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Social Policy and the Government of Waste

Abstract

This article argues that key elements of contemporary social policy can be fruitfully analysed through the lens of waste. Drawing on work identifying the importance of waste and waste disposal in the history of modernity and early liberal theory, the article develops two concepts of waste – waste as inertia and waste as excess – and uses these to shed light on aspects of recent social policy in the areas of unemployment, health care, and higher education. In particular, it is argued that the theme of waste is able to capture the desire of recent governments to deploy social policy explicitly to economic ends – including economic growth and capital – and the

consequences it sets in motion for citizens who fail to comply with stipulated obligations. It is also argued that the government of waste is a source of political legitimacy for the state.

Keywords: Waste; Social Policy; Government; Inertia; Excess; Capital

Introduction

Waste, and the need to tackle it, has become a pressing political concern. Perhaps the most prominent manifestation of this is to be found in the context of austerity politics and the concomitant cuts to public services. The state's bailout of stricken financial institutions in 2008 created large deficits in the public finances that have been tackled, at least partially, by the implementation of cuts in the public sector. In the UK, one way in which this policy of cost-cutting was justified by the previous Coalition Government was to frame it in terms of the need to eliminate waste – a necessary response, this Government argued, to the excessive spending of, and lack of fiscal management by, previous, Labour, administrations. The charge was that taxpayers had not obtained value for money from Labour's spending practices, something that needed to be addressed, for example, by slimming down government departments through the elimination of needless inefficiencies. A more streamlined and cost-effective public

sector would not only function more efficiently; it would also contribute to deficit reduction. The political concern with waste can be detected in other areas of government policy too. Some of these, such as the desire to champion recycling by working towards a 'zero waste economy' in the environmental field (Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs 2010), may seem obvious; others, less so. Thus, in its White Paper on welfare reform, for example, the previous Coalition Government used the discourse of waste to characterise the nature of its concern for the deleterious effect of the existing welfare benefits system on both beneficiaries and the economy: 'The waste of human potential is immense and the cost to our country vastly exceeds the monetary benefits paid' (Department for Work and Pensions [DWP] 2010: 12).

Academic literature on waste has tended to focus on those areas in which it appears most evident, such as the environment and food. *The Sociological Review*, for instance, recently dedicated a special issue to food waste and its sociological implications (*Special Issue: Sociological Review Monograph Series* 2012). To the extent that conceptual analyses of waste exist, these tend to be heavily analytical and normative accounts aimed, at least in part, at perfecting an accurate definition of waste (eg Cohen 2010). This article's engagement with waste differs from the foregoing literature in two ways. First, its focus is on social, rather than environmental or food,

policy. Secondly, while the article advances two ideas of waste, the aim of this conceptual analysis is to draw attention to, and shed light upon, what it is argued here is a pressing contemporary political and social issue – namely, social policy’s relationship to capitalism and the economy. Of course, the relationship between the welfare state and capitalism has been explored many times before, with a variety of interpretations being offered of its nature (see, for example, Jessop 2002 and Holmwood 2000).¹ While this article does not engage directly in a discussion of what is a vast literature on this topic, it is inspired by the same methodological approach to social policy that underpins this – namely one that seeks to understand social policy and the welfare state in the context of broader questions of political economy, rather than as being driven by narrower concerns relating to charting specific types of social provision (Esping-Andersen 1990: 1-2). As David Garland has reminded us recently, the macro-economic function of government ‘is the broadest and least frequently invoked conception’ of the welfare state (Garland 2014: 339). But whereas Garland understands this governmental function as being undertaken ‘in the interest of *security, stability and welfare*’ (Garland 2014: 340; original emphasis), this article aims to identify and comprehend the state’s deployment of social policy predominantly to the ends of capital rather than to the security or welfare of citizens relying on the state for protection against capitalism’s negative social and economic consequences.

Developing two concepts of waste – as excess and inertia – the argument advanced is that the idea of waste offers a critical conceptual lens through which to capture the state’s increasing use of social policy for the ends of capital and economic growth.

The article is structured as follows. The first section develops the aforementioned concepts of waste – waste as excess and waste as inertia. Drawing on work in the fields of the critique of political economy and legal theory, this section sets out the meanings of those two concepts. It also highlights a concern with waste in the history of liberal theory and its inextricable relationship to capitalism. It is argued that, while not explicitly mapping onto developments in contemporary social policy, the themes to be found in the historical literature resonate in this sphere today.

The remainder of the article discusses some examples from contemporary social policy and aims to demonstrate how these can fruitfully be understood through the conceptual lens of waste developed in the first section. Thus, in the second section, it is argued that the main policy designed to address unemployment today in the UK – workfare – displays elements of both waste as excess and inertia. Recent reforms to the National Health Service (NHS) and higher education system in England – the topic of section three – it is argued, display a political concern with the inertia of public institutions and services, in the sense that they require to be reformed with a view to

contributing to national prosperity and facilitating opportunities for profit-making. The final section sums up the article's arguments.

