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‘How the other Half Live’: Poor and Rich Citizenship in Austere Welfare Regimes

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A growing body of research quantifies the recent impact of fiscal consolidation and public service reform in liberal welfare regimes. However, less is known about how this is affecting the common terms upon which citizenship status is granted and experienced. With this in mind, this paper examines what bearing the political crafting of welfare austerity is having on the status, rights and identity of notionally equal citizens. To do so, this paper draws on a qualitative study examining lived experiences of poor and rich citizenship in New Zealand and the UK. Despite policy programmes idiosyncratic to their institutional context, both countries exhibit a similarly bifurcated system of social citizenship that is serving to structure, rather than moderate, material and status inequalities in austere welfare regimes.

Keywords: Citizenship; Welfare; Austerity; Poverty; Wealth

Introduction

In recent years, liberal welfare regimes have, to varying degrees, continued to pursue a strategy of welfare reform that has commodified the rights and status of social citizenship (Humpage, 2015; Raffass, 2016). In response to the global financial crisis of 2008, this has also occurred alongside a programme of regressive cuts to public social spending with wealthier households relatively protected and low-income households worst affected (De Agostini *et al.*, 2015; NZT, 2016). At least in liberal welfare regimes, these developments are undermining the integrative function of social citizenship.

Within liberal parameters, the rights of social citizenship have traditionally been understood as safeguarding an equality of status between citizen members (Marshall,

1950: 28). In theory, the common rights, duties and status inhered in collective membership establish an equal baseline from which other inequalities may legitimately arise (Marshall, 1950: 56). However, in practice these inequalities have the capacity to corrupt and destabilise the emancipatory potential of citizenship (Dickinson *et al.*, 2008). As Jo (2013: 517) notes, ‘behind the veil of ‘universal citizenship’ and ‘equality before the law’, there lay systemic forms of domination and oppression’ that misrecognize those ostensibly deemed equal citizens. This comes some way to explain why, in spite of shared legal status and rights, individuals experiencing material or symbolic marginality have been known to feel like ‘second class citizens’ (Dwyer, 1998; Humpage, 2008).

A growing body of evidence is emerging that quantifies the recent impact of fiscal consolidation and public service reform (e.g. Roper, 2011; Beatty and Fothergill, 2014). However, less is known about how this is affecting the common terms upon which citizenship status is granted and experienced. Beyond the relative paucity of empirical research in citizenship studies (Lister *et al.*, 2003), there has been a ‘broader neglect of citizenship in relation to wealthy rather than poor citizens’ (Orton, 2006: 251). With this in mind, this paper examines what bearing the political crafting of welfare austerity is having on the status, rights and identity of poor *and* rich citizens.

To do so, this paper draws on a qualitative study examining lived experiences of inequality and social citizenship in New Zealand and the UK. Since the 1980s, income inequality has fluctuated but steadily risen in both countries (OECD., 2013). Against this backdrop, the paper starts by outlining the increasingly paternalistic welfare reforms implemented alongside fiscal consolidation in both countries. The methodological approach of the study upon which this paper is based is then summarised. The remainder of the paper critically examines the rights, duties and status of social citizenship through the voices of ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ citizens. Contrary to safeguarding an equality of status between citizen members, the lived experiences of these two groups highlight the trappings and tribulations that social citizenship can engender.

Reforming Welfare in Times of Austerity

Since the global financial crisis, New Zealand and the UK have sought to reduce the overall fiscal burden of working-age welfare. Whilst cuts to public social spending have been less pronounced in New Zealand, tax-benefit changes have been notably regressive in both countries (De Agostini *et al.*, 2015; NZT, 2016). Between 2008 and 2015, the real-term value of working-age social security fell significantly in both countries (De Agostini *et al.*, 2015; NZT, 2016).

