our ‘addictions’, or to help us find work or to cope with unemployment.

The death of liberalism

In his excellent, *The End of Utopia*, the American Marxist, Russell Jacoby, noted that for much of the twentieth century it was the left that gave liberalism its backbone. Once the left

collapsed in the 1980s, he argued, liberalism essentially collapsed with it. Without the pressure to stand up for the 'Free World', against the threat of communism abroad and socialism at home, for example, the very meaning of freedom was transformed. In the case of New Labour and their battle against 'crime and the causes of crime', freedom increasingly became associated with the idea of 'freedom from fear'. Here, freedom was no longer a right held by the individual but something provided to the individual and to 'vulnerable communities' by the state, in the form of an increasing number of laws and police and safety initiatives.

The collapse of liberalism within today's new class is another novel development and one that has serious implications for understanding our dependency culture.

Historically, elites across the Western world have been concerned about the effects of welfare and other forms of support upon an individual's sense of moral responsibility. Despite Britain's growing welfare state in the twentieth century, this idea together with the promotion of self-reliance, individual and family autonomy remained important values until recently. Today, despite the rhetoric of responsibility, policies increasingly start from the presumption that we, as vulnerable individuals, need support. Indeed the very idea of responsibility has changed.

In the classical liberal writings of John Stuart Mill, responsibility was something that was entirely bound up with the notion of the self-determining, robust, autonomous individual. Being responsible, for Mill, did not mean that you always acted responsibly, but when you did not do so, you recognised that this was something of your own doing – you were responsible for your own stupidity or immorality. Today, in comparison, the threatening couplet of 'rights and responsibilities' is one whereby the state allows you to have rights based on the correct behaviour that you demonstrate. Under New Labour, this approach was best illustrated through what Hazel Blears and Frank Field called the 'politics of behaviour'. Indeed the focus on 'behaviour' is itself a significant shift away from the engagement with people's 'belief'. The latter assumes we are rational, moral agents who can be engaged by ideas, the former attempts to nudge us, like lab rats, to behave correctly, to eat our five-a-day, to gamble, to drink, to have sex, indeed to do everything 'responsibly'.

As 'big' ideas associated with politics and morality have declined in their significance, the expertise of the *new class* has become more significant, and public debate and decision making has been replaced by the growing use of laws, regulations and procedures to ensure that we *behave* correctly. By doing so, and by transforming the meaning of freedom and responsibility, the genuine capacity of people to be free, to choose and to develop their independent sense of personal responsibility, is undermined.

The well-being state

Through the 1970s and 1980s welfarism and the welfare state was seen as a problem for society. Grand schemes to plan away capitalism's problems rationally, by using the state,

appeared to have failed. Out of the collapse of grand narratives and the ‘end of utopia’ a more legalistic, managerial form of governing developed, often focused upon the managing of individuals and often framed within a therapeutic discourse and approach to social (read psychosocial) problems. Through this process, the old structurally grounded welfare approach was transformed into a new approach oriented around the therapeutic idea of well-being, an approach developed and adopted enthusiastically by the *new class*.

Today’s experts and policy advisors are no longer driven by an interventionist zeal to plan the Great Society. The more limited, but also potentially more extensive, micro-managing and supporting of individuals and especially individuals’ emotional well-being, is the new focus of the *new class*. One outcome of this therapeutic form of managing is that there has been an expansion of professionals into increasing areas of everyday life, and increasingly into areas where ‘expertise’ does not belong. In Scotland this trend can be seen most obtusely through the example of something called the ‘named person’.^{viii}

With the passing of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, in law, by 2016, every child in Scotland will be appointed a state ‘named person’, or state guardian, who will have a legal duty to oversee the interests of the child. Often sold as a policy to ‘protect the vulnerable’ this is in fact a universal provision, framed around the need to intervene where there are concerns about the ‘well-being’ of a child. Crucially, *concerns about a child’s well-being*, rather than evidence that a child is ‘at serious risk of harm’, is now the basis upon which an investigation into a child and a family’s life will be triggered.

Teachers, who will act as the named person, will be trained to understand well-being based on SHANARRI indicators. These indicators are the building blocks for encouraging early intervention by the named person, part of an ‘inspection methodology’ for assessing the well-being of every child in regard to being Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible and Included (SHANARRI). It will be a named person’s legal duty to ensure these well-being indicators are understood and addressed, where necessary.