Before beginning, it is worth stressing one point. In his critique of literature that uses terms such as bare life, wasted life, disposable life, precarious life, and superfluous life, Denning comments that: 'To speak repeatedly of bare life and superfluous life can lead us to imagine that there really are disposable people, not simply that they are disposable in the eyes of state and market.' (Denning 2010: 79-80) For the sake of clarity, the argument in this article is not a normative one along the lines that waste management and getting rid of waste is something that ought to be done; or that certain people or lives are inherently disposable. Nor is the contention here that unemployment is somehow a better condition than employment – that there is something more appealing about not working compared with doing so. As Jimmy Reid said of redundancy in his rectorial address at Glasgow University in 1972: 'I challenge the right of any man or any group of men, in business or in government, to tell a fellow human being that he is expendable.' (Reid 1972) Rather, the aim is to offer waste as a critical concept that describes controversial features of the state's contemporary social policy and highlights its inextricable link with capitalism and the economy. But while the focus is upon the state and its policies, this does not mean, *contra* Denning, that one of the effects of such policies is not that some people 'really

are disposable people'. As this article aims to demonstrate, one of the consequences of the state's treating certain categories of people as disposable is that they can, in reality, become just that.

Waste as excess and inertia

The first sense of waste advanced here is waste as excess. It will be helpful to turn to an article by Susan Marks on superfluity (an idea closely related to waste) to obtain an understanding of this first sense of waste, as she understands superfluity to revolve around 'the general idea of excess' (Marks 2011). Marks identifies three senses of superfluity. The first is 'quantitative excess', meaning that there is too much of something, hence rendering the excess surplus to requirements. The second involves 'practical redundancy' – namely, something that 'does not serve any useful purpose and can be omitted without consequences. There may also be a hint that it is creating needless clutter; it no longer fits or has a place in the overall scheme of things and is now in the way.' (Marks 2011: 3) Finally, superfluity can point to excess that takes the form of 'noxious waste' – the excessive use of something that has the effect of diluting the original. This may amount to what Marks calls 'contaminating waste' – an excess that has a detrimental impact on that which remains. Drawing these meanings together, Marks concludes that: '[S]omething is superfluous when it is expendable,

disposable, useless, unwanted, undesirable, worthless, senseless, or supernumerary.’

(Marks 2011: 3)

As well as the idea of excess, another feature that is common to Marks’ three senses of superfluity is the need to get rid of their respective excesses. More particularly, there is a sense in which these excesses demand not only to be eliminated, but eliminated in what might be called a negative manner. In other words, because they perform no useful function, those excesses are to be viewed in a negative light – they may, for instance, be a source of danger should they be allowed to persist and, as such, must be eliminated in order to preserve or secure the wanted, the worthy, the desirable etc.

While waste as excess posits something superfluous that needs eliminating (in the sense of getting rid of), waste as inertia suggests something that contains within itself the potential to be of use, though, for a variety of reasons, that potential remains unfulfilled. This might be someone, for example, whose talent for playing the piano is either not nurtured or goes to waste because he or she cannot be bothered practising. It is therefore waste not in the sense of being excessive or superfluous; rather, the waste resides in something whose potential remains unrealised – to put it differently, the waste lies in the thing not having been exploited at all or exploited only to a fraction of its maximum capability. As it currently stands, it is useless; but if its

potential is cultivated, it can be converted into something of utility. We can link this idea of waste as inertia to some of the themes that will be relevant to the analysis of contemporary social policy to follow by referring briefly to some of Mark Neocleous's work (Neocleous 2011).

Exploring the work of some early liberal theorists, Neocleous uncovers an obsession with eliminating waste – specifically what he calls ‘the waste of the commons’. Unlike Zygmunt Bauman’s analysis in his book *Wasted Lives*, in which he traces what he calls ‘the production of ‘human waste’’ to the application of modernity’s order-building and desire for economic progress, for those liberal theorists the waste of the commons was the result of the absence of those features of modernity. Waste was equated to the ‘uncultivated land and idle labour’ present in those areas of the globe not (yet) subject to the order of capital. And it was this waste of the commons that needed to be eliminated: ‘[W]asted land needs to be improved, wasted labour disciplined to work.’ (Neocleous 2011: 508). In other words, waste had to be eliminated with a view to ensuring the creation of value and the accumulation of capital. Waste disposal did not mean leaving things and people to rot; on the contrary, it meant activating them – setting them to work in the pursuit of the ends of capital. Commenting on this aspect of John Locke’s work, Neocleous says:

[T]he necessity of the state in Locke's argument is comprehensible only through the logic of war, exercised in permanent fashion against rebellious slaves, antagonistic Indians, wayward workers, and, of course, the criminal more broadly defined. Government is nothing less than the continuous battle between the sovereign and these unsocial elements. Read through the lens of sovereignty, these unsocial elements are the enemies of security. Read through the lens of property, they are the enemies of improvement. The outcome can only be a war against such enemies: a war for the security of improvement; a war against the waste of the commons; a war of accumulation; a *war on waste*. (Neocleous 2011: 521; original emphasis; reference omitted)

The waste of the commons, then, amounts to things – labour and land – that, in their current state, are not being optimised, or realised, or exploited for capital; and it is this waste, which takes the form of inertia (idleness and lack of cultivation), that must be eliminated.

