Time, social justice and UK welfare reform

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Abstract

While analyses of time have never strayed too far away from those of social justice, and vice versa, this article’s premise is that they have so far failed to converge as directly and coherently as they might. The aim of this article is to facilitate a greater degree of convergence by working within a framework of liberal equality and establishing similarities in the work of the two theorists who have gone furthest in bringing the various debates together. These are Robert Goodin and André Gorz, and the article explores the respective strengths and weaknesses of their ideas. A liberal theory of socio-temporal justice is derived from their work and is then used to critique some recent developments in UK welfare reform.

Keywords: time; justice; liberalism; social policy; Robert Goodin; André Gorz.

Introduction

Despite the paradox that the wealthier our societies become the more we seem to be experiencing a time squeeze (Schor 1991), political theories have barely gotten to grips with the theoretical and practical problems of time. One effect of this is to leave social and public policies adrift of any convincing account of time and its relation to social justice. The aim of this article is therefore to help rectify that neglect by bringing debates about time and social justice closer together and to provide the outline of a liberal theory of ‘socio-temporal justice’.

The article’s premise is that, since almost all social and political theorists of the last thirty years have not allowed questions of time and social justice to converge adequately (a premise illustrated through a succinct analysis of Rawls),

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we have to start from outside the mainstream literature. That said, I shall also assume that a broadly liberal approach to these issues is warranted if we are to develop a theory with the most practical application to current social and policy developments. To this end I shall use the work of Robert Goodin and André Gorz as a key resource, explaining why each can be located within a liberal framework and how questions of time and social justice are central to both theorists. The essential question to be addressed is ‘what social background conditions are needed to make the release of more free time socially just?’ and Goodin and Gorz are utilized as a means of answering this.

In brief, while both recommend a shortening of the average working life as the sine qua non of social justice, both are more concerned with the quality of the time available to people, even though they disagree on what quality means in this context. The differences between Goodin and Gorz in this respect are therefore identified, but I shall argue that there is enough agreement between their respective positions to yield the outlines of a liberal theory of socio-temporal justice that specifies the basic prerequisites that social background conditions have to meet to be regarded as just. This outline is then offered and is employed to critique some recent developments in UK welfare reform in order to consider the theory’s practical usefulness and potential for further development.

No time for Rawls?

In sketching a liberal theory of socio-temporal justice why not just rely upon the main authorities? Part of the problem is that the last three decades of political philosophy have paid relatively little attention to time, perhaps on the assumption that time can simply be ‘read into’ whichever framework of social justice is found to be most convincing. This tendency is illustrated by Rawls. After he had spent years, and hundreds of pages, explaining one of the most influential theories of justice ever, it took a short article by Musgrave (1974) to point out that Rawls’s difference principle (the idea that inequalities should be organized so that they are to the benefit of the least well-off) would favour those with a high preference for leisure. By not considering the time people spend in productive and unproductive activity Rawls had advanced a theory of justice that blanketed the ‘least well-off’ with the same characteristics and failed to discriminate between those who were either more or less deserving – we return to this critique below. Yet, while Rawls originally pushed time into the margins, he did at least come to assimilate it more fully into his thought, which is more than can be said for his intellectual descendants – an assertion that, I admit, would take another article to demonstrate. Therefore, we can gain some idea of political philosophical failings vis-à-vis time by examining Rawls in more detail.

There are two main aspects to the Rawlsian account, one concerned with primary goods and the other with intergenerational justice. Since I have critiqued Rawls’s ideas about intergenerational justice elsewhere (Fitzpatrick 2003: ch. 7), I shall here limit myself to a discussion of primary goods.
This aspect of time emerges for Rawls within the process of reflective equilibrium. Responding to Musgrave’s accusation that the difference principle would permit the idle to claim their maximin share of social resources, Rawls (2001: 179), assuming a standard working day of eight hours, added sixteen daily hours of non-working time to his index of primary goods. If someone therefore spends their waking hours, say, surfing off the Malibu beach then s/he gains an extra eight hours of leisure compared to those who work a standard day. As the surfer has chosen eight hours of leisure rather than the equivalent income from a standard working day then s/he would be a free rider and so cannot be allowed to claim their maximin share of co-operative resources. The difference principle is therefore a principle of reciprocity (van Parijs 1995: 96–8; White 2003: 58).

Rawls seems to have stipulated sixteen hours of non-working time to correspond to current social norms, i.e. a division of the day into three eight-hour periods of sleep, work and leisure, which the surfer can then be said to have violated. The assumption is consistent with Rawls’s view that political theory must augment the commonplace – through reflective equilibrium – rather than replacing it. But should this existing standard really be treated as the ideal norm?

In the 1960s a great deal of sociological effort was spent on the potential benefits and burdens of the anticipated ‘leisure society’ (Dumazedier 1967). The fact that this leisure society failed to arrive in its widely anticipated form may be due to sociological naivety but is more likely due to the social sublimation of productivity increases. In other words, and under the influence of the New Right, we diverted ourselves away from a leisure society into societies of materialist, possessive individualism as a means of transferring increased wealth away from the more socially progressive ends for which it could have been used. By treating the prevailing eight-hour working day as a norm, then, Rawls is internalizing into his thought the kind of existing social injustices that the difference principle presumably ought to challenge.

By not challenging them sufficiently Rawls’s hunt for the free rider simply ends once the usual suspect has been found. But what if a wealthy businessman is walking along the beach and stops to admire the surfer’s abilities? Should he offer a fee to the surfer in return for his enjoyment and, if he does not, does this mean that the businessman is now the free rider? But for how long? Can the accusation of free-riding be levelled at the surfer again once the businessman has moved along? And what if a political theorist is passing who decides she can get a journal article out of asking and addressing these questions? Is a fee now owed to the surfer and the businessman on pain of the political theorist becoming a free rider? These increasingly absurd questions illustrate the knots we can tie ourselves up with once we allow our theories of time and socio-temporal justice to be dominated by prevailing norms, values and assumptions regardless of their implications for injustice.