Here we find an attempt to give technical definitions that can be measured and recorded to the woolly concept of well-being. With each category, from safe to included, comes a sub-set list of examples and descriptions of issues the named person must be conscious of when ‘inspecting’ the children they work with. This has been helped by academics at Edinburgh University who have drawn up 304 ‘outcome signifiers’,^{ix} to help analyse well-being and to explain what positive well-being looks like. This couples with over 200 ‘risk indicators’ developed within the GIRFEC (Getting It Right for Every Child) framework: These risk indicators further help to break down assessments of children into risk assessments, risk analysis and risk management processes. The 222 risk indicators list include - being under five years old, having an illness in the family, experience of bereavement, parental resistance to support, the child being unwilling to disclose information and the parent having a different perception of the problem.

Most recently, discussing what potential triggers could be incorporated into the category of well-being in the future, Bob Fraser, a GIRFEC health advisor has suggested that a lack of *hope, love or spirituality*, provided by parents, could and perhaps should be the basis for action. This, he noted, would mean intervening with children who are ‘not just the usual suspects, not just for those that we identify as those in need’ (*The Scottish Mail on Sunday* 31st May 2015).

Key to the emergence of well-being as a basis for intervention and support is the perception that children are vulnerable. Once conceptualised as vulnerable or potentially vulnerable, the trend is to intervene, to protect and to support, both their physical and emotional well-being. This couples with what has been described as the problematisation and professionalization of parenting, with parenting over the last few decades being constructed as a skills-based activity.

The example of the ‘named person’ in Scottish welfare policy is not used to show the dangerous and intrusive potential of the well-being state, but rather, it is used to illustrate the trend towards intervention in society. Framed within a more limited sense of what the individual is capable of, the technical and managerial zeal of the *new class* has kicked in and constructed a remarkable bureaucratic framework for ‘supporting’ all children and families across the country.

Once being a parent is understood in a technical way, it becomes difficult to comprehend that ordinary people have the capacity to successfully care for their own children. Consequently the autonomy that was once understood to be essential for families has become understood as a problem, as a barrier to the necessary professional support that we all need. As a result being responsible is not something that is developed through independence, but the opposite, being a responsible parent is illustrated by your willingness to ask for and accept support, for the interests of yourself and your vulnerable child.

Who is responsible for the raising of children in Scotland? Is it the parents or the named person? The answer to this question is now confused. Noticeably, in the new Children’s Act there was only one mention of ‘families’ compared to the 54 times that the term ‘corporate parent’ or ‘corporate parenting’ was used. Increasingly, it appears that being a responsible parent in Scotland will mean understanding professionally drafted risks, indicators and outcomes. Perhaps we may even find that the happiness index is soon joined by a love, hope and spirituality chart!

Unfortunately, despite some concerns about the ‘problem of welfare’, the trend in society, and especially amongst the increasingly dominant *new class*, is to assume that people need professional support with almost everything they do. It is this *new class*, a class whose outlook dominates policy developments in the UK, who are encouraging a dependency culture and undermining the autonomy of individuals, families and communities. This has enormous implications for the way in which the welfare state will develop in the UK and elsewhere in the years to come.

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ⁱ See an earlier paper on the colonisation of everyday life. Available at <https://repository.abertay.ac.uk/jspui/bitstream/10373/718/2/WaitonYouth%26PolicyPublisher2010.pdf>

ⁱⁱ See Waiton's *The Politics of Antisocial Behaviour: Amoral Panics* (2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ For Martyn Hammersley, Professor of Educational and Social Research at the Open University, evidence based policies are a myth and should be understood as more of a 'slogan whose rhetorical effect is to discredit opposition'. See the book review of *The Myth of Research-Based Policy and Practice* at

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2013/09/13/book-review-the-myth-of-research-based-policy-and-practice/> Accessed 29th May 2015. Also see the discussion paper *Some Questions about Evidence-based Practice in Education* at

<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00001819.htm> Accessed 31st May 2015.

^{iv} Durodie, B. (2003) 'Limitations of public dialogue in science and the rise of new 'experts'' in *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*. 6:4, 82-92.).

^v See for example the British Government's collection of paper on 'wellbeing'.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-wellbeing> Accessed 29th May 2015.

^{vi} See the ONS website <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/index.html> Accessed 23rd May 2015. This apparently more caring approach also gives a certain sense of moral goodness and legitimacy to professionals and institutions that are otherwise devoid of public veneration.

^{vii} See for example the developing laws regarding emotional abuse of children and in terms of domestic abuse.

^{viii} Scotland, with its relatively new parliament, appears to be at the forefront of modern trends, perhaps because in a literal sense it has a new class, less connected to past institutions and traditions.

^{ix} See the Edinburgh University report online at: <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0039/00398541.pdf>