Neocleous's quotation identifies a final issue regarding waste that, owing to constraints of space, can only be identified here, but is important to bear in mind nonetheless. This is the nature of the relationship between the state and waste. As Neocleous notes, for Locke the state was central in undertaking the 'war against the waste of the commons' effectively. We see a similar linkage between the state and waste being made in Bauman's *Wasted Lives*. There, Bauman alerts us to how central the power to determine what amounts to waste, and how subsequently to manage it, has been in constituting and legitimising the authority of the modern nation-state:

Throughout the era of modernity, the nation-state has claimed the right to preside over the distinction between order and chaos, law and lawlessness, citizen and *homo sacer*, belonging and exclusion, useful (= legitimate) product and waste ... [S]ifting out, segregating and disposing of the waste of order-building combined into the main preoccupation and metafunction of the state, as well as providing the foundation for its claims to authority. (Bauman 2004: 33)

In Bauman's view, then, the modern nation-state has staked its claims to authority on, *inter alia*, identifying and managing waste ('sifting [it] out, segregating and disposing of [it]'). Consequently, and as noted above, while bound up with the idea of uselessness, waste is nevertheless also intimately associated with utility or usefulness. Here, though, the use function of waste and waste management takes a political form – lending legitimacy to the nation-state. Determining what constitutes waste and decisions regarding its subsequent management (for Bauman, its disposal) are useful to the modern nation-state in the sense of acting as sources of its legitimacy.²

To summarise, waste, in the sense in which it is understood in this article, can be conceptualised as having descriptive and functional qualities. On the one hand, waste can be understood in terms of excess and inertia – it describes a state of affairs where something is practically redundant as it serves no useful purpose or where something that has potential is not realised or, at the least, not realised fully; on the other hand, what might be called waste management or the government of waste, performs certain functions – including political (lending the state legitimacy) and economic (creating outlets for capital and profit-making) ones. The government of waste is undertaken not merely for the sake of eliminating it; rather, the identification of what constitutes waste and the manner of its subsequent disposal reveals something important to us about, *inter alia*, contemporary political and economic priorities. Let us

now turn to a few examples from the field of social policy and consider how these might be understood through the conceptual lenses of waste as inertia and waste as excess.

Unemployment and the waste of idle labour

“I don’t mind doing the work,” similarly reported street cleaner Geneva Moore, a 45-year old Bronx mother of three. “But we are just like a piece of waste material the way the state program treats us. They feel like we’re slaves or something, having to work off our check.” (Boris 1998: 28)

For some time now, many Western countries have managed unemployment through the policy of workfare. Workfare, or labour activation, as it is also known, is a social policy of conditional welfare. In order to continue receiving unemployment benefits, welfare recipients must undertake certain tasks which are designed to (re-)engage them in the world of work. Should they fail to undertake the stipulated tasks, their benefits may be reduced and, ultimately, withdrawn. By way of an analysis of some aspects of the 2010 White Paper *Universal Credit: Welfare that Works* (DWP 2010) and the subsequent Welfare Reform Act 2012 (hereafter WRA 2012), this section argues that workfare policy in the UK is designed both to discipline idle labour in order to drive a particular form of capitalism and labour market (that is, to tackle waste as inertia) and progressively to remove state means of subsistence from those who fail to comply with the workfare system – with all the economic and social consequences this entails (described here as tackling waste as excess).

On their face, the White Paper and WRA 2012 are concerned with waste in the sense of the need to tackle excessive expenditure in the current welfare system. On the one hand, this concerns the costs of administering welfare benefits. For instance, in place of the existing duplication of functions across several organisations, the Government proposed that: 'A single organization [the Department for Work and Pensions] will deliver Universal Credit [a new streamlined form of welfare benefit introduced by the WRA 2012], enabling this waste and inefficiency to be eliminated' (DWP 2010: 39). On the other hand, wasteful expenditure takes the form of high levels of error and fraud in the welfare benefits system, something which the Government argues Universal Credit will curtail significantly (DWP 2010: Ch. 5). It is not, however, simply the removal or reduction of administrative costs that these proposals provide for. They contain other elements too, which, it is argued here, can be characterised using the two concepts of waste set out earlier.