Therefore, we can claim that, by being too ready to reify existing norms, Rawls has not provided an adequate incorporation of time into his principles of social justice and, while another article would be needed to demonstrate it, I believe this failure to be indicative of the recent history of political theory. In
order to allow questions of time to converge with those of social justice then, rather than simply following the normal path of Rawlsian and post-Rawlsian developments in the subject (Kymlicka 2002), we therefore have to look further afield towards those who have offered more critical treatments of time than Rawls et al., even if they do not represent the mainstream theoretical literature on social justice. So, for the duration of this article, I am going to set those developments to one side and concentrate instead upon the work of those who have arguably gone furthest in cross-referencing debates on time to those on social justice. But before doing so we need to understand why remaining within a liberal frame of reference is nevertheless appropriate.

By ‘liberal’ I here mean ‘liberal equality’, i.e. the view that, for individual freedom to be properly realized, social background conditions have to involve the reduction and eventual elimination of systemic disadvantages through an equalization in the ownership and control of diverse economic and social (including cultural) resources – though I am leaving open the question of how much equalization is necessary. The meaning of liberal in this context can therefore be identified with the traditions of American liberalism and European social democracy. Why is this the most appropriate framework for our analysis?

Simply because it is that which corresponds most directly to those ideas which inspired the social reforms that brought developed nations in Europe and North America closer to the ideals of social justice than at any other point in their histories, i.e. from the end of the Second World War to the 1980s. And, while the influence of liberalism has waned in recent years, it still provides the clearest support for those institutions, like the welfare state, that for all their faults represent the strongest bulwark against the ideologists of inequality and injustice.

We are now in a position to explore the work of two theorists who have gone the furthest in drawing together issues of time and of social justice from within a critical but nevertheless liberal framework. They both offer important contributions to liberalism, as defined above, by epitomizing what are perhaps the two main schools of liberal thought: the individualistic and collectivist.

Goodin and Gorz

Goodin is a liberal individualist whose commentary on political theory has ranged widely over the last twenty years. Individualism constitutes a principal strand of liberal thought, where the freedom and autonomy of the individual self is the yardstick of social reform. In insisting that movements for social justice can no longer to afford to marginalize issues of time, e.g. by failing to conceive of it as a social resource to which individuals should have access according to principles of just distribution, Goodin articulates an important set of ideas standing at the confluence of time, justice and liberalism. For Goodin, the meaning of free time is supplied by the individual who experiences it: that is what makes free time autonomous.
Gorz’s background is in existentialist Marxism and libertarian socialism. Running throughout Gorz’s work is the notion that, if societies are to be made more just, a collectivist and inter-subjective re-appropriation of social resources (including that of time) is going to be necessary. What characterizes him as a liberal for our purposes is his view that human potential is being stifled by our productivist societies, that the tools we developed to dominate nature are, in turn, dominating us. So, while there are aspects of liberal thought which Gorz certainly rejects (those that are instrumentalist and anti-statist), he is nevertheless content to express this unrealized potential through a vocabulary of rights and self-realization that is more conducive to a liberal framework (Gorz 1999: 64). His is a collectivist approach since, for Gorz, time is always social time. So, if Goodin’s notion of autonomous time is one of individualist ‘freedom from’, Gorz’s notion of social time is much more of a collectivist ‘freedom to’.

I therefore contend that Goodin and Gorz provide a criticalist overview of the issues we need to address while contributing to a liberal framework. In this section I first elaborate upon their basic ideas, offer some criticisms and then begin to suggest how and why their ideas concerning social justice and time might be brought together.

Goodin et al. (1999: 225–36) define ‘combined resource autonomy’ as having enough income to meet basic needs and having enough free time to ensure that life involves more than the mere satisfaction of those basic needs. Full autonomy therefore derives from a combination of adequate resources of both income and time. So although those on inadequate incomes may have lots of available time this is not necessarily free time because they do not possess the combination of resources needed to generate proper autonomy, i.e. quality as well as quantity. It is social democratic nations that have come closest to recognizing this and so to achieving the much-desired ‘work–life balance’, a balance that, as we shall see below, is essential to a political economy of care. Goodin (2001) has gone on to propose that, if they are to move further in this direction, then social democracies must become ‘post-productivist’ in that they must embody a stronger recognition of the value of non-employment activities such as care, so that reductions in working time can be regarded as economically and socially beneficial rather than as another form of financial burden. Goodin therefore lends his support to those who call for more dynamic solutions to the problems of social exclusion, and in this respect policies to encourage households in which employment and caring activities are shared out more equitably are crucial (Goodin et al. 2001), but goes on to insist that this requires much more than the usual emphasis upon the formal economy. In short, Goodin’s notion of combined resource autonomy is a liberal theory of justice, which insists that just distributions of income and time are essential to individuals’ autonomy.

Gorz (1983, 1985, 1989, 1994), too, refers positively to autonomy, contrasting this to time spent in the heteronomous sphere of social necessities, a sphere of activity that Gorz regards as ineliminable even in a socialist society. But by autonomy Gorz does not mean simply leaving people alone to do whatever they wish to do, since this might lead to a situation where the sphere of autonomy
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fails to achieve any real distinction from the sphere of heteronomy, given the extent to which the latter currently dominates social structures and relations. But nor is Gorz advocating a kind of ‘coercive voluntarism’ where we prod people into Orwellian community centres and watch over them as they perform ‘socially meaningful activities’. Instead, Gorz remains within a liberal orbit and talks of enhancing the spaces of freedom by supplying superior opportunities for creativity and social interaction than prevail at present: a Gorzian society would expand and enhance opportunities for self-management and co-operation by freeing up time rather than by reducing the state (Gorz 1989: 169).

Like Goodin, Gorz agrees about the necessity of providing adequate levels of income and free time to all and so both therefore support the introduction of a basic income (BI) (see below). But, whereas Goodin is content to leave social reforms there, Gorz is rather more ‘presumptive’: he is more politically radical (recommending systematic working time reductions, for instance) and puts greater stress on the integrative role of social obligations (cf. Goodin 1992a, 2002).

If these are the basic positions of Goodin and Gorz, and if they therefore pull in opposing (if not hostile) directions vis-à-vis time and social justice, then which should we prefer, the individualistic or collectivist? The problem is that neither appears to be entirely adequate, as I shall now argue.

