

article

The 'official' social justice: an examination of the Coalition government's concept of social justice

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This article examines the official concept of social justice, as advanced by the Coalition government in the UK between 2010 and 2015. The article begins with a discussion of some traditional comprehensions of social justice and summarises its recent use by political parties prior to 2010. A short section on methodology precedes a sketching out of five interconnected themes of: dehistoricised; localisation and individualisation; residualisation; work; and innovation and commodification. The article concludes with a brief summary of the official understanding of social justice and a look forward to its future use by the government.

key words social justice • coalition government • welfare reform • poverty

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Introduction

Social justice has appeal across the political spectrum but, in recent times, it is the Conservative party who have spoken most successfully about social justice in the UK. David Cameron called social justice 'one of the priorities for the modern Conservative party' (in Lister and Bennett, 2010). He referred to Iain Duncan Smith, a former Leader of the party and former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions as 'the most determined champion for social justice this Party has ever had' (Telegraph online 2013). The Conservative-led Coalition government published a raft of social justice documents, including the first UK government Social Justice Strategy (SJS). Duncan Smith himself established the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) think-tank and has spoken of the government's policy of a 'benefits cap' as 'social justice in action' (Stone, 2015). Theresa May, in her first speech as Prime Minister, spoke of Cameron's 'true legacy' being social justice and not the economy (May, 2016).

This article examines the official governmental concept of social justice that May has inherited, arguing that it is inconsistent with other theories and understandings of the concept. While the work of CSJ has been subjected to critique (Lister and Bennett, 2010; Slater, 2014) the official concept of social justice advanced in government documents has, to date, largely escaped similar attention (Hayton and

McEnhill, 2015, 140–3 is an exception). The article begins with a discussion of some traditional comprehensions of social justice and summarises its recent use by political parties prior to 2010. A short section on methodology precedes a sketching out of five interconnected themes of: *dehistoricised*; *localisation and individualisation*; *residualisation*; *work*; and *innovation and commodification*. The article concludes with a brief summary of the official concept of social justice and a look forward to its future use by the government.

Social justice

In acknowledging the growing Conservative interest in the concept, Lister argues that ‘the political debate is no longer about the desirability of social justice. Instead, it now concerns its meaning(s) and how it is best achieved’ (Lister, 2007, 113). She highlights two paradigms within social justice – (re)distribution and recognition – and notes that Nancy Fraser has proposed that a paradigm of representation or ‘voice’ should be viewed as a third dimension of social justice. The distribution paradigm can perhaps be best summed up by David Miller’s (1999, 1) assertion that social justice is about ‘how the good and bad things in life should be distributed among the members of a human society’.

John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* is arguably the most influential contribution to discussions on the concept of social or distributive justice in the last 50 years. He argues that: ‘the primary subject of (social) justice is the basic structure of society, or more exactly, the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation’ (Rawls, 1999, 6)

Rawls defends this choice of subject by highlighting the profound nature of the effects of the structure of society, noting that the place in the structure that people are born into has undeniable consequences for their potential outcomes in life. Rawls sets out two (or three – Wolff, 2008, 18) principles of justice which focus on: equal rights for all (the *liberty* principle); and the arrangement of social and economic inequalities, so that they can both be expected to be to everyone’s advantage (the *difference* principle) and are attached to positions and offices open to everyone (the *fair opportunity* principle, Rawls, 1999, 53). It is the difference principle that has been called Rawls’ ‘most distinctive contribution’ (Wolff, 2008, 18) and has led to the argument that his theory is based on absolute priority for the ‘worst-off’, and that we should judge the justness of any given society by how it treats its worst-off and most marginalised members.

Rawls’ work, however, is not without its critics (see, for example Sen, 1992; Dworkin, 2000) and there are alternative theories about how resources and holdings can and should be distributed. Robert Nozick developed the concept of ‘entitlement theory’ which is based on principles relating to individuals’ entitlement to a ‘holding’, being through just processes of acquisition or transfer and no other arrangements (Nozick 1974, 151).