Alongside this, public administrations in both countries have garnered public support for budgetary restraint and welfare reform by claiming that ‘government got too big, did too

much and undermined responsibility' (Cameron, 2009: n.p.; DWP, 2010; WWG, 2011). Framed as a problem of moral and economic contagion, the shifting threat of welfare dependency has proven instrumental to the political crafting of austerity (Jensen and Tyler, 2015). Within political discourse, 'feckless' welfare subjects have been positioned as the central 'scapegoats' of policy attention through which to overcome high unemployment, public sector debt and economic stagnation (Jensen and Tyler, 2012; Beddoe, 2015). Within the New Zealand context, the burden and risk of national debt has proven particularly influential in justifying an actuarial approach to public service reform (WWG, 2011; NZT, 2016).

In many respects, welfare state retrenchment can be seen as antithetical to the project of social citizenship in that it entails a narrowing and withdrawal of welfare entitlements. However, austerity not only focuses on 'frugality, self-sufficiency and fiscal prudence in contemporary economic and political life', it is also intimately linked to reforming welfare, and in particular, 'cultures of worklessness' (MacLeavy, 2011: 355). Welfare austerity has been presented as a necessary step towards restoring economic productivity but also a reformation of the welfare subject's character and decision-making. On this basis, New Zealand and the UK have both continued to pursue a welfare reform programme that is increasingly situated within a justificatory framework of neoliberal paternalism. Whitworth (2016) outlines how this framework positions those subjected to such reforms as *paradoxical subjects*. On the one hand, a neoliberal welfare discourse conceives of those receiving out-of-work social security as self-interested and economically rational whereby they 'choose a life on benefits' (Cameron, 2012). To address this 'something for nothing culture' (Duncan Smith, 2011), welfare reforms seek to revise the choice architecture of individuals so that they pursue *rational* ends that are 'achieved through work, not welfare' (Bennett, 2012). To ensure individuals are 'better off in paid work' (WWG, 2011: 58), this entails restricting the level, coverage or length of welfare entitlement or increasing work incentives.

On the other hand, a paternalistic discourse justifies welfare reform on the basis that welfare subjects are either unable or unwilling to exercise 'good choices' or fulfill their civic duties (Whitworth, 2016). Based on this interpretation, there is an increasing reluctance to 'hand over benefits and leave people to their own devices' (Bennett, 2012: n.p.). Restricting the freedom of such individuals through sanctions, surveillance and direction not only entails increased conditionality, but also the conditioning of welfare subjects (Dwyer and Ellison, 2009).

In recent years, NZ and UK political administrations have advanced a similar ideal of neoliberal paternalism to justify welfare reforms that seek to re-craft unemployed individuals into 'active welfare subjects' (Humpage and Baillie, 2016; Wright, 2016). To reform the 'citizen character' of low-income benefit recipients, policy agendas have

focused on cultivating capabilities and orientations contributing towards market assimilation. This comprises the promotion, and at times mandation of independent, autonomous citizenship through work-related conditions attached to social security provision (Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Humpage and Baillie, 2016). The renewed intensification of welfare conditionality has occurred alongside a new sanctions regime that suspends or reduces benefits if work-related and ‘social’ obligations are not met (O'Brien, 2013). Since 2008, the rate of sanctioning has almost doubled in both countries (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2014; Watts *et al.*, 2014; DWP, 2016).

Whilst these measures can be seen as an intensification of ‘Third Way’ policy approaches, ‘supported activation’ has also given way to a distinctly paternalistic approach to welfare provision (cf. Wiggan, 2011). This has principally manifested itself in reforms that reduce low-income social security and increase work obligations rather than work incentives (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2014). As noted, this has occurred alongside regressive cuts to public social spending. Arguably, this begets a variegated praxis of social citizenship where the requirement to ‘learn to do without, to wait for what we want and to put scarce resources to better use’ is unevenly applied to social citizens in times of austerity (Jensen and Tyler, 2012: n.p.).