The limitations of Goodin’s liberal individualism can be illustrated by examining his recent work on democracy. Goodin (2003) provides an interesting and useful contribution to the debate concerning deliberative democracy (Fishkin and Laslett 2003). Insisting that inputs (reasons, motivations, reflection) are as important to the democratic process as outputs (counting votes), Goodin explores how and why deliberation can improve social understanding and so contribute to democratic legitimacy. However, in mass societies there are severe limits on the extent to which such deliberation can actually be discursive, there being too many of us and too many issues and questions to ponder for the usual approaches to deliberative democracy to be truly workable (Dryzek 1990, 1995, 2000; Cohen and Rogers 1995; Benhabib 1996; Bohman 1996; Elster 1998; Young 2001; Goodin 2003: 172–8). It is therefore more realistic to interpret deliberation as an imaginative process that takes place largely within our heads, as acts of creative empathy by which we project ourselves into the perspectives of others and consider social and political questions with reference to an internalized multitude of voices. This ‘democratic deliberation within’ retains the rationale of deliberative democracy but provides a more realistic basis for accommodating the beliefs and preferences of others. Its aim is to shore up existing political institutions rather than to replace them.

Goodin undoubtedly provides the debate with an idea it cannot afford to ignore but there are two reasons why Goodin’s contribution is less effective than it might have been.

First, Goodin’s approach is strangely apolitical in that it makes few noteworthy connections with the contemporary state of liberal democracy and so avoids exploring the ideological implications that the deliberative debate has generated. For instance, in his discussion of social exclusion, Goodin (2003: ch.
10) somehow manages to avoid exploring the significance of social equality and why strong social equality is necessary if participative inputs are not to be dominated by those privileged by material resources and/or cultural status (Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Fitzpatrick 2002). In short, although he is correct to regard ‘democratic deliberation within’ as a supplement, he is rather too quick to append it to the familiar institutions of political representation rather than to an alternative possible set of deliberative institutions and forums that could be said to intervene and mediate between the (large) scale of representative aggregations and the (small) scale of the intrapersonal imagination. This means that, while he would no doubt welcome an expansion in the informal economy of care, he does not consider the extent to which this could represent the ground of such mediated deliberation.

Second, Goodin’s reluctance to get his political hands dirty may be explained by his tendency to bracket off the potential implications of a properly functioning deliberative democracy. He says, for instance, that democratic deliberation within would ‘require people to make various changes in their behaviour, if not their basic character’ (Goodin 2003: 231). This distinction between behaviour and character, as if the latter can remain immune to changes in the former, tracks back to Goodin’s rejection of communitarianism, or, rather, his insistence that liberalism can absorb the key elements of the communitarian critique (the importance of community) without having to make any substantial concessions to the communitarian position on self and society (Kymlicka 2002: 228–44):

Biologically, each ‘individual’ is made by a ‘community’ of two others – but to seize upon that as evidence of communities ‘making’ individuals is akin to the facile attempt to assimilate feminism within orthodox Marxism by pointing out that reproduction is just a form of production like any other. . . . Most of those activities involved in communities ‘making’ individuals amount, more, to ‘influencing’ and ‘imparting’.

(Goodin 2003: 39–40)

So underpinning Goodin’s ideas is a vision of the ‘decently encumbered self’ who can be described as ‘independent and autonomous’ (Goodin 2003: 15). Goodin is obviously fearful of the verb ‘to make’, as if this must imply a self which is nothing more than an embedded social construction, and he must therefore propose a thinner conception of the self whose character floats free of, and so is somehow impervious to, changes in behaviour. So, by imagining that the essential choice is between a decently encumbered self and a ‘fanatically immersed self’, Goodin (2003: 43) squeezes political and social radicalism out of the picture, a radicalism that would deploy deliberative democracy as an alternative to the technocratic instrumentalism of modern societies.

These critiques reflect back upon his notions of time and social justice. By providing an individualistic interpretation of autonomy, Goodin’s version of socio-temporal justice over-emphasizes the importance of removing constraints. For Goodin, autonomous time gives you the discretion to organize your life as you please and is therefore defined somewhat negatively: what you have left over
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from a 168-hour week once the necessities of employment, domestic labour and personal care have been attended to. He would no doubt welcome the situation where many use their discretionary time to build social capital rather than go ‘bowling alone’ but he does not build such considerations into his analysis. Goodin no doubt fears that the alternative would be to prescribe how people should use their free time, i.e. to re-establish constraints and so contradict the very notion of free time, and so his conception of the self – where the internal (character) is impervious to changes in the external (behaviour) – seems designed to forestall this. Yet dictating to people what they should and should not do is not the only alternative. Indeed, unless we expand the range of opportunities for social interaction – challenging the present dominance of working and consuming – then extra free time may lack value even in terms of Goodin’s individualistic framework.

Therefore, Goodin’s version of autonomy perhaps elides the social interdependencies which make the exercise of autonomy either socially meaningful or meaningless, an interdependency that Goodin is reluctant to acknowledge given his preference for a thin conception of the self. Without a reorganization of social structures (which Goodin’s apoliticism seems to rule out) the time for which he would free us might be quantitatively superior but not necessarily qualitatively superior to the free time currently prevailing.

If Goodin’s individualistic approach to time and social justice is problematic should we therefore prefer Gorz’s? There are respects in which Gorz might repair the gaps in Goodin’s approach: he is far from being apolitical, being clearly oriented around socialist and ecological principles, and his is always a social self. And yet Gorz’s approach to what I am calling socio-temporal justice is not without its problems either (see Little 1996; Lodziak and Tatman 1997; Bowring 2001).

A key difficulty lies in the degree of social mobilization that Gorz would require. In order to effect a radical reduction in work time everyone would be obliged to spend a certain amount of time performing heteronomous work, an obligation that presupposes a number of preconditions. First, it would necessitate a large degree of organization and co-ordination to ensure that future increases in productivity are translated into equivalent increases of more free time for all rather than into maldistributions of income. This would mean altering the means of production and distribution through centralized state planning but without such centralization being allowed to threaten the integrity of the autonomous sphere (Gorz 1983: 114). Second, it assumes that heteronomous tasks will be interchangeable and so potentially performable by anyone (Gorz 1985: 146–7). Gorz needs this assumption because only if there are no significant bottlenecks and inflexibilities in the system of labour can the sharing out of heteronomous necessities appear to be feasible. Finally, and most importantly, those who choose not to perform such obligations are denied some or all of the ‘social wage’ generated by the heteronomous labour of others, for without social duties social rights cannot be said to properly exist (Gorz 1989: 205–8; 1994: 96–7). Here we have a performative notion of citizenship as something...
that has to be earned: ‘participation in the social process of production is an essential factor of socialization and of membership in socially formalised communities and groups, even if working time is reduced to less than half the present average’ (Gorz 1992: 182).

