A Post-Productivist Future for Social Democracy?

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The purpose of this article is to contrast productivism with post-productivism and raise a question mark over the extent to which social democrats should support the former rather than the latter. It offers a definition of post-productivism, explaining this in terms of the ‘reproductive value’ of care and sustainability. The paper then sketches the limits to social democracy and indicates why post-productivist solutions might therefore be appropriate. It concludes by speculating on some implications for social policy.

Social democratic futures

What possible futures for social democracy are on offer? We are now all too familiar with the Third Way or the ‘new social democracy’ (Finlayson, 2003) and as one of those who has critiqued it extensively elsewhere I will not be dealing with it here (Fitzpatrick, 2003a). Another alternative is to revive what Third Wayers (Giddens, 2001; Heffernan and Chadwick, 2003) constructed as ‘old’ social democracy, i.e. the attachment to nationalism, statism, corporatism, tax-and-spend redistribution, outcome equality, demand management, passive welfare, citizenship rights and universalism. Putting aside the allegation that this is at best a simplification and at worst a caricature of older versions of social democracy (C. Pierson, 2001) I will be assuming that a return to the social democracy which prevailed in the four decades after the Second World War is not desirable for reasons that should become clear.

For many this leaves us with the task of imagining a social democracy which is more egalitarian than the Third Way but which nevertheless roots itself in present-day realities. Some insist that this involves appealing to commonplace understandings of social membership: the idea that proper membership involves making active contributions to one’s society through work—though ‘work’ is not necessarily limited to paid employment. White (2003: 18) has provided an impressive defence of fair reciprocity in that the ‘social background conditions’ have to be egalitarian if an ethic of obligation is not to load more unjust burdens upon the least advantaged. This is a powerful idea but since I have critiqued it elsewhere (Fitzpatrick, 2003b) I will also be leaving this to one side.

Another reality that is allegedly unavoidable is globalisation and in opposition to those who equate globalisation with neoliberal capitalism some insist that globalisation can be shaped according to social democratic principles and aims (Held and McGrew, 2002: Ch.9). Once we have established that globalisation does not necessarily sound the death knell of social democracy (Stiglitz, 2002), even if it does make life harder for high-spending welfare states (P. Pierson, 2001), then we can imagine a social democratisation of global markets converging with the global-orientation of social democratic movements to produce a new form of politics whose pragmatism is nevertheless more egalitarian than the
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Third Way (Monbiot, 2003). However, a successful expansion of the geographical scope of social democracy depends upon being clear about what kind of social democracy we want. The purpose of this article is to open up a much deeper contrast than those to which Held et al. draw attention.

The contrast I have in mind is that between a productivist and a post-productivist social democracy. A succinct defence of the former is provided by Midgely and Tang (2001; also Bowles and Gintis, 1998; Huber and Stephens, 2001) when they contend that social democrats have to beat conservatives at their own game by shaping capitalism so that (1) it generates greater wealth and growth than under laissez faire regimes, but (2) without abandoning the fair distributions which are essential to social democracy and appeal to most people's innate sense of decency and humanity. The history of social democracy is therefore the history of productivist attempts to balance (1) and (2) in a variety of national, political and cultural contexts. What might therefore be called the 'new productivism' (Fitzpatrick, forthcoming: Ch.1) is the attempt to reconjoin (1) and (2) in a socioeconomic environment that has been pulling them apart since the 1970s. For Third Wayers this means avoiding too egalitarian an interpretation of 'fair distribution', though other new productivists retain more ambition in this respect (Esping-Andersen, 2002).

So, what can possibly be wrong with productivism? Given its legacy, its commonsense appeal and its potential for social progressiveness why bother opening up another conceptual division in a Centre-Left politics that is already rife with ideological cleavages? The purpose of this article is not necessarily to make a knock-down argument for post-productivism but to elaborate upon the contrast introduced in the previous paragraph and to suggest why social democrats should place a series of question marks over productivism. I begin by defining productivism and then exploring its implications for social democracy and social policy.