First, there is detectable in the reforms a sense of waste as inertia. The starting point here is the observation that what the reforms, and the policy of workfare generally, are designed to tackle is what Neocleous, as we saw above, calls 'idle labour'. In other words, there is currently a problem of worklessness. It is the view of recent governments that not enough people are working and this needs to change. In terms of inertia, this waste might be understood in two ways. On the one hand, and as noted

at the outset, the inertia might be comprehended from the perspective of those who are unemployed and the knock-on effect for the country. To reiterate, this is the way the Government understands idle labour – as a ‘waste of human potential’ the ‘cost [of which] to our country vastly exceeds the monetary benefits paid’ (DWP 2010: 12). The failure to maximise the working potential of the unemployed constitutes an unnecessary waste that has detrimental consequences for the unemployed individuals concerned (eg lack of money and continuing poverty) and ‘the country’. On the other hand, idle labour can be understood as waste from the point of view of businesses and the labour market. This reading can be supported by reference to the White Paper, as there is a consistent theme running through it of the need to recognise the importance of employer and labour market requirements. Indeed, at points it seems as if these requirements act as justifications for the welfare changes, such that the purpose of Universal Credit is to fit the needs of, and entrench, today’s flexible labour market. Thus, the proposals say that the current system of in-work welfare support ‘fails to reflect the flexible working pattern that modern employers and individuals need’ (DWP 2010: 8). At another point, the current system is said not to ‘reflect the needs of a flexible labour market’ (DWP 2010: 10). And again: ‘The introduction of Universal Credit will drive dynamic labour market effects’ (DWP 2010: 58). The overall objective is to have a welfare system that ‘provides people with the confidence and security to

play a full part in society through a flexible labour market within a competitive modern economy ... Britain is internationally recognized as having some of the most effective labour market policies in the world, helping people, including those previously written off as 'inactive' in the labour market, to move off benefits and into work through conditionality and support' (DWP 2010: 12). These aspects of the welfare reforms therefore suggest that Universal Credit will, 'through conditionality and support', function as a means towards eliminating idle labour for the ends not only of the unemployed (in terms, it is claimed, of more flexibility in the mode of working and increased take home pay as in-work welfare benefits are withdrawn at a lower rate than the current regulations permit), but of the flexible labour market and the employers who operate within it too.

This sense that a key objective of the reforms is the elimination of idle labour for the ends of business and employers is heightened when one considers the, at the time new, though recently discontinued, Mandatory Work Activity scheme. Purportedly a mechanism designed to inculcate in individuals 'the habits and routines of working life' and to further the Government's objective of instilling 'the labour-market discipline associated with full-time employment', looked at from another angle it was simply a source of free labour for businesses.³ On this reading, it facilitated the flow of free labour as and when required by the flexible labour market and added economic value

to organisations and businesses at no, or little, cost.⁴ This can also be witnessed in the Government's plans to 'encourage and support *volunteering* as a way of developing and maintaining work skills' (DWP 2010: 39), and in its vision of greater partnership between Jobcentre Plus managers and local bodies – including charities, voluntary groups, and Local Authorities. Extending the links between Jobcentre Plus and such bodies is designed 'to provide local solutions to local labour market challenges' (DWP 2010: 39).

Conceptualising workfare and the welfare reforms as waste as inertia points to the presence of themes similar to those found in the work of early liberal theorists, such as Locke, that Neocleous describes – the key one being that 'idle labour' must be eliminated and 'disciplined to work'. Of course, requiring the unemployed to work in return for assistance is not a new phenomenon; one need only think of the workhouses of the 19th century to realise this. Moreover, a clear difference exists between the 'idle labour' that constituted the target of the early liberal theorists and that of today's welfare recipients – namely, that the former lived in societies hitherto free from the application of capitalism. The problem then was how to divorce work and workers from the commons that sustained them so that it, and they, became associated with wage labour and the creation of value – a key feature of Marx's idea of primitive accumulation (Marx 1976). But what we witness in today's welfare reforms is

a reassertion of this need to identify and eliminate this form of waste as inertia – the unfulfilled potential of idle labour – in the pursuit not of the objective of *instituting* capitalism *per se*, but of maintaining and supporting what Richard Sennett calls ‘the new capitalism’ (Sennett 2006). This type of capitalism is characterised, *inter alia*, by flexible organizations and an accompanying casual labour force:

The “casualization” of the labor force refers to more than the use of outside temps or subcontractors; it applies to the internal structure of the firm. Employees can be held to three- or six-month contracts, often renewed over the course of years; the employer can thereby avoid paying them benefits like health care or pensions. More, workers on short contracts can be easily moved from task to task, the contracts altered to suit the changing activities of the firm. And the firm can contract and expand quickly, shedding or adding personnel. (Sennett 2006: 48-49)

Several authors have noted how workfare sustains flexible labour markets and casual labour by disciplining individuals to accept the decreasing wages and underemployment with which these are associated (eg Peck 2001). This intensifies competition for work at the low-paid end of the labour market enabling wages for such work to be driven down further to the benefit of employers and their profit margins (Piven 1998). Those margins have also been augmented as a result of the free labour made available by workfare schemes such as MWA, noted above.⁵ Idle labour, then, is wasted insofar as it plays no part in either embedding the new form of capitalism structured around flexibilisation and casual labour or in facilitating capital accumulation through the generation of profit.