Nozick believed that (re)distribution by other means, such as theft and fraud, but also by taxation, was unjust, hence the need for a ‘principle of rectification’. Ronald Dworkin has argued against Rawls’ work on the basis that it doesn’t include a consideration of responsibility in relation to why ‘the worst off’ were in the position they were. If people chose not to work, or not to work hard, and were thus

disadvantaged, then, Dworkin argued, it would be unfair to redistribute resources from hard-working groups to lazier, more feckless groups. Both Dworkin and Amartya Sen have further critiqued Rawls by highlighting that income and wealth, which were central pillars of Rawls' work, ignore the fact that some people, such as those with limiting illnesses and disabilities, may require extra resources in order to achieve the same level of welfare as others. Sen's influential work, often in collaboration with Martha Nussbaum, has instead focused on the extent to which each individual is able to achieve their full capabilities.

The recognition paradigm within social justice highlights the domination and oppression that many people are subject to and extends the concept to include not just economic or distributive justice, but issues of cultural or symbolic injustice as well (Lister, 2007, 116). Iris Marion Young has highlighted 'how broad structures of the division of labour, hierarchical decision-making power, and processes of normalisation inhibit the ability of some people to develop and exercise their capacities while offering wide opportunity to others' (Young, 2008, 78)

Other recognition theorists (see Lister 2008 for an introduction) have spoken of 'status subordination', the need for 'parity of participation' and discussed the humiliation and disrespect associated with the lack of recognition (Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

Social justice, then, although often viewed as a concept to be pored over and 'discussed at an abstract, perhaps refined, level by political and economic philosophers' (Piachaud, 2008a, 34) is generally perceived to be about the impact of the structures and institutions of society on the lives of all its people, with a sometime strong regard for the impact felt by the most marginalised and disadvantaged. It is therefore an issue which has occupied politicians of different colours, and to different degrees. The various post-war policies and approaches of the Labour (Page, 2008; Tomlinson, 2008; Piachaud, 2008b) and Conservative (Bochel, 2010; Hickson, 2010) parties in respect of poverty and social justice have been covered extensively elsewhere and so these longer histories will not be covered in detail. More recently, Margaret Thatcher's deep respect for the work of Friedrich Hayek, who believed that social justice was a 'hollow incantation' meant that she had little time for the concept (Hayek, 1976, xii). The attention here focuses on the ways in which the concept has been employed since the advent of New Labour.

A Commission on Social Justice, established by the late John Smith MP during his time as Leader of the Labour party but reporting under the leadership of Tony Blair, suggested that 'the UK need not be the tired, resentful, divided and failing country it is today' (Commission on Social Justice/Institute for Public Policy Research, 1994: 1). Their final report makes the case for a social justice that appears close to Dworkin's approach that emphasises responsibility – one 'that demands and promotes economic success' (1994, 1) with a key feature being the building of an 'intelligent' welfare state. Such a state 'must offer a hand-up, not just a hand-out' (1994, 8), because 'Social benefits have to be paid for, and the economy will not sustain limitless transfers from a diminishing section of society to an increasing class of the destitute' (1994, 18–19).

The concept of social justice was never more than an overarching theme for New Labour, with a more explicit policy focus on tackling social exclusion and the eradication of child poverty. Blair's symbolically important first speech as Prime Minister at the Aylesbury Estate highlighted a focus on the most socially excluded individuals – 'a workless class' – and the need to 'reconnect them' to society. In a

brief examination of the application of social justice principles under New Labour, Burchardt and Craig (2008, 2) argue that the establishment of the Social Exclusion Unit in the early days of Blair's first government, and its subsequent focus on the most marginalised individuals such as homeless people, teenage runaways, and teenage parents, suggest a move away from attempts to improve society and address inequalities for the benefit of all.

In Tony Blair's speech in 1999 when he made the pledge to 'eradicate' child poverty by 2020, however, he set out his vision of what social justice was. Blair argued that social justice was about 'decency', 'merit', 'responsibility', 'fairness' and 'values'. Despite the mention of poverty and social justice in the same speech, Driver (2008, 164) argued that 'a persistent criticism of New Labour is that, like the New Right, it has separated policies to address poverty from claims to social justice'. Driver also states that while New Labour helped to reduce poverty among certain groups it 'failed to resolve the fundamental inequalities of wealth and income that are the main drivers of poverty across society' (Driver, 2008, 165).