There are undoubtedly problems with the assumptions underpinning the first and second of these conditions, but I want to concentrate here upon the final one by offering two important criticisms.

The first difficulty with a thoroughgoing performative conception of citizenship is that the lines people draw around it tend to be weak and arbitrary. Gorz talks about the process of production as being essential to socialization, but, even if this is the case, then why not include other factors also? If, for instance, Doyal and Gough (1991) are correct to regard health as essential to autonomy then surely we should deny health care to those (drug addicts? alcoholics? smokers?) who have foolishly undermined their own degree of autonomy. Gorz does not go this far, of course, because his central concern is with the productive process. But if this is too economistic a focus, and if citizenship really is performative, then there is a wider spectrum of social duties which Gorz is reluctant to acknowledge. Therefore, and as an alternative to Gorz’s formula, citizenship may imply performance, but not necessarily ‘all the way down’, i.e. performance may have to stand upon a basic platform of ‘status citizenship’.

The second problem is this. Is Gorz describing the rights and duties of a future egalitarian society only or a future society plus the stages of transition to that society? The distinction is crucial because the stages of social transition would presumably retain (ever diminishing) levels of class and gender inequality. We would have two options, therefore. Either to accept that those in the disadvantaged groups would enjoy less time over and above their heteronomous obligations, or to raise the work obligations of the advantaged as a means of reducing the obligations of others. So, while the equation of rights and responsibilities that Gorz supports has a prima facie acceptability, it generates a long series of practical and theoretical problems that Gorz has not addressed (Lodziak and Tatman 1997: 112–14).

But perhaps these criticisms are no longer relevant since in recent years Gorz (1999: 85–93) has performed an about face and has come out in favour of an unconditional BI (van Parijs 1992, 1995; Fitzpatrick 1999) for two reasons: first, because the complexities of the contemporary economy would make it extremely difficult to measure when socially necessary work is and is not being performed; second, because certain activities have to be performed for their own sake where the imposition of external conditions upon their execution would render them both more instrumental and so less meaningful. The obligation to care, for example, implies qualities (of spontaneous and unforced emotional attachment) that are damaged when codified in the vocabulary of social obligations much loved by free market conservatives and new social democrats. Yet, while this shift is welcome (to me at least), it leaves Gorz’s ideas about obligation, social justice and political strategy in abeyance. If the principle of unconditionality now seems reasonable, does this render his previous arguments about
social obligations fully or partially superseded? If they are now completely redundant, then where does that leave Gorz’s intellectual project? And, if they are only partially redundant, then how are they to be revised and reformulated? Apart from offering some hints about the importance of grassroots democracy Gorz (1999: 118–26) has not, to my knowledge, yet addressed these questions.

We therefore have two replies to the question posed earlier: what social background conditions are needed to make the release of more free time socially just? Goodin offers more of an individualistic response where institutional reform is to be kept to a minimum and, in relation to deliberative democracy, I have suggested why this is inadequate. By introducing the notion of ‘social meaning’ into his politics of time Gorz recommends a strong top-down collectivism based upon equitable distributions of and between both heteronomous and autonomous work. But this, too, has its problems.

Reconciliations?

So where does this leave us? Can we simply use Goodin to repair the holes in Gorz’s position, and vice versa, in order to devise an all-encompassing liberal theory of socio-temporal justice? Or do we go back to basics and construct a more robust individualist or collectivist theory than that proposed by Goodin or by Gorz respectively? Or do we simply have to start again from scratch? I am going to experiment with the view that we can extract the best from both theorists in order to provide ourselves with the basis of a loosely integrated liberal theory of socio-temporal justice. I am therefore going to outline the main points on which Goodin and Gorz agree in order to assemble a platform upon which a liberal theory of socio-temporal justice can be said to stand.

There are four legs upon which this platform rests. First, both Goodin and Gorz agree that just distributions of time presuppose just distributions of income and wealth. As we have seen, Goodin and his co-authors frame this in terms of a ‘combined resource autonomy’ where both free time and income/wealth are hollow unless accompanied by adequate resources in the other. For Gorz, the sphere of autonomy can only be properly ‘activated’ if the sphere of heteronomy is reformed so that it is no longer a system of labour market domination divided between the included and the marginalized. Therefore, although Gorz works with a conception of social meaning that Goodin eschews, as observed above, they both broadly converge upon a notion of temporal and social egalitarianism where, in terms familiar to the Centre Left, equality and liberty both require and condition one another.

Second, they both agree on the desirability of what, albeit it for different purposes, Giddens calls the ‘democratisation of democracy’ (1998: 70–8). We have already seen why and how Goodin supports the idea of deliberative democracy. Gorz has not systematized his views on democracy but, as noted above, he seems to have swung in favour of a grassroots democracy to counterbalance the top-down social reforms that he has been accused of emphasizing (Frankel 1987).
and perhaps to find a new communal basis for the reciprocity of rights and responsibilities given his recent support for an unconditional BI:

And democratic culture implies just this: that the members of the different communities do not claim their cultural identity to be a ‘given’ which constitutes them in their ‘nature’; that they do not see it as something which can only be ‘deepened’, not questioned or subjected to choice.

(Gorz 1999: 125)

So democratization is a means of uniting disparate cultures and of ensuring that communal identity remains liberal, i.e. contingent: democracy is that which both glues and dissolves community. And, although Goodin neglects to make an explicit connection, even democratic deliberation within must presuppose adequate amounts of time if it is to be truly reflective. For Gorz (1999: 145), the archetypal democratic community would lie within a self-organizing civil society for which greater amounts of free time are a sine qua non. Therefore, both Goodin and Gorz arguably lend support to a ‘democratization of time’ where more time is needed for social dialogue and the point of social dialogue is to consolidate the just distributions mentioned above.