Defining productivism

Productivism is not the same as productivity. Productivity refers to increases in output per work-hour that are achieved by improvement in inputs and/or the flow of inputs through a given process. Such improvements can occur in a number of ways: (a) doing more for the same, for example by investing in capital stock, skills and training, or changing working practices through more effective management–labour relations, or (b) doing the same for less by reducing production costs, for example by inputting cheaper raw materials or by cutting real wages, or (c) some combination of (a) and (b). Increases in efficiency and productivity are therefore crucial to the achievement of GDP growth, where GDP measures total output across a given economic territory, and such growth may be channelled into either private or public forms of consumption, depending upon the preferred levels of taxation and expenditure. Growth therefore allows borrowing and taxation to be kept at levels that are economically and politically acceptable, while permitting spending on state welfare, that is the public consumption of social goods, to increase. Productivity has therefore long been essential to the positive sum strategies of social democratic capitalism.

Productivism is the ideological fetishisation of productivity growth where the latter takes on the quality of an end rather than a means. This is not to suggest that productivity becomes simply an end-in-itself since there are constitutive goals that productivity
and growth are always designed to serve: for social democrats this goal involves fair
distributions. However, by taking on the quality of an end the drive for ever-greater
productivity reconfigures these goals so that they, themselves, are interpreted in terms of
their contribution to GDP growth. Distributions are largely regarded by social democratic
parties as fair or unfair in relation to economic contributions, hence the social democratic
emphasis upon redistribution by and through employment, and the suspicion by some
that the much-heralded axis of commodification and decommodification is overdrawn
(Room, 2000). Productivism therefore denotes the values and perceptions through which
the means–end relationship is rendered indistinct: for productivity to serve deeper goals
those goals must serve the processes of productivity growth; one consequence of which is
that perceptions of negative externalities become purblind, for example social democrats
are adept at identifying the negativities of free markets but have been much slower to
factor the negative externalities of economic growth per se into their vision of public
goods (see below). So, productivism is the institutional, discursive and psychological
process by which social goals are subordinated to the domains of productivity growth.

For the Left’s historic project of freedom from economic necessity, productivism is
somewhat problematic. That state welfare can and does assist economic growth is still the
main argument deployed against the anti-statist Right (e.g. Gough, 2000: Ch.8). Yet while
its productivist appeals have enabled social democracy to become socially and politically
embedded, they have also undermined its ability to recognise the potential limits to
productivism. To specify those limits I need to define two forms of value: emotional and
ecological.

First, there is the kind of emotional value expressed in an ethic of care and for
which the much sought-after work–life balance is an obvious condition (Williams, 2001).
Carework creates economic (or exchange) value, in that it involves the performance of
activity that neither the capitalist market nor the state have either the inclination or the
ability to remunerate in full, yet economic value is not its primary rationale. We do not
have children in order to populate the future economy, or look after us in old age; we do
not care for elderly relatives in order to make a profit. These are potential consequences
of carework but cannot, without contradicting the meaning of care, be their motivating
rationale. Some care can and should be performed as waged activity, and should be
factored much more closely into social and economic policies than at present, but most
care will always remain informal, performed for reasons of emotional belonging.

Second, there is the ecological value of the environment. Greens have long pointed
out that economic value depends upon and feeds off an environmental substructure
(Daly, 1996; Douthwaite, 1999). The resources we mine and the ecosystem we pollute
are the origins of economic value, yet economic orthodoxy still relates productivity to
labour rather than to natural resources (Bleischwitz, 2001). For Greens, by contrast, the
environment’s value may be quantified to some extent (Pearce and Barbier, 2000), but
ultimately transcends the economic. So, while it is certainly necessary to ‘Green’ the
economy, even a Green economy could not perform all of the work of sustainability that
needs to be done. For this a much wider conception of social activity and participation
is required, one that sets the economic in an environmental context rather than the other
way around.

We therefore have two forms of value, emotional and environmental, that are
related to, but might be said to underpin, the economic value that remains central to
contemporary societies. If this is the case then we potentially have reference points against
which productivism can be judged. By redefining productivity as the transformation of (a) emotional and natural resources into (b) sources of economic wealth, we can see that productivism is that which assesses (a) according to the value of (b), whereas what I will call ‘post-productivism’ says that once the pursuit of economic wealth becomes an unsustainable goal then (b) must be assessed according to the values of (a). The emotional and the environmental are not, therefore, different forms of value but the tectonic strata upon which economic value is dependent and against which it must be measured. So, we already have some indication why emotional and ecological values constitute limits to the economic and so to productivism.