On the other side of the political spectrum, a number of recent Conservative 'modernising' leaders have been linked with a 'compassionate Conservatism' which has sought to incorporate the concept of social justice. William Hague and Iain Duncan Smith, during their leaderships, both embraced this approach. While the 'traditional' Conservative approaches favoured by Michael Howard represented a brief hiatus, the election of David Cameron as Leader in 2005 at least restored the rhetoric of compassionate Conservatism (Page, 2010, 148–9). Shortly after becoming Leader, Cameron established six policy groups, including a Social Justice Policy Group, chaired by Duncan Smith and tasked with 'refashioning the Conservative approach to poverty and social justice' (Page, 2010, 149). This work was carried out in partnership with CSJ, the 'independent' think-tank, established by Duncan Smith in 2004.

It is Duncan Smith, who is most closely associated with the Conservatives (re) discovery of social justice. The influential Conservative Home website argued that 'What brought Duncan Smith back from the land of the political dead was his passion for social justice' (Goodman, 2013). Duncan Smith set up CSJ following a visit to Easterhouse in Glasgow in 2002, around ten years after Labour's Commission on Social Justice visited the same estate. The *Daily Herald* called Duncan Smith's visit the 'Easterhouse Epiphany' and suggested that he 'came, saw and converted to a radical new form of Conservatism' (Collins, 2002). Duncan Smith himself has talked about the profound impact the visit had on him, claiming it was a sort of Damascene point' (Derbyshire, 2010).

Duncan Smith established CSJ, which now proudly proclaims on its website that it is 'putting social justice at the heart of British politics', following a promise he made to Janice Dobbie, an Easterhouse mother who had lost her son to a drug-related death shortly before meeting Duncan Smith. CSJ helped to popularise the 'broken Britain' narrative and their work has been subjected to robust academic critiques which have highlighted the stigmatising portrayal of disadvantaged groups in their publications and press releases (see, for example, Hancock and Mooney, 2012; Slater, 2014). When a Conservative-led coalition government was formed in 2010, it gave Duncan Smith the opportunity to implement many of his ideas about social justice.

Methodology

Official government documents relating to social justice were critically examined using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998, 29–53). Based on prior theories of social justice, a theory-driven code approach was developed, with the analytic emphasis on looking for thematic departures from other, more 'traditional', theories of social justice. Initial codes were reviewed and, in some cases, refined and/or re-written (Boyatzis, 1998, 36).

The limitation of only using official government documents means that the publications, press releases and rhetorical interventions of CSJ are outside the remit of this article. The focus here is strictly on the official concept of social justice, and not on the accompanying unofficial, or informal, supporting rhetoric. The advent of the SJS came when an official version of social justice was published, one which carried the full force of the state behind it. Pierre Bourdieu (1989, 22) has argued that official discourses, authorised by the state, carry more weight than many others because they impose a point of view that is 'instituted as legitimate' and that 'everyone has to recognise'.

The official version of social justice is not just being spoken or written about, it is also being *operationalised* via the SJS and a wider political programme of work promoting the 'delivery' of social justice. Shortly after the publication of the SJS a Social Justice Outcomes Framework was published, setting out priorities, how progress would be measured and what the government wanted to achieve. Two progress reports (referred to here as *One year on* (HM Government, 2013a) and *Progress report* (HM Government, 2014)) have followed showing how the government is 'delivering' social justice and three annual Social Justice Conferences have been held. A Social Justice Cabinet Committee has been formed. April 2014 was identified as Social Justice month, promoted by an official government Twitter account (@socjusticegov) and the now obligatory hashtags – #SJmonth2014 and #sjpledge2014.

A 'new' social justice?

The intention here is to highlight five broad inter-connected themes that emerge from the government's social justice publications and communications, and discuss them in relation to other theories of social justice. References are for the SJS (HM Government, 2012), unless otherwise indicated.