Third, both agree with a large swathe of feminist and ecological thought that our employment-based societies must be subjected to radical form. Of the two the best known is the feminist call for a political economy of care. Many have long argued for an ethic of care as that which counters the more masculinist properties of productivism and rationalism (Tronto 1993). More recently some have insisted that this ethic needs to be embedded in a reformed political economy to be truly effective and meaningful (Williams 2001). As already noted, the much sought ‘work–life balance’ is crucial here. While appearing as the apparently modest demand for a greater equilibrium between employment and non-employment time there are, trailing behind this demand, more far-reaching implications (we return to this in the discussion of New Labour). For instance, achieving a sounder balance for women necessitates that more men also balance ‘work’ and ‘life’ more effectively than at present, a requirement that challenges a host of male/public and female/private divides that underpin policy-making. Additionally, a greater valuation of non-employment work means a decoupling to some extent of income from earnings, though to date this has largely manifested itself in more imaginative forms of maternity and paternity leave, and redistributive policies to ensure that all households can achieve the required equilibrium.

As this political economy of care increasingly becomes a means of assessing different welfare states (Lewis 2001) so it merges with a politics of time. As indicated above, Goodin’s call for a combined resource autonomy pushes in this direction. Both he and Gorz support the uncoupling of work from employment and of income from employment, hence their espousal of a BI. The assumption here seems to be that, although the employment society has increased growth and productivity to the point where we no longer need to be employed for so much of our lives, this society also makes us so dependent upon the wage
contract that we fail to see how the time freed by productive growth can be utilized in ways not restricted to earning and consuming. By being paid irrespective of employment status a BI is the key which unlocks the employment society, even if it cannot, by itself, swing the door fully open.

Fourth, we can infer from their work that Goodin and Gorz both believe a ‘new localism’ to be desirable and credible, though some additional explanation of this is required. Contemporary social theory is infused by those who might be described as ‘post-liberals’, those such as Bauman (2000), Castells (2001), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) and Lash (2002) for whom the local is being reconfigured as global flows rather than sheltered places, as defined by the weblike strands that link them, as the ghettoized interactions of the quick and the slow, as sites from which the most powerful are seen to leave and, as importantly, to which they are seen to return having circumnavigated what to them are the globe’s permeable boundaries. Localities are therefore the instantaneities of timeless time, nomadic spaces within a proliferation of networks for which freedom of access is proportional to one’s freedom of exit. Others, though, have queried this rush to annihilate time. Kamppinen (2000), for example, suggests that collapsing time into timelessness is as one-dimensional a conception as that around which Western imperialist capitalism has revolved – namely, the absolutism of Newtonian time (Postone 1993; Fitzpatrick 2004).

If post-liberalism therefore represents a new closure of time (an anti-absolutism) then the way is left open for a liberalism based upon more plural conceptions of time. One component of this plurality will be natural time. Natural time is consigned by post-liberals to an earlier stage of modernity before nature itself became an atavistic construction of risks, flows or information. Here, those who believe in a real nature are condemned as clinging deludedly to the after-images of modernity. But if we are to avoid the one-dimensionality of post-liberalism then natural time reappears as anterior to risks, flows and information intervene without necessarily transforming it beyond recognition. Therefore, while post-liberalism redefines the environment as another site of reflexive governance and environmentalism as another discourse in a conversation of de-privileged vocabularies (Beck et al. 1994: 49–52; Lash et al. 1996), liberals like Goodin (1992b) and Gorz (1994) prefer to see the environment as a source of objective necessities, e.g. needs and scarcities, and so environmentalism as a rationality that privileges – and is allowed to privilege – some interests over others.

And if room can be made for natural time, then room can also be made for natural space. For, if instantaneity has not yet arrived (Bauman 2000: 119), then, even for post-liberals, natural time and space cannot yet have vanished and if this is so then localities are capable of being reinvented and re-energized. For instance, the information and communication technologies that work to disconnect power from powerlessness can also be used to channel together the shoals of disadvantage and discrimination that are often separated. Such is one interpretation of the movements that have been challenging the arrogance of both
corporate and American government power over recent years (Klein 2002). The new localism, therefore, is not the desire for pre-fabricated, impregnable shelters but the search, with others, for new forms of political and social cooperation through which ‘the slow’ can be connected and ‘the quick’ can be decelerated. It is a natural localism of spaces and times which have not been – and perhaps cannot be – fully absorbed into the social (Adam 1998).

In theorizing environmentalisms that are suspicious of what I have called post-liberalism both Goodin and Gorz contribute to this project. Each seems to conceive of the need for intergenerational justice and so for an intergenerational consciousness – the parameters of which I have explored elsewhere (Fitzpatrick 2003: ch. 7). Goodin (2003: ch. 11) talks at length about how the interests of future generations of humans and non-humans can be taken into account through reflective deliberation. Gorz, too, discusses the importance of inheritance in that what future generations need is not only a clean environment but also the capacity and power to bequeath that environment to their descendants in turn (Bowring 2001: 133–6). The new localism is therefore a means for thinking beyond the immediate and particular, it is a localism without which the non-local is less likely to be brought into view. We certainly ought to be wary of simply projecting ourselves into the perspective of future generations – of universalizing contemporary particularisms – but in their commitment to democratic open-endedness both Goodin and Gorz seem to insist that this can be done without relapsing into the rhetorics of post-liberalism.

We therefore have four elements of a liberal theory of socio-temporal justice: (1) the idea that just distributions of time and of income/wealth go together, (2) a conception of the democratization of time, (3) support for the decoupling of income and work from employment, so contributing to a political economy of care and (4) a new localism based upon natural (pre-social) space and time. Despite their disagreements, then, there is some degree of consensus between Goodin and Gorz regarding the background conditions needed to make the release of more free time socially just.

Earlier, I claimed that social and public policies were adrift because of the failure to develop an adequate theory of time and social justice. Many policymakers and researchers are certainly aware that time in contemporary society is distributed unfairly but there is less evidence of strategic and long-term thinking in seeking to critique and correct this state of affairs, certainly in the UK. The rest of this article therefore has two aims. First, to test whether the above ideas might have a practical, policy-related application by seeing if the theory can offer a distinctive, coherent and effective critique of recent welfare reforms which have had time and justice as a central theme. Second, to explore whether the theory can form the basis of the kind of long-term strategic approach currently missing. What follows is necessarily speculative and tentative but can hopefully provide a platform for further development at a later date.
New Labour’s policies of time

There are three recent trends in social policy that I wish to examine: life-course dynamics, work–life balance and flexible retirement.