For the sake of convenience let me place emotional and ecological value under the joint heading of ‘reproduction’. Reproductive value refers to the emotional and ecological foundations of economic value, that upon which economic value is founded but which it can never fully incorporate or commodify since care and sustainability imply forms of activity so extensive that they can never be completely quantified or reduced to economic criteria. Reproductive value and economic value are therefore related to one another ambiguously. Economic value depends upon the reproduction of its conditions but cannot acknowledge this dependency since no economy is wealthy enough to fully compensate for the emotional and ecological costs that it creates: the ethics of affluence and growth are undermined the moment we render visible the foundations upon which they rest because it is these foundations which they are gradually eroding. Reproductive value is the ultimate source of economic value yet it is the destructive effects of affluence and growth which now provide us with the reflexive skills and resources needed to preserve reproductive activity. Reproductive and economic values therefore push both away from and towards one another.

Productivism is that which would subsume reproduction within the sphere of production, insisting that the costs of pursuing ever-higher levels of economic wealth can be incorporated within the existing political economy, for example by insisting that carework and sustainability are job- and therefore growth-friendly. Post-productivism is that which would subsume production within the spheres of reproduction, insisting that those costs are beyond the capacity of the employment society to fully recognise and absorb so that we must alter our conceptions of value and so of affluence, growth and work. Post-productivism is therefore a doctrine of ‘reproductivity’ whereby economic growth is justified if and only if it can be demonstrated that the emotional and ecological sources of production are enhanced. Reproductivity does not, then, deny the importance of productivity but subjects it to ‘non-productivist’ criteria, for example it points out that there are emotional limits to the extent to which working time can be squeezed and ecological limits to reliance upon cheaper raw materials. But other forms of productivity growth that enhance reproductive values may be perfectly acceptable, for example where it is used to reduce negative externalities and social costs.

We have therefore identified a potential distinction in social democratic politics. Let me now illustrate what is at stake in this contrast.

**Reproductivity and the limits of social democracy**

Many on the Left advocate a productivist future for social democracy (Huber and Stephens, 2001). ‘Wage earner feminism’ says that gender equality is best delivered through dual breadwinning households; ecological modernisation insists that Green reforms are
inefficacious unless they promote productive activity. However, others advocate what we here call post-productivism on the grounds that productivism undermines the sources of its own value and so is ultimately self-defeating. Some feminists point to the disadvantages of dual breadwinning, for example that it predicates gender equality upon the repertoires of masculinity (Fraser, 1997); many Greens argue that ecological modernisation is a short-term solution at best (Fitzpatrick with Caldwell, 2001).

The strongest case for a productivist social democracy can be found within those nations committed to moderate to high levels of equality since it is here that the balance mentioned earlier – between growth and fair distributions – continues to be most effectively maintained. Such countries therefore represent the best stage for a debate between productivists and post-productivists.

Egalitarian social democracies are attractive to feminist commentators, although the incompleteness of the social democratic record is not ignored. Plantenga et al. (1999) note that the Netherlands idealises the equal sharing of time between waged and unwaged work and between men and women (OECD, 2002). However, although women’s labour market participation has grown the countervailing increase in men’s care participation has been more limited and so women are still the secondary earners in a ‘one-and-a-half-earner’ model (Lewis, 2001). The Dutch system salutes part-time employment as the means of combining employment and care but it is primarily women who take such jobs. Policies still favour breadwinning and thus the privatisation and feminisation of care. According to Warren (2000), Denmark, too, pulls away from the male breadwinner model but only half successfully as unwaged work remains underemphasised, and, because the substitute for male breadwinning is regarded as dual breadwinning, then considerable remnants of male breadwinning nevertheless remain as women are concentrated away from the core jobs that men have little incentive to vacate (OECD, 2002). There is a similar pattern visible in Sweden: high rates of female participation in the labour market combined with generous childcare and parental leave policies. The price, though, is a labour market with some of the most sexually segregated divisions to be found anywhere, with women grouped into public sector jobs and the one-and-a-half model visible here also (Sainsbury, 1999; Bergmark and Palme, 2003).

The record of productivist and egalitarian social democracy seems impressive, therefore, yet far from complete. Does this mean we need still more effective policies? Or does it mean we need policy reforms to be underpinned by alternative values?