De-historicised

The official government SJS states simply that 'Social Justice is about making society function better – providing the support and tools to help turn lives around' (2012) and aligns it with a 'challenging new approach to tackling poverty in all its forms' (2012, 4). The strategy is linked to the government's strategies on social mobility and child poverty: if the Social Mobility Strategy 'is about ensuring people are able to move up the social ladder, regardless of background, this Social Justice Strategy is about ensuring everybody can put a foot on that ladder' (2012, 4).

The official concept of social justice rhetoric is presented as a radical break from previous government work to address disadvantage, but it is unclear on which previous understanding(s) of social justice the SJS is based. When Iain Duncan Smith

was previously asked by a journalist what social justice was primarily about, if not distribution, he gave a 'startlingly muddled' response: 'I mean to improve the quality of people's lives, which gives people the opportunity to improve their lives. In other words, so people's quality of life is improved' (in Derbyshire, 2010). Similarly, at no point during their existence has CSJ ever clarified what they mean by 'social justice' (Slater, 2014, 953).

While most theories of social justice set out 'ideal' and therefore radical situations, such as Rawls's argument that inequalities should be to everyone's advantage, the official concept of social justice appears more minimalist in its aim to 'make society function better'. Rawls's view that 'the primary subject of justice is the basic structure of society' is eschewed in favour of a version of social justice which leaves the basic structure of society (the 'ladder') unchanged, but 'functioning better'. Where Rawls was concerned with the positions into which people were born, the SJS sets out the government's vision for a 'second chance society' (HM Government, 2012, 1) implicitly suggesting that everyone has access to (more or less) equal first chances.

Structural issues such as race, gender and disability barely feature in the SJS and the words 'redistribution' and 'recognition' do not feature once in the document. The words 'freedom' and 'capabilities' or their derivatives are rarely mentioned in official social justice documents, although 'responsibility' does feature slightly more often, across a range of policy areas. Mention of class and material and cultural inequalities is similarly absent. Cross-departmental work on social justice in Whitehall does not include the Treasury which effectively precludes the potential role of (re)distribution in the official concept of social justice. The official social justice seeks to minimise the role and influence of the central state further, instead focusing on the roles of 'individuals and organisations working at the grassroots, from local charity and community leaders to local authorities and agencies' (2012, 11).

The *dehistoricised* and *minimalist* official social justice, then, which satisfies itself with 'keeping young people on track' and 'ensuring that interventions provide a fair deal for the taxpayer' echoes Slater's (2014, 965) argument that the concept 'has never been part of Conservative intellectual history' which, instead, is more focused on 'avoiding social breakdown' than radical, transformational change.

Localisation and individualisation

As highlighted above, social justice is depicted as a localised issue, with the delivery of social justice being devolved to 'grassroots' organisations and junior, street-level bureaucrats and charity workers. The concomitant focus within the SJS on small numbers of individuals experiencing 'multiple disadvantages', and 'troubled families', represents another point of departure from many conceptions of social justice which tend to focus on structural and institutional issues rather than individuals.

Although there is a strong rhetorical commitment to social justice from central government, it is expected that it will need 'to be driven forward at a local level' (2012, 11). One of the five principles of the official social justice is 'Recognising that the most effective solutions will often be designed and delivered at a local level' (2012, 4). The SJS also states that

Locally-designed and delivered solutions are critical here. This Government is clear that individuals and organisations working at the grassroots, from

local charity and community leaders to local authorities and agencies, are best placed to make decisions about how improvements can be made to the way services are delivered in their area. (2012, 11)

The focus on 'life chances' within the SJS, the adoption of a 'lifecycle approach' (2012, 13), and the use of case studies of individuals within the strategy and accompanying social justice communications ensures that the official social justice revolves firmly around individuals who, given the right 'tools', and support from local services, can 'transform their lives' and 'lift themselves out of poverty'. The SJS introduces us to a range of individuals, used as examples of the need for a 'new' approach to tackling poverty and social injustice: 'Barry' is the first such example:

Barry was drug dependent, as was his father before him. His mother, an alcoholic, split from Barry's father and met another man, at whose hands Barry was physically abused. Barry was taken into care. Barry was drinking by the time he was 10, using cannabis by 11 and heroin at 15. Quickly turning to crime to fund his habit, he spent the next 17 years in and out of prison: "I was messed up in a really bad way. My family had disowned me... The crime, the drugs, the violence. Nobody wanted to know me." When not in prison he was parked on benefits, money spent either on feeding himself or feeding his habit. (2012, 5)

The reader is also introduced to Sparky, an ex-offender whose life has been 'turned around' by him finding employment (2012, 52); Paul, an alcoholic with a range of health issues and lacking in motivation; Luke who got involved with gangs shortly after the death of his mother; and Rob and Rachel, a couple who were often in rent arrears and whose children 'were close to being taken into care' (2012, 22). Visitors to the social justice webpages of the DWP website can read 24 case studies of social justice in action, sorted into themes such as 'domestic violence', 'drugs and alcohol', 'homelessness' and 'mental health' (DWP, 2013).

The detail of the personal stories, along with the benevolent idea of a 'second chance society' (2012, 1) echo Levitas' (1998, 188) criticism of New Labour's use of the concept of social exclusion which 'distract[ed] attention from the essentially class-divided character of society and allows a view of society as basically benign to co-exist with the visible reality of poverty'. Levitas argued that the 'problematic' characteristics of individuals were personalised and therefore placed 'outside society' – a situation which is not consistent with other theories of social justice.

Residualisation

The localisation and individualisation highlighted above does not apply equally to all people or all places. The personal characteristics and experiences of small numbers of marginalised groups – the 'most disadvantaged' or 'troubled families' – living in 'broken communities' (2012, 5) are scrutinised and pored over. This *residualisation* allows the structures and institutions of society, and the populace more widely – the primary subjects in most theories of social justice – to become, at best, secondary considerations or afterthoughts.

The SJS ‘sets out an ambitious new vision for supporting the most disadvantaged individuals and families in the UK’ (2012, 1) and a whole chapter is devoted to ‘Supporting the most disadvantaged adults’, such as those affected by homelessness, re-offending, drug and alcohol dependency and mental ill health and problem debt (2012, 47). As highlighted in the previous section, many of the case studies and vignettes used in the official social justice documents and webpages focus on individuals who have experienced a range or extent of disadvantages that many members of society would not have experienced.

Another group who are central to the SJS are the 120,000 ‘troubled families’ identified by the government in 2011, following the riots that took place in August of that year. In the SJS, the lives of these families are described as ‘so chaotic they cost the government some £9 billion in the last year alone’ (2012, 1). Once again, a wide range of disadvantages are linked with ‘troubled families’: ‘These are families whose lives are blighted by crime, worklessness, drug and alcohol dependency, low aspirations and educational failure. The chaotic lifestyles these families lead, without routines or boundaries, often destroy the life chances of the children who grow up in them.’

In keeping with similar historical debates about an alleged ‘undeserving poor’ or an ‘underclass’ (Welshman, 2013) there is, within the SJS, concern that relatively small numbers of ‘troubled families’ will pass on their problematic behaviours to their children. The strategy sets out how it will need to break ‘the cycle of deprivation’ (2012, 10) and the cycle of inter-generational disadvantage (2012, 43). The Social Justice *Progress report*, published in November 2014, reported that the Troubled Families programme had ‘successfully turned around the lives of 70,000 troubled families’ and noted the expansion of the programme to include 400,000 more families in a second phase (HM Government, 2014; 16).

These issues are also localised. The strategy focuses on disadvantaged communities where ‘entrenched and intergenerational worklessness’ exists (2012, 41). Children who grow up in ‘broken communities and facing multiple disadvantages ... find themselves passing on their difficult circumstances from one generation to the next’ (2012, 5). The strategy goes on to state that, if it is to make a difference it will be necessary to ‘focus our efforts on reaching those families and communities where worklessness has become all too common (2012, 37).