The steady strengthening of paternalism in the NZ and UK welfare system has come to problematize the motivations and behaviours of ‘poor citizens’ whilst valorizing the subjectivity of those deemed as ‘overwhelmingly self-sufficient’ and ‘financially independent’ (WWG, 2011; SJPG, 2006: 13). In the UK, this is more observable in policy discourse than in practice where measures have primarily focused on revising the choices of low-income households through welfare withdrawal or suspension. By contrast, the National-led coalition government has, in addition to increasing work-related welfare conditionality, sought to embed a greater degree of control and surveillance in the administrative architecture of social security in New Zealand. In 2012, ‘income management’ was introduced for 16 and 17 year olds and 18-year-old parents to address a ‘permissive approach in the benefit system’ (WWG, 2011: 47). In addition, a range of ‘social obligations’ have been introduced for benefit recipients with payments suspended if claimants do not: pass drug screenings; enrol young children in education and healthcare programmes; or complete household budgeting training (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2014). Arguably, the heightened paternalism and governmentality that characterizes these reforms positions low-income social security claimants as ‘subjects of the state rather than full rights-bearing citizens’ (Bielefeld, 2015: 99).

Despite differing strategies underpinning their reform agendas, NZ and UK political administrations have similarly presumed and problematized the choices and behaviours of low-income households and pitted them against active, self-sufficient citizens. Within this context, the status and rights of social citizenship have become progressively more ‘conditional upon certain kinds of ideal citizens and behaviours and grounded in

classificatory distinctions between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ citizens’ (Jensen and Tyler, 2015: 2). As a result, social rights are becoming ever more ‘proportionate to the market value of the claimants’ (Marshall, 1950: 28). Given that the provision of social rights is designed to mitigate such proportionality, these developments have relegated citizenship ‘from status to contract’ (Handler, 2004: 2) in a way that is increasing material and status divisions between ‘poor’ and ‘rich’ citizens. The remainder of this paper examines what implications this has for the character and experience of social citizenship, and its capacity to safeguard an equality of status citizen members.

Methods

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study undertaken between 2013 and 2014 in New Zealand and the UK. This study explored lived experiences of inequality and social citizenship amongst poor and rich citizens. To capture the multi-dimensional nature of relative advantage and disadvantage, a purposive sampling strategy was used to identify: employed individuals living in affluent areas on an income well above the national average, and unemployed individuals living in deprived areas below the relative poverty line. In the first instance, participants were recruited by leafleting small geographical administrative areas that were classified as some of the most affluent and deprived (top 30 per cent) according to official statistics. A smaller number of participants were also recruited using gatekeepers. All participants were offered a shopping voucher as a thank you for their time. Ethical standards were adhered to throughout the research process.

In total, 50 qualitative interviews were undertaken: 28 interviews with ‘deprived’ respondents (15 UK and 13 NZ) and 22 interviews with ‘affluent’ respondents (13 UK and 9 NZ). Interviews lasted between 40 and 105 minutes and the same interview schedule (except some minor revisions) was used in both countries. This facilitated a structured ‘conversation’ to explore lay accounts of social citizenship and welfare that are often absent from citizenship debates (Dwyer, 2002; Orton, 2006: 251). The first part of the interview asked respondents about their social networks, engagement with public affairs and local community. Respondents were then asked about their material circumstance and their feelings towards these. Following this, a range of vignettes was presented to respondents to facilitate an applied discussion about welfare, inequality and social citizenship.

Many of the questions asked were open-ended. In doing so, it was possible to explore how research participants interpreted abstract concepts on their own terms and how their diverse vantage points and experiences lead to differing conceptions of social citizenship. Based on the qualitative data generated, thematic analysis was undertaken to identify commonalities and differences emerging between and within the two sample groups.

Lived Experiences of ‘Poor’ and ‘Rich’ Citizenship

Through the course of fieldwork, all deprived respondents recognised that they were on a low income and the vast majority felt that they did not have enough money ‘to have a good quality of life’ⁱ. These individuals drew upon a range of strategies to overcome financial ‘shocks’ and hardships arising from austerity measures and welfare reforms. Confronted with the restriction or suspension of benefits, many respondents struggled to meet the basic needs of their household:

I’m unemployed and we can’t survive on the money the government gives us. Friends lend me money and my son who is 27 who is still sharing with me and giving me as much as he possibly can (D2NZⁱⁱ)