The shift towards a service economy has long been observed, accompanied by fears that because services are not as amenable to the productivity increases visible in manufacturing a loss of productivity will reduce economic growth and therefore dilute the sources of expenditure upon which social democratic welfare states depend (Baumol, 1967; Iversen and Wren, 1998; P. Pierson, 2001). According to this scenario, care is esteemed but only to the extent that it does not undermine the virtuous circle linking productivity to growth to social welfare. In a service society the circle may be squared in a social democratic direction by expanding the number of service jobs in and around the public sector, that is counterbalancing low productivity through an expansion in the quantity of employment. Not all service jobs will involve carework (think of tourism, for instance) but many will.

So the ambivalent successes and failures of productivist social democracy are no accident. Whereas social democracy is able to pay women to enter the labour market, and so expand the very caregiving services that those women need, there are limits to
which men can be paid to leave it since this would strain social expenditure to bursting point. This is not to decry social democracy’s record on gender equality, nor to predict that future improvements will not be made, but it is to observe that a service economy places productivist limits on the feminist agenda.

This emphasis upon growth through employment also affects the environmental record of egalitarian social democracies. Evidence suggests that social democratic societies like Sweden are the Greenest (Lafferty, 2001). But because of the stress upon international market competitiveness the emphasis has been placed upon technological, end-of-the-pipe fixes, top–down managerialism rather than grassroots democracy, a win–win philosophy that avoids the difficult questions of trade-off and a legacy whereby Swedish industry has developed through environmental exploitation (Jamison and Baark, 1999; Sverrisson, 2000). Environmental concerns have not been integrated into the wider array of economic, social and welfare issues, unless to justify a ‘business as usual’ approach (Eckerberg, 2000, 2001). Jamison and Baark (1999: 217) find that Denmark’s record is better, but, even here, environmental policies have not been integrated in the social lifeworld, such that they are easily abandoned when they become too costly – a risk also noticeable in Finland (Niemi-Iilahti, 2001). In the Netherlands and Norway, the environment tends to be brought into the decision-making picture only when it benefits, but does not challenge, economic orthodoxy, for example job creation in the waste management industries (van Muijen, 2000; Langhelle, 2000).

So, while the social democratic record is impressive, its incompleteness may be due to the limits of productivism rather than to defects in policy making that merely require an administrative fix. If so, then there is a question mark over whether the solution to the problems of productivism is yet more productivism. In terms of both caregiving and sustainability, social democracies have arguably gone further than other countries in incorporating reproductive values into their socioeconomic institutions and policies. Yet they are bumping up against the limits of productivism because the dominance of economic value makes it harder to achieve more than modest (though still welcome) forms of gender equality and sustainability. The Centre-Left may, therefore, face a choice between seeking a productivist future and a post-productivist one. In the final section I indicate what the implications of this for social policy might be.

**Post-productivist social policy**

To what extent can a post-productivist approach surmount the problems identified above?

This article is concerned to counter Goodin’s (2001) description of post-productivism as ‘welfare without work’, since, while this makes for a neat headline, it makes no sense to aim for a workless society. Instead, post-productivism might be formulated as a post-employment approach in which multiple forms of valuable activity, both formal and informal, are identified and nurtured. What this implies is that economies cannot be based (as they are now) upon the fiction that wages are or can be the dominant means through which the mass of people generate and exchange value. If there is to be an expansion of informal activity then non-waged equivalents have to be encouraged and, in fact, those equivalents are already available in the form of time. Both social capital and domestic labour are built upon time, as people ‘give time’ to one another in expectation that it will be returned in other forms; and economies are based upon time, the means by which individuals convert their finite years into goods which (for one reason or another) they
desire or need. Money is therefore a reification, a way of eclipsing the acts of temporal conversion that underpin it. In rooting itself in employment, productivism propagates this deception by having social exchange circulate primarily through the medium of the wage contract. While, in seeking to promote post-employment forms of activity, post-productivism involves recognising the fundamental status of time and so of making its use more overt by directing policy reforms towards a creation of the appropriate institutional infrastructure. An ethic of care and an environmental ethic therefore converge upon a politics of time.