This focus on the most disadvantaged individuals, families and locations has occurred when wider government rhetoric has directed attention towards ‘skivers’, ‘shirkers’, benefit fraudsters’ and ‘sink estates’. This process of ‘othering’ sees a line ‘drawn between “them” and “us” – between the more and the less powerful – and through which social distance is established and maintained’, with people and places experiencing disadvantage are constructed as ‘a source of moral contamination, a threat, an “undeserving” economic burden, an object of pity or even as an exotic species’ (Lister, 2004, 101).

This narrow focus of the SJS on the ‘most disadvantaged individuals and families’, which almost appears as a misreading of Rawls’ focus on the most disadvantaged, helps to present the view that those citizens who are not ‘the most disadvantaged’ experience and live in a largely benign and socially just society.

Work

Within the official social justice documents, there is a strong emphasis on the role of work in tackling disadvantage. Tackling 'entrenched and inter-generational worklessness' and 'the culture of worklessness' in 'troubled families' and 'broken communities', as highlighted in the previous discussion, is a key component of the SJS. In the third chapter of the SJS, which highlights the importance of work, the document states that 'this Government is unashamedly "pro-work"' and will 'reward those who seek a job' (2012, 36). The chapter highlights that 'work has the potential to transform the lives not just of individuals but of whole communities' and that the benefits of work are 'far wider than just remuneration', enabling 'parents to act as role models for their children' and 'fostering aspiration in young people' (2012, 37). Such a position suggests links with Dworkin's emphasis on personal responsibility, but there is no attempt to differentiate those who 'can work but won't' from those who can't find paid employment.

There is a strong emphasis on 'support' for people seeking employment, with a number of different funding streams, welfare reforms and policy programmes listed which set out how the government is 'smoothing the journey into work' (2012, 38–46). This narrow focus on one side of the 'employment equation' ensures that the 'employer' side receives relatively little attention. A 'living wage' and the issues of 'in-work poverty', 'zero-hours contracts' and insecure, precarious employment are not mentioned in any of the official government social justice documents. Support for people with disabilities or disadvantages to 'achieve their full potential' appears to stop once they have entered employment of any sort, leaving the official social justice looking like a distorted, minimalist version of Sen's 'capabilities approach'. Instead, the focus remains on 'helping those in work to lift themselves out of poverty' (2012, 9). In discussing 'the future' the SJS sets out the 'tangible outcomes' that are required

more households with at least one member in sustained work, with a focus on reducing the number of young people out of work and the number of children growing up in workless households; more households being financially independent through work; more people with multiple barriers to work moving closer to the labour market. And, critically, a change in attitudes. Work must be seen as desirable and something to be aspired to, and a life on benefits for those who can work must become unacceptable.

This future highlights the minimalist and residualist themes already noted, but it also obscures a vision of what the future might hold for those unable to work. Although the SJS promises 'unconditional support to those who are severely disabled and cannot work' (2012, 10) what this support looks like is never explained or expanded upon in the strategy or any subsequent documents. The Social Justice Outcomes Framework contains no mention of 'disability', which is central to Sen and Dworkin's work, and the issue is rarely discussed in any of the documents. The issue of 'caring' for family members, and other forms of domestic labour, remain similarly undiscussed in the SJS, which views participation in the labour market as the only form of 'work' worth mentioning.

Innovation and commodification

The SJS promises to ensure a ‘fair deal for the taxpayer’ (2012, 4) and believes that social justice can be achieved by ‘connecting successful financiers and businesses with difficult communities and creating a vested interest in delivering real and lasting improvements’ (2012, 64). In setting out how it represents a break from previous government efforts to support ‘the most disadvantaged’ the SJS highlights a number of ‘innovative’ market-friendly reforms, such as: ‘incentivising providers – payment by results’ (2012, 62); ‘Growing the social investment market’ (2012, 64); ‘Leading the way in testing innovative financing solutions’ (2012, 66); and ‘Supporting social ventures to improve their investment readiness’ (2012, 67). The future promises to be one where it is possible to ‘open up greater opportunities for social ventures and social investors to get involved in turning around the lives of those most disadvantaged’ (2012, 68).