Life-course dynamics

This debate is allied to the discourse of social exclusion rather than to poverty per se, in that, while the latter concept is alleged to offer only static snapshots of distributive hierarchies, the former is supposed to provide a dynamic film of horizontal movements in and around the poverty line across a much longer (diachronic) timeline. One example of life-course research will suffice.

Leisering and Leibfried (1999) observe that most life histories periodically demonstrate some degree of poverty: poverty is not a fixed characteristic of certain disadvantaged groups but is a life event, reaching well into the middle class, that we negotiate our way through using state welfare institutions. Socio-economic structures exist but within those hierarchies can be found a diversity of biographical trajectories. Poverty transcends class boundaries as a temporal dynamic of all income groups. Therefore, the objective duration of poverty has to be understood in terms of the subjective orientations of poor individuals, i.e. how they contextualize that experience in terms of their life histories, using public institutions as coping strategies. What this implies is that we, including the poorest, are all competent actors who determine the course of their lives within certain constraints. In so far as it is confined to transitional periods in individuals’ lives, the trick is to devise life-course policies that use poverty strategically by constructing institutional supports that offer bridges through those periods (Esping-Andersen 1999). Some vertical redistribution is justifiable but, ultimately, these transitional bridges must be built upon updated forms of social insurance.

Life-course dynamics therefore appeals to those who have wished to construct new forms of social democracy within which vertical redistribution is less important. But whereas the social democratic traditions of mainland Europe still make room for a great deal of egalitarianism even within this framework (Esping-Andersen 2003), in the UK life-course dynamics has been allied by supporters of the ‘Third Way’ to a much weaker form of social equality. Giddens (2001: 112), for instance, approves of the above research in so far as it reinforces his call for a post-socialist politics based upon self-help, individual responsibility, positive welfare and a social investment state. And the comment of Geoff Mulgan, head of the Downing Street Policy Unit, to the effect that only those in the bottom 8–10 per cent of income distribution could be defined as truly poor also reflects the view that, since deprivation is of temporary duration for most people, New Labour’s emphasis upon targeted (and conditional) assistance is more effective than the ‘old-fashioned’ preference for redistributive universalism. In the UK context, then, life-course dynamics has emerged
around a controversy between those who wish to support the Centre Left’s shift towards ‘horizontal’ policies of inclusion and those who wish to challenge it (Walker 2001).

By drawing upon the above outline of socio-temporal justice, as derived from the work of Goodin and Gorz, we might make the following criticisms of the New Labour version of life-course strategies. First, rather than conjoining just distributions of time with those of income/wealth, it anticipates a need for only modest adjustments to the pattern of income and wealth that New Labour inherited from the conservatives. Raising the floor has been regarded as much more important than lowering the ceiling and, although Tony Blair pledged to end child poverty in twenty years, the evidence to date is that this target will be missed by a considerable margin (HMSO 2003). Even some erstwhile supporters of Third Way philosophy have complained that New Labour’s moderate ambitions vis-à-vis social equality render its emphasis upon reciprocity and responsibility rather hollow (see White 2001). Therefore, New Labour has less a theory of just distributions than a philosophy oriented around the realities of electoral expediency.

Second, there has been little evidence to date of a democratization of time. New Labour’s early years were characterized by a top-down model of political command and social change, even in its policies of devolution and decentralization, allied to a culture of media spin and control. More recently, it has warmed to the idea of localized autonomy and democracy but has done so within a discourse of market competition that has barely tried to square the circle of diversity and equality (cf. Hirst 1994), let alone introduce ideas of deliberative democracy and time.

Third, its overwhelming strategy for social inclusion has been employment based. Having accepted and adapted the Right’s view that dependency equals welfare dependency, and that welfare dependency is morally and economically debilitating, New Labour has sought a labour market within which all but a few adults of working age are in employment. With this goal in mind it has hesitated to introduce reforms that would give employers an excuse to shed jobs: the minimum wage has been set at modest levels and, although New Labour accepted the European Union ruling that forty-eight hours should be the maximum compulsory working week, it exempted more occupations from the ruling than any other EU country. So, although some have attempted to see within New Labour’s patchwork of tax credits, benefit reforms and minimum wages the embryo of a BI (Jordan et al. 2000), this is at best an income guarantee which resembles a negative income tax rather than the decoupling of work and income from employment that Goodin and Gorz regard as essential (Fitzpatrick 1999: ch.5).

Finally, and following on from this, New Labour has demonstrated little empathy for the idea of natural space and time. Feminist critics complain that its employment-based approach threatens the ethic of care upon which domestic work and attention is based (Williams 2001), with New Labour applying to caring responsibilities a discourse of economic rationality that cannot be
properly translated into the sphere of inter-personal dependencies (Barlow and Duncan 2000). Furthermore, while it has made some of the right noises about the environment, its enthusiasm for globalized capitalism means that it has interpreted as ‘protectionist’ the fair trade policies advocated by Greens and others within the Global Justice Movement that crystallized after Seattle in 1999. New Labour has made the connection between social and environmental degradation but without fully acknowledging the extent to which the cure for the former (growth and competition) can also be the cause of the latter. Indeed, its economics seems to be based upon a conception of permanent revolution in which people are expected to be constantly updating their skills, qualifications, networks, portfolios and jobs, where anything apparently unproductive is suspected.

In short, the UK version of life-course dynamics has, rather than pointing the way towards a politics of socio-temporal justice as advocated by Goodin and Gorz, become trapped within an unnecessary and ineffective rejection of ‘old’ social democracy.