The manner in which the state deals with those who fail to undertake the work demanded by workfare schemes brings us to the second concept of waste – namely, waste as excess. In particular, it is the punitive nature of the types of benefit sanction that forms the basis of the argument that the current welfare reforms can be thought to contain an element of waste as excess. For the removal, sometimes in their entirety and potentially for a period of three years, of Jobseeker’s Allowance under the existing system and the ‘basic personal amount’ component of Universal Credit designed ‘to provide for basic living costs’ (DWP 2010: 18), suggests that those welfare recipients who do not discharge the obligations contained in their claimant commitment are to be treated as disposable human beings. Their continuation as wasted or idle labour is met with a policy that treats them in a fashion according to Marks’ second sense of superfluity – that is practical redundancy. In other words, as those individuals are no longer deemed to ‘serve any useful purpose’ or ‘fit[] or ha[ve] a place in the overall scheme of things and [are] now in the way]’ (which, as argued above, in this context amounts to complying with the exigencies of the new capitalism), they can, in the eyes of those designing the policy, be ‘omitted without consequences’. Providing for the removal of basic living costs signals, from the state’s viewpoint, the uselessness and disposability of such individuals. They are what Khanna, in her discussion of disposability, calls ‘throwaway’ individuals (Khanna 2009) (one might also think here of

the pejorative, morally-loaded term – ‘wasters’ – sometimes used to describe such people). While the economic consequences for those subject to such a policy are all too obvious, the nature of their consequential social counterparts is less immediately apparent; although these, including a possible link between sanctions and suicide, are beginning to come to light (see, for instance, Cowburn 2015). This is the extreme endpoint of a process that Castel describes as disaffiliation – that is the ‘rupture of the bond within society’:

The final outcome, the end of this process, is that economic insecurity becomes destitution and fragility of relationships becomes isolation ... Poverty is revealed as the outcome of a series of breakdowns in belonging and failures to establish bonds, which finally throws the person concerned into a floating state, a sort of *social no-man's land* (Castel 2000: 520; emphases added).

While the removal of basic living costs signals, from the state’s point of view, the uselessness of idle labour, this method of dealing with the latter nevertheless has utility value for the state in the sense of lending it legitimacy. To take just two examples from Bauman’s quotation earlier, the state’s manner of dealing with idle labour illustrates and reinforces its authority to determine the distinction between citizen and *homo sacer* (the latter being read in the current context not necessarily as a figure who can be killed with impunity (see Agamben 1998), but as an individual deprived of access to the basic means necessary to establish citizenship) and belonging and exclusion. The method’s punitive character also has a symbolic effect by enabling

the creation of collective representations of those who do not discharge the obligations associated with workfare (on which see, for eg, Wacquant 2009).

The waste of social property: health care and higher education

This section shifts the focus from the individual to the institutional level. Referring to recent policy on the NHS and higher education in England as examples, it is argued that this can be understood as a political concern to eliminate the waste of what is here, drawing on the work of Robert Castel, called social property. Public services and institutions established to address two of Beveridge's five giants (Beveridge 1942) – disease and ignorance – have become the object of reform, it is contended here, as they are considered not to contribute either directly or sufficiently to economic prosperity and the creation of wealth. Traditionally serving non-pecuniary common interests such as the pursuit of knowledge and a healthy population, these public institutions have been targeted for their inertia on the economic front. This section does not provide a detailed description of, and engagement with, recent policy and reform in the fields of health care and higher education. Rather, reference to aspects of these is undertaken with a view to illustrating the argument advanced here –

namely that those in power have increasingly come to view public institutions and goods as objects of waste.

According to Castel, social property has two components or 'poles'. The first has work as its basis. This was social property's original meaning. Through the obligatory allocation of part of one's wages to a social insurance fund, workers obtained the right to access '*collective* goods and services which had a *social* purpose: ensuring the security – the *social security* – of the members of a modern society and reinforcing their interdependence in such a way that they continue to constitute a society' (Castel 2002: 319; emphasis in original). This component of social property could be understood to be personal, in the sense that it constituted a mode of protection for each individual worker against insecurity, based on his or her labour. The second component of social property concerns 'generalization of the use of jointly-held goods' (Castel 2002: 328). What is facilitated here is 'the participation of non-property-owning individuals in collective services which are also placed under the responsibility of the state' (Castel 2002: 327). The state intervenes directly to ensure the universal provision of common services. Like the work-based component of social property, the ability of all to access these services is designed to provide the security previously only available to those having private property and, thereby, to promote social interdependence within society. And, while a form of property, these public services

were unusual in that, because of their collective nature, they could not be exchanged on the market or become the object of private appropriation. They were public goods or social wealth that served a common purpose or interest.