The ‘growing’ of the social investment market is a strong element of the focus on innovation. The seventh Key Indicator in the *Social justice outcomes framework* is ‘The size of the social investment market’ (2013b, 27). The *One year on* document states that such a market can ‘unlock new funding streams motivated by social as well as financial returns, bringing the resources and the rigour of the private sector to bear on tackling entrenched disadvantage’ (HM Government, 2013a, 40). The *Progress report* document also lays out how

we are opening up social services to a whole host of groups who might never before have seen themselves as part of the solution for change; be it private sector companies, high-net individuals, venture capitalists and more. With it, that investment brings the rigour, discipline and innovation of the private sector, the know-how of our most savvy entrepreneurs and business people applied to tackling our society’s most entrenched problems. (HM Government, 2014, 48)

As well as promoting the role of local government and local voluntary sector organisations, then, the SJS also foregrounds the role that social enterprises, ‘mutual and private companies’, and ‘investors and philanthropists’ (2012, 60) can play in ‘delivering social justice’. Once again, this has the effect of minimalising the role of the state and focusing the attention of more localised actors and activities. Social justice is thus transformed from a concept variously concerned with issues such as redistribution, equality, responsibility and freedom to one which repackages some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged people in our society and presents them as investment opportunities for ‘high-net individuals’, ‘venture capitalists’ and ‘successful financiers’. The ‘opening up’ of public services introduces a marketplace where private sector companies, philanthropists and ‘savvy entrepreneurs’ can bid for the opportunity to make a tidy profit out of ameliorating other people’s misery. This commodification of social justice represents another fundamental shift from Rawls’ concern with the structure of society and the distribution of resources to one that aims to ‘change the way that people in poverty behave, but leave the system intact’ (Silver and Clarke, 2014).

Discussion

The official social justice which, in summary, purports to prioritise local action to support the most disadvantaged individuals, appears to be at odds with many traditional theories of social justice, which promote radical changes to structural and institutional arrangements to bring about social justice for the whole populace. The emphasis on the individuals and families serves to close off discussion of wider issues such as the structure of the labour market, the inadequacy of the benefits system, and extreme levels of wealth inequality. The causes of poverty, as understood by over a century's worth of social scientific research, are systematically *misrecognised* and misrepresented by the official social justice narrative. The prevalence of in-work poverty, the problems of low-pay and the corrosive effects of poverty and material deprivation all remain undiscussed, with poverty presented as an effect of personal failings as opposed to an inadequate income and its effects.

The 'disadvantaged' individuals within the SJS are portrayed as having messed up their 'first chances': they have 'failed' educationally; lead 'chaotic lifestyles'; are unable to prevent their family from breaking down; and would spend an increase in benefits income 'feeding social problems such as drug dependency' (2012, 10). This official narrative, which doesn't mention welfare reforms such as the 'benefits cap' or 'spare room subsidy', which are adversely affecting precisely the populations and places the SJS aims to support (Beatty and Fothergill, 2016), drowns out the voices of the individuals themselves.

'The future'

It is still too early to assess whether Theresa May's approach to social justice will be similar to that advanced by Iain Duncan Smith under David Cameron-led governments. The concept has itself been marginalised in recent years with no new strategy, no progress reports since 2014. Duncan Smith is now out of office and Cameron is out of party politics altogether. May's early platitudes to Cameron and her suggestion that his 'true legacy is not about the economy but about social justice' (May, 2016) suggest that a radical departure may not be just around the corner. However, May did, in her first speech, talk about the union 'between all of our citizens, every one of us, whoever we are and wherever we're from' (May, 2016), and her subsequent announcement of a review of the scale of racial inequalities across the UK suggests that a different, stronger approach to social justice may be coming into view. If May, however, is to avoid the accusation that her use of the concept is 'intellectually disreputable, the mark of a demagogy' (Hayek, 1976, 97), then she will need to acknowledge the role that government plays in creating the 'burning injustice' of inequality, as well as the role it can – and should – play, in tackling it.

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