Work–life balance

Similar criticisms appear under the heading of work–life balance. This has become an important topic in recent years for several reasons: increases in the number of women entering the job market having knock-on effects on child care and familial relationships; the need for employment generation in order to finance welfare spending as concerns about indigenous pressures (e.g. ageing populations) and exogenous pressures (e.g. globalization) have multiplied (Gershuny 2000; Tausig and Fenwick 2001; OECD 2002; Guest 2002; May 2004). The debate assumes that significant conflict exists between employment and non-employment activities, usually because over-commitments at the workplace – especially in dual-earner households – leaves less time than might be wished for domestic roles, responsibilities and activities. Apart from the obvious difficulties of defining and measuring the various relevant concepts, e.g. due to spillovers between employment time, (non-employment) work time and leisure time, an obvious problem concerns the meaning of balance. Since different people will mean different things by balance should we simply orientate policy around these multiple interpretations? If so, then a work–life balance could be regarded as the capacity of individuals to choose the appropriate balance between employment and non-employment activities with a minimum of conflict between the two. In other words, we should be talking about choice and capacity rather than balance per se so that policy reform can get on with the business of removing the various private- and public-sector constraints on choice that exist.

However, in addition to these external constraints there may also be ‘internal’ constraints that we should not ignore. An obvious example concerns the gendered expectations whereby many working women face the double burden of wage-earning and care-giving, i.e. their increased participation in the labour
market has not significantly reduced the amount of domestic chores falling on women. Additionally, it may be that while, in societies of consumerist individualism, people often choose to work long hours, e.g. out of fear that if they leave the treadmill they might be able to get back on later, they would also make different decisions if faced with an alternative opportunity set. The debate cannot ignore such internal factors yet acknowledging them makes the work of policy reformers that much harder, since interventions into the processes of cultural socializations are difficult to make directly (Crooker et al. 2002).

There is much research suggesting that the UK’s record on work–life balance is the worst in the European Union (e.g. Industrial Society 2001; Warren forthcoming) – although even the more welfare advanced nations are encountering problems of one sort or another (Johansson 2002). For instance, in their report of a project initiated under the EU’s Fifth Framework, Cousins and Tang (2003) underline the distinctiveness of the UK: British men work the longest (and the most unsocial) hours, as do British fathers; British men and women are more likely to express a desire to reduce their working hours in order to spend more time with families; part-time workers in the UK, most of whom are women, are most disadvantaged in terms of pay, promotion, tenure and employment protection, although part-time jobs do permit at least some degree of control over time-schedules. What explains the UK’s lamentable record? It must to some extent be due to the rush towards deregulation, flexibility and privatization that began under the conservative government in the 1980s. For instance, as more of public-sector functions have been contracted out into the private sphere, there is evidence to suggest that workers become more vulnerable as a result (IPPR 2002). However, we cannot ignore the masculinist and industrialist assumptions that are stamped into the British social psyche whereby it has proved a lot easier to get women out of the home than to get men into it, meaning that the UK has barely inched towards the ‘two-thirds economies’ emerging elsewhere (Visser 2002).

Against this background New Labour has talked a good talk about the need for change and, as Driver and Martell observe (2002: 212–17), there is no inherent conflict between a jobs-based approach to social inclusion and the government’s stated commitments to families and parents, reflected in recent improvements in maternity and paternity leave. Nevertheless, New Labour has done little to reverse the deregulationist approach of its predecessor, preferring to issue moral persuasions and voluntary guidelines in order not to alienate business (Dean 2002), and failing to distinguish between forms of flexibility that are employer-friendly and those which are employee-friendly. Critics therefore accuse it of under-performing with respect to child-care provision, gender inequalities within the labour market, part-time working conditions and lone parents (Rake et al. 2000; Lewis 2001; Land 2002). With lone parents in particular New Labour has trapped itself between an integrationist discourse (stressing the advantages to parent and child of paid work), a maternalist discourse (emphasizing the virtues of mothering) and a moralistic discourse (where lone mothers, teenage ones especially, are classified in terms of a
dependent, unproductive and exploitative underclass) without recognizing the many contradictions at work here, still less unravelling them (cf. Levitas 1998; Rowlingson and Millar 2002). In short, New Labour has made only modest inroads into the work–life imbalances it inherited from the conservatives.

The liberal theory of socio-temporal justice permits us to bring such criticisms together under the heading of a progressive politics which embraces the interface of the social and the temporal. First, because New Labour conceives of redistribution as occurring almost entirely through the wage packet, its ‘work-first’ approach has obsessed about the quantity of employment rather than the actual quality of the jobs on offer, despite the obvious effects that the latter has upon the boundaries between workplace and home. To the extent that it has associated income/wealth with time it seems to have done so by imagining that justice in the latter follows simply from increases in labour market participation: that once voluntary unemployment is at a minimum employers will be forced to respond to the demands of their workers for family-friendly schedules or risk losing good will and productivity. So, although New Labour acknowledges problems with Britain’s ‘long hours culture’, it has trusted to the market relations of supply and demand to provide the solution.

Second, therefore, time has been conceived as a form of market commodification – where free time flows from the demands of market actors – rather than located in terms of the decommodified spaces which both Goodin and Gorz theorize. So, third, far from uncoupling either work or income from employment, New Labour has been strengthening the links by shifting towards workfare-like compulsion and, for reasons of electoral psychology more than anything, by adopting the American approach of transferring income through the tax rather than through the benefit system, given the hegemonic associations of the latter (which New Labour has perpetuated) with ‘handouts’ and ‘charity’. Finally, despite the maternalist discourse which has occasionally surfaced, New Labour’s support for the virtues of caring has not translated into anything like a political economy of care, which, as argued above, is necessary for social progress on a number of fronts.

Flexible retirement

The demographic panic that once characterized this debate has subsided to some extent but, more importantly, those who insist that the only way of meeting the demands of an ageing population is to privatize and deregulate (OECD 1994) have had their arguments challenged and largely dismissed (Barr 2002). Even so, most welfare states are facing tests to their pension and employment systems of one form or another, with the following four strategies for coping with those tests being the most prominent.

The first option is to raise the retirement age in order to release funds, both now and in the future, that can be used for other purposes (Brooks et al. 2002). Taqi (2002: 111–12) reveals that retirement ages across developed nations are in
fact creeping upwards so that the standard age of retirement is slipping from 60–65 to 65–70. Second, if we did not wish to work for longer we might choose to accept lower incomes during our years of retirement, though the possible implications of this for pensioner poverty and social expenditure are obvious. The third option is either to encourage people to save more for their retirement, through financial incentives, or to compel them to save by raising taxes or raising public and private insurance contributions. Governments, though, are electorally nervous about this approach. These three options suggest a trade-off, a trilemma, between work, income and savings (see Figure 1).