Analysing the state of social property today, Castel identifies how, since the early 1970s, it has been subject to sustained attack. In this context, only his analysis of the 'public services' pole of social property will be discussed here. On the one hand, Castel notes how previously nationalised industries have been (re)privatised in the course of recent decades. While taken under national control as part of the extension to marketable goods of the public economic management associated with Keynesianism, these companies have been sold back to the private sector, with the result that their goods become subject to competition and the pursuit of profit. On the other hand, in respect of what he calls public services 'strictly speaking', Castel notes a more complicated picture. Thus:

On the one hand, one observes a tendency to bring their management into line with the operating modes of private-sector standards by insisting on the need for them to be efficient, profitable, to treat their users like clients, and so on – all of which is not necessarily incompatible with the fact that these services continue to ensure, as Léon Duguit would say, "social interdependence." But one also observes a propensity to transfer to the private sector services which were first set up by the public sector in the name of the need to maintain and strengthen social interrelations. (Castel 2002: 329)

Social property, in the form of public services 'strictly speaking', has therefore been attacked on two fronts – by what might be called the discourse and practices of private

property and management, and by the shifting of the running of public services to the private sector. Summing up, Castel says: '[T]oday the balance of power between these two poles – that of profitability and that of the defense of social property in the service of the collective interest – is no longer in the latter's favor' (Castel 2002: 330).

Castel's observations in respect of these public services 'strictly speaking' capture elements that exist within social policy in the UK today. There has, for instance, been a noticeable and much-documented effort to instil the language and ideas of the market – choice, customers, targets, efficiency, driving up quality, to name but a few – into the operation and management of public services. The 2010 Browne Report on the future funding of higher education in England, with its stress on the importance of student choice and the creation of a market within higher education, is merely one of many examples (Lord Browne of Madingley 2010). And there can be little doubt that the tendency to transfer public services, or aspects of their management, to the private sector constitutes a key plank of a variety of social policies in the UK today. One of the main justifications advanced for seeking the involvement of the private sector in the provision or running of public services is that this will result in better value for money for the taxpayer through the application of more efficient management techniques. As a result, waste will be eliminated, meaning that less public funds will need to be spent in providing the relevant public service. As we saw earlier, this type of waste reduction

or elimination has been leant added weight by the political desire to reduce the UK's currently high public deficit.

It is argued here, however, that it is not merely the waste of public money in the sense of needless spending that is the target of recent governments' social policies, but also the waste of social property itself. We need to complement the focus on waste elimination in the context of the reduction of the public deficit, with an analysis of the relation between waste disposal and the ultimate, economic objective that this is designed to serve. For the real problem that successive governments have had with public services in the collective sense that Castel describes them – the 'generalization of the use of jointly-held goods' – is that they have not traditionally functioned as a source of economic prosperity and private profit. Of course the public services provided by the welfare state have always worked, indirectly, to support capital. The NHS, for instance, can be understood as a mechanism for maintaining the health of Marx's 'industrial reserve army'; and the education system supported capital by producing educated individuals. But public services and institutions were never considered to be a source of economic prosperity and private wealth accumulation in themselves – that is, either as institutions that the private sector became directly involved in running or helping to manage; or as institutions whose purpose was to train individuals to the explicit ends of creating economic growth and amassing private

wealth. This situation has changed over the last 30 years or so, as numerous examples from the field of social policy confirm. The following are merely indicative of this trend. First, the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) / Public Private Partnership (PPP) were established to allow private contractors to bid to construct and manage the buildings within which public services – such as health care and education – are delivered. Under PFI/PPP contracts, private firms build the facility at their own expense and are then reimbursed (with interest) over a period that can range from 25-30 years. As well as diverting taxpayers' money from the delivery of health care, for example, to the private sector in the form of repayments and interest, this method of funding the construction of buildings for public use has spawned a lucrative secondary market in PFI/PPP equity (Whitfield 2011).

Secondly, the outsourcing of public services, or aspects of their management, to private firms – for instance, the cleaning of NHS hospitals – is now an established feature of contemporary social policy. Its continuation today can be witnessed in the Health and Social Care Act 2012. Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), which have replaced Primary Care Trusts as the bodies responsible for commissioning health care services by spending £80bn of NHS resources can opt to pay private sector bodies to undertake their commissioning activities. The 'any qualified provider' system has also been established in order to enhance patient choice. The possibility of private sector

involvement in the direct provision of NHS services is also heightened by the promotion of competition and the application of competition law to the commissioning of NHS treatment for the first time. Monitor and the new NHS Commissioning Board – the bodies that oversee the commissioning decisions of CCGs – have the function of promoting competition for the provision of NHS services. In respect of Monitor, the economic regulator for the health and social care sectors, it has the additional power ‘to apply competition law to prevent anti-competitive behaviour’ (DH 2010: 38). The effect of the reforms will be to alter the previous situation in which the bulk of NHS services were commissioned from public bodies by creating a level playing field in which private providers of health care can compete to deliver these services. CCGs will need, in effect, to ensure that a tendering process for the provision of NHS services is in place. Otherwise, they may breach competition law.