The implications of this convergence are already visible within social policy debates. Goodin (2001) himself supports not worklessness *per se* but a welfare society of resource autonomy, the resource in question being available in two currencies: income and time. This means correcting imbalances in the existing distribution of resources between employed and unemployed, men and women, affluent and non-affluent. Since the *sine qua non* of this approach is often taken to be the freeing up of time, so that it can be distributed more equitably in conjunction with income and wealth, we should examine this at more length.

A politics of working-time reductions has long been proposed as at least a partial solution to unemployment (e.g. Gorz, 1989), since, assuming production costs and output are stable, the time freed up can be used to employ more people (cf. Little, 2002). Furthermore, and as many commentators have suggested, gender imbalances require a greater equilibrium between homelife and worklife and a redistribution of carework from women to men (Guest, 2002). But it is the broader divisions of affluence which present even more of a problem. Challenging the culture of overwork means encouraging many of those who are time rich and income poor to converge upon those who are time poor and income rich, and *vice versa*. As always, though, desire is unlikely to translate into social change unless government channels preferences and actions in the appropriate direction. Among other things this might suggest more imaginative employment policies. For instance, employers might be obliged to replace wage increments with increments of time above a stipulated level of the pay scale. The establishment of time banks and time credit schemes could accompany the new fashion for endowment funds, for example baby bonds, and tax credits. And informal exchange schemes have been proposed as a means of repairing the defects produced by over-reliance upon formal labour markets (Williams, 2002).

The trickier problem is in converging those who are time and income poor upon those who are time and income rich. If we contradict the last quarter century of welfare reform and assume that the problem lies primarily with the latter rather than the former then what new combination of sticks and carrots might we conceive? In addition to the kind of progressive income tax levels that New Labour has abandoned even talking about one possible solution awaiting a future government is to tax time by introducing different ages of compulsory retirement. To put it simply, the richer you are the longer you have to work. If this sounds outrageous it is no more so, and considerably fairer, than the present situation where a single retirement age is being slowly ratcheted up, forcing those on the lowest incomes (and so with the shortest longevity) to work longer for their inadequate pensions. In other words, the taxation of time already prevails, but in a regressive rather than progressive form.

The freeing of time potentially leads in a post-productivist direction, since, while society continues to grow, it grows by utilising a finite resource (time) rather than by
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consuming natural resources in infinite pursuit of materialist satisfaction. I say ‘potentially’ because free time does not, by itself, guarantee the enhancement of reproductive values. This, too, requires policies to encourage the right sorts of activities and discourage the wrong ones. The *sine qua non* here is a shift away from the dominance within social policies of paid work, since, while paid work can be made compatible with emotional and environmental necessities (as argued above), the latter may ultimately require a greater displacement of the former than productivist social democrats can contemplate. In itself, obviously, a shift from formal into informal economies is no more of a guarantee – the ‘third sector’ may also be emotionally and ecologically damaging, depending upon its socioeconomic context – but the shift at least symbolises that the wage relation is only one of a number of socially valuable relations. If money is the main currency of economic value then time is the main currency of reproductive value. In a post-productivist economy you do not have to ‘pay’ men to leave the labour market since the divisions between formal and informal activities are less pronounced. Something like an unconditional income will not deliver this kind of system by itself but may underpin the kind of economic diversity upon which a range of conditional schemes could flourish (Fitzpatrick, 1999).

This is to explore only one potential aspect of post-productivism’s implications for social policy and, obviously, it has not detailed how post-productivism might constitute a more effective response to the problems of a service economy. However, I suspect that we repair the virtuous circle of productivity, growth and welfare not by tying everything so closely to employment but by recognising how time both lies at the heart of employment and also points beyond it. Social democracy’s commitment to high levels of social welfare will be maintained not just be worrying about sources of social expenditure but by harnessing and channelling more effectively the temporal work we already perform for one another in ways that existing measures of social and economic accounting are poorly suited to capture.

**Notes**

1 Though the recent French experience is a sobering reminder of how and why this proposal can be co-opted.

2 This characterisation is obviously crude and ignores the distinction between quantities and quality of income and time.

3 This is my answer to the referee who went slightly apoplectic at the suggestion. Governments can and should alter the parameters of public and private pensions all the time, through taxation policy for instance. The struggle (whether direct or indirect) over property rights is essential to politics and is at the heart of social democratic responses to the conservative defence of unequal ownership.

**References**


OECD (2002), Babies and Bosses, Paris: OECD.