If we do not wish to work for longer then we will have to accept either lower retirement incomes and/or higher pre-retirement savings; if we do not want lower incomes then we will either have to work for longer and/or save more; and if we do not wish to save more then we will either have to accept lower incomes and/or work for longer. The final option that is available to governments hoping to avoid the worst of this trilemma is to improve job opportunities for older people by promoting training, job search (including part-time jobs), workplace flexibility, cultural changes (and redefinitions of what we mean by social participation) and tackling age discrimination, what Alan Walker (2002) calls ‘active ageing’.

This, to date, has been New Labour’s preferred option, given the relative modesty of its pension reforms. New Labour’s strategy has been to shift pension provision so that the current ratio of 60/40 in favour of the public sector is inverted in favour of the private (DSS 1998). To this end, the government has

Figure 1 The pensions trilemma
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introduced employer-administered stakeholder pensions and a second state pension for the low-paid, though the value of the latter will wither over time as the government anticipates that most of the low paid will be covered by stakeholder schemes. Critics argue that these changes imply the death knell for social insurance. With New Labour also introducing a means-tested minimum income guarantee for pensioners, with pension credits being introduced in 2003 to cope with the resulting savings trap, with the basic and second state pensions eventually withering in value and due to inadequacies in the stakeholder system, critics allege that means-testing is becoming the bedrock of retirement for half of UK pensioners (Hewitt 2002: 201–4). It may even be that New Labour has begun to accept such criticisms since its most recent reforms are beginning to grasp the nettle of the above trilemma more directly. The government rejects the option of lowering retirement incomes and so prefers to see a rise in savings rates (though so far without a compulsory element) with various inducements for people to stay in the labour market for longer (DWP 2002). Interestingly, the compulsory retirement age of 65 is being scrapped not by raising it (67 or 70 have been alternatives floated in the past) but by shifting towards the idea of flexible, phased or part-time retirement by making it easier for people to combine pensions with earnings once they are 60 years or over. This seems to go some way to meeting what academic analysts have long been calling for (Schulz 2002).

So what, from the perspective of socio-temporal justice, is wrong with any of this? The main problem is that the trade-off between work, income and saving is largely (if not entirely) interpreted horizontally, i.e. across the life-course of individuals, rather than vertically, i.e. with a view to reducing inequalities between socio-economic classes. For Goodin and Gorz the latter is essential. New Labour’s preference for means testing may mean that the incomes of poorer pensioners are raised, but, by effectively abolishing Beveridge’s legacy of social insurance, the status of poorer pensioners is, if anything, worsened. Further, while the shift from retirement age to a pension age is welcome, this may easily become a Trojan horse for increases in the de facto age of retirement for the millions of working-age adults and pensioners on low incomes who will have to work longer than their more affluent peers. With enough evidence available to suggest that class affects longevity (Wilkinson 1996), New Labour’s reluctance to address vertical inequalities head on is worrying. So, while the government is here making links between income, wealth and time, these are piecemeal and technocratic reforms which do not add up to a coherent stance inspired by principles of social justice.

An alternative might be to introduce differential pension ages so that those on higher incomes and/or born into higher socio-economic classes have to work for longer before their pension funds (public and private) can be converted into annuities. Putting aside the problem of how this could be administered, let alone introduced,4 the rationale is to replace the present taxation of time (where the lives of the poorest are shortened by social inequalities) with another form of temporal taxation where the greater the inequalities of income then the greater the difference between the pension age of the poorest and those of the more
affluent. What this reform would amount to is a democratization of time in two senses: first, because it would necessitate deliberation (at individual and social levels) about the value of income relative to time, values that are at present determined largely by natural and social inheritances; second, if the working lives of the poorest were shortened then individuals could be left to decide whether the balance of free time is experienced during youth, old age or intermittently, a choice that would necessitate some form of BI or basic capital scheme to replace the loss of earnings (Ackerman and Alstott 1999; White 2003: ch.8). Either way it would mean uncoupling employment from income and work to some extent at least. And finally, the idea of taking time out and biasing this, at least initially, in favour of the materially disadvantaged is consistent with a new localism in which less of our lives is spent around the imperatives of preparing for, experiencing and recuperating from employment.

In short, our theory of socio-temporal justice reveals the shortcomings of prevailing notions of flexible retirement and suggests an alternative approach.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to help repair a neglect in recent political philosophy, as illustrated by Rawls who spliced time retrospectively into his theory of justice rather than assimilating its importance at earlier and more essential stages. I then compared and contrasted the work of Goodin and Gorz, two thinkers who attempt to do this and so arguably go further than most other political philosophers. Having criticized both theorists for various reasons, I then attempted to draw upon the strengths of each in outlining a liberal theory of socio-temporal justice, one in which issues of time are allowed to converge more directly than hitherto with issues of social justice. This is not to claim that the individualism of Goodin and the collectivism of Gorz are perfectly assimilable but it is to establish a framework to ‘pump-prime’ some new approaches and from within which further analysis can occur. I then used this outline to examine some recent developments in UK welfare reform, specifically: life-course dynamics, work–life balance and flexible retirement. In each case I provided reasons for doubting whether New Labour’s assumptions and ideas have been taking us in the right direction. If these doubts are convincing then we have reason to mistrust the broad focus of Third Way social democracy. Therefore, we have explored the theory’s political location vis-à-vis current social developments and, inter alia, its potential for further development.

I have suggested that there is some real potential here in that, even in embryonic form, the theory reveals the shortcomings of current welfare reforms and begins to suggest some alternative strategies. Such strategies involve making greater room for egalitarian redistributions of time from advantaged to disadvantaged groups and evolving a politics of post-productivism and post-employment by allowing political economies of care, sustainability and democratic deliberation to emerge.
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Notes

1 This is peculiar since he is certainly identifiable as someone of the environmental Left. Nevertheless, he has always sought to establish a ‘minimalist consensus’ when exploring philosophical and social issues and has veered away from too conflictual a stance (e.g. Goodin 1988).
2 20,000 hours across a lifetime is a favourite figure (e.g. Gorz 1985: 41; 1989: 195).
3 Note, I am not using the term as it has been used in recent UK social policy debates.
4 And I noted the problems of middle-class revolt in my earlier discussion of Gorz.

References