Finally, the transformation of higher education institutions in England into centres focused on the furtherance of economic growth also signals a change in the use to which public institutions are put. As Stefan Collini notes of the Browne Report into the future funding of higher education:

Overwhelmingly, the general statements announce, with startling confidence, the real point of higher education: ‘Higher education matters because it drives innovation and economic transformation. Higher education helps to produce economic growth, which in turn contributes to national prosperity.’ ... This report displays no real interest in universities as places of education; they are conceived of simply as engines of economic prosperity and as agencies for equipping future

employees to earn higher salaries. (Collini 2010: 24)

Rather than what Collini calls 'the public character of higher education', it is the objectives of economic growth and private wealth accumulation that are to constitute the rationales of the higher education institution of the future. This is confirmed in the UK Government's recent White Paper on the future of higher education (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2016), which, in the following passage, declares the desired core purpose of contemporary universities: 'Universities provide an environment for deeper and wider learning, allowing for the development of analytical and creative thinking, objective inquiry and primary research. But evidence suggests that for most students, the most important outcome of higher education is finding employment.' (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2016: 11; reference omitted) The measures contained in the White Paper – predominantly an increase in student choice and enhancing competition by making it easier for a wide range of providers to enter the higher education market – are designed to support students' 'future productivity' and 'deliver better outcomes and value for students, employers and the taxpayers who underwrite the system.' Increased competition amongst providers is justified on the basis that it will improve the country's economic prosperity by enhancing 'long-run productivity' and overall economic growth ('GDP per capita'); higher education is described as 'a key export sector' and heightened competition a

means, *inter alia*, of transforming the higher education sector's ability 'to respond to economic demands' and of 'serv[ing] the national economy' by meeting the needs of international students. One could go on. Hopefully, however, enough has been said of recent higher education policy to demonstrate that what it identifies within the sector is untapped potential for economic ends and the need for its release. The idea that the main purpose of universities is, to use Collini's phrase, as 'places of education' where, one might add, knowledge and critical thinking are valued as goods in themselves, translates in current policy into so much waste from the economic point of view. Moreover, the solution to this – increased competition amongst providers – itself enhances opportunities for capital by making it easier for private firms to enter the market (one of the objectives of the 2016 White paper being the simplification of regulatory requirements for new providers).

These developments in the fields of health care and higher education, it is argued here, suggest a relation between waste and social property that extends beyond recent governments' obsession with the eradication of bureaucratic inefficiencies from the institutions of the welfare state. For what they point to is a more fundamental concern – namely, the waste of social property in the sense of inertia. Anthropomorphising, from the point of view of economic growth and capital, these services are considered to be idle and, as such, must be disciplined to work. They have traditionally been

sources of value in a non-economic sense – ensuring, amongst other things, a healthy and knowledgeable population – and, at most, have indirectly benefited the economy. In economic terms, this amounts to waste, as it fails to contribute directly to the accumulation of capital, and thus to economic growth. What we have seen in the course of the last 30 years or so, illustrated by the examples cited above, is successive governments' actions to dispose of this waste of social property – that is, to eliminate social property's lack of direct contribution to economic growth. It is not good enough that public services act as institutions that promote social security and foster social interdependence, as in Castel's reading of their original function. They must do much more today. Wealth and profit must be extracted from institutions hitherto overwhelmingly associated with what Castel calls 'social wealth'. To put it in the terms Neocleous uses to describe the problem of wasted land and labour in the work of some early liberal theorists, for those in power today's social property represents the waste of the commons, an uncultivated terrain that must be improved and made to work for the economy and capital. Its potential remains unrealised in the sense of not having been exploited at all, or not having been so to its full capacity.

Care, however, must be taken not to equate exactly the waste of social property with the scenario those theorists were describing. This is because Neocleous's description of the latter's essence – 'the commons must be destroyed' – does not apply fully to the

waste of social property today. In other words, the manner in which the elimination of this waste is to be effected does not equate to a wholesale privatisation ('destruction') of these public services and institutions. Rather, this is undertaken in a way which allows those in government to claim the preservation of social property, and the principles and values with which it has traditionally been associated.⁶ The elimination of the waste of social property is therefore better thought of in terms of the extraction of private wealth from *extant* public services and institutions, and the public resources that fund them. The NHS, for instance, is not wholly privatised by the recent reforms; rather, its inertia insofar as contributing to economic growth and capital is concerned is remedied by extending the role of the private sector within this public institution.

Conclusion

This article has argued that aspects of contemporary social policy can usefully be understood through the lens of waste. In particular, it has advanced two concepts of waste – waste as excess and inertia – that aim to identify, on the one hand, the increasing deployment of social policy by the state for a variety of economic ends (including capital and the nation's economic growth and prosperity), and, on the other, the manner in which the state manages those citizens who do not discharge their obligations in the context of workfare programmes. What contributions does the

development of a concept of waste in the context of social policy seek to make? First, it aims to contribute to the refocusing of critical energy in writing on social policy around its relationship with capitalism and questions of political economy. As noted in the Introduction, Garland has recently highlighted the relative lack of interest in this field and political debate in the extricable links between the welfare state and the macro-economic aspects of government. But whereas Garland discusses this idea in the context of an argument about the reciprocal relationship between the welfare state and capitalism – each needs the other in order to exist and capitalism is not abolished by the welfare state but ‘is altered by welfare state government in ways that make it socially and politically sustainable’ (Garland 2014: 356) – the conceptual framework of waste developed in this article is intended to highlight the skewed nature of that relation; that is, how governments deploy social policy today in order to facilitate opportunities for capital and to foster and shape aspects of the macro-economy – such as the labour market – in ways which provide new avenues for profit-making. As this article demonstrates, recent governments have been tackling the inertia of institutions of welfare – like the NHS – by rendering them sites of opportunity for capital accumulation. Moreover, like the analysis of workfare presented earlier, the concept of waste allows for a focus on the economically and

socially deleterious consequences of this type of deployment of social policy for those denied access to (sufficient) benefits and welfare services.

Secondly, it is suggested that the concepts of waste developed here could usefully shed light on developments in other fields of social and economic policy. To take just one, brief, example, the common occurrence today of the displacement of council tenants from their homes in order to make way for private housing developments demonstrates, from the point of view of capital, a realisation of value from the wasted potential (inertia) of social housing and, specifically, the land upon which it stood. Meanwhile, those displaced from their homes – either to other parts of the city or, indeed, country, with the accompanying economic and social implications, such as longer travel to work and the dissolution of communities – are superfluous (waste as excess) from the point of view of capital. They are, in line with the etymological root of the word, disposed of, that is literally placed or laid down – in this case, in a different location.

Finally, this article has noted that the state's identification and government, or management, of waste has a long history. As Bauman notes, distinguishing between waste and utility, and subsequently disposing of what it determines to be waste, has been a core function of the modern nation-state, providing it with a source of

legitimacy. This is supported by the understanding of the state's role identified by Neocleous within the work of some early liberal theorists – namely to wage war on waste, specifically 'the waste of the commons', which took the form of 'uncultivated land and idle labour'. Through a focus on the government of idle labour and the inertia of social property, one of the purposes of this article has been to demonstrate that this long-standing state concern with waste and its elimination is re-emerging today, this time in the guise of the state's use of social policy to prise open new opportunities for capital.

Notes

¹ While not the focus of this article, it should be noted that there have been many leftist critiques of the welfare state. *Inter alia*, these identify and critique the welfare state's repressive nature (its denial of individual freedom by creating dependency on this form of state); its inevitable maintenance of capitalism and capitalist relations, thus postponing their overthrow via revolutionary means (the Marxist critique); and its disempowerment of civil society organizations, which, rather than the state, ought to be the sites from which to contest market dominance. For a discussion of these and relevant literature, including an interesting argument about how such critiques end up replicating some of the neo-liberal tenets they are purportedly designed to confront, see Holmwood 2000. While offering a critique of some aspects of contemporary social policy, the present article, unlike the literature above, does not adopt a particular stance on the welfare state itself.

² Interestingly, in her discussion of disposability, Khanna notes the etymological root of the word 'dispose' as being to place or lay something down and goes on to argue that disposing of something 'is an exertion of power by the disposer' – as illustrated in the old sovereign power to dispose of subjects' bodies as the sovereign saw fit. See Khanna

2009. This touches on the more general meaning of ‘dispose’, which is to order or organize. Disposal, so closely connected with waste, is bound up with the management or order of things – suggesting its political dimension.

³ ‘Free’ labour here meaning free from the perspective of the business for which the welfare claimant works. From the claimant’s perspective, any sense of freedom may be illusory. See, for example, the recent case of *R on the application of Reilly and Another v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* [2012] EWHC 2292 (Admin), in which both claimants argued, unsuccessfully, that, as their respective workfare schemes required the performance of “forced compulsory labour”, they violated the prohibition against such labour in Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

⁴ This reading is supported by the Government’s recent, legally forced, disclosure of 534 organisations that made use of individuals on the Mandatory Work Activity scheme during 2011-12. For the legal case that ruled that the Government must accede to a Freedom of Information request in this regard, see *Department for Work and Pensions v The Information Commissioner and Frank Zola* [2016] EWCA Civ 758.

⁵ For testimonies of this free labour in practice, see www.boycottworkfare.com.

⁶ See, for instance, the previous Coalition Government’s White Paper on NHS reform, which, before proceeding to carve out a niche for the private sector within the NHS, enunciates values and principles associated with the NHS since its founding in 1948: ‘The Government upholds the values and principles of the NHS: of a comprehensive service, available to all, free at the point of use and based on clinical need, not the ability to pay’ (DH 2010: 3).

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