I shop everywhere... if they’ve got an offer on I will buy a load of it. So it saves me money. But erm, I’m very careful with money... I don’t have lights on at night (D15UK)

This contrasted strongly with the pecuniary position of affluent participants who all (except one) felt that they had enough money ‘to have a good quality of life’. Overall, constraints on their ‘standard of living’ tended to centre on post-material concerns such as a lack of time with friends and family. In seeking to explain, and at times justify, their financial position, affluent respondents regularly referred to the ‘hard work’ and ‘sacrifices’ they had made to ‘build a good life’ for themselves and their family:

I’ve earnt a good salary for a good number of years and I have assets and whatever...I’ve paid a lot of tax over the last 20 or 30 years so why shouldn’t I get to enjoy life? (A4NZ)

As a taxpayer, I’ve worked hard, made sensible choices and put a lot into the system... (A9UK)

Overwhelmingly, affluent respondents tended to understand their citizenship status and contribution in reference to their employment, tax contribution and earnings recordⁱⁱⁱ. In this sense, affluent respondents fulfilled and endorsed the status of citizen worker and the valorised condition of independent, earned citizenship (Orton, 2006; Van Houdt *et al.*, 2011). By contrast, deprived respondents struggled to defend their claims making on the same basis.

Over three quarters of deprived respondents described feelings of shame or stigma associated with being unemployed. Whilst many of these individuals affirmed their civic contribution through voluntary, community, care or domestic work, they nonetheless felt their employment status undermined their standing in society. Many provided accounts of the negative treatment they had experienced and the feelings of marginality, and isolation that arose as a result. For these individuals, unemployment precluded them from the validating dogma of ‘neo-liberal citizenship’ (Woolford and Nelund, 2013). Their distance from the labour market not only alienated them from the material trappings of active citizenship, but also from effective participation as an equal citizen with a shared sense of common belonging and contribution:

I always feel judged for not being in work. When people walk past you. I know they judge me. Tend to walk away or give you that look. I know WINZ [Work and Income: income support and employment agency] judge me. They talk down to me. (D7NZ)
If I was working, I would probably think more about voting and what have you... about my rights and fitting into society more... when you're working you do feel as though you fit in more. (D6UK)

Through an applied discussion about the principles underpinning social citizenship, deprived respondents discussed their experiences of the social security system and their interaction with welfare institutions. Despite fulfilling newly introduced conditions and requirements, many felt that their entitlements were regularly brought into question by welfare agency staff. This caused a great deal of stress and anxiety for respondents and, at times, undermined their sense of self-worth. In New Zealand, an increasingly paternalistic approach to welfare governance meant deprived respondents often had to justify household expenditure and needs to welfare agencies and institutions. In order to safeguard their social assistance, some of these individuals regulated their behaviour and reactions whilst engaging with agency staff. These individuals expressed anger and resentment at having to resort to such strategies but also feared the removal of benefits if they did not conform to a behavioural expectation of deference:

You could apply for ten jobs... and they're like "is that all you've done?"... like they talk down to you kind of thing. Like you've never done enough... (D11UK)
Fortunately I go to the [X] office and they have no toilet so when I get exasperated I can say "I'm sorry I've got to go to the loo" and I can leave the office... because you're on a benefit... they all think that you have not got any mental capacity. They think you're bloomin' stupid (D11NZ)

Across both countries, many of those claiming social security on the basis of a disability, illness or being lone parents had experienced increasingly governmental welfare reforms that extended work-related obligations and procedural surveillance. Referring directly to the treatment they had received from welfare institutions, the majority did not feel like they were able to claim the social rights to which they were, at least theoretically, entitled.

Battling to get the scraps only to be humiliated and belittled by the people at WINZ (D13NZ)
Like I say, we don't have no rights, full stop. (D4UK)

The significant amount of procedural work that went into claiming, defending and fighting for social rights contrasted significantly with the experience of affluent respondents. When asked, almost all affluent respondents felt that they were entitled to social rights and principally justified their entitlement based on prior employment and earnings.

... having contributed you know both of us throughout our lives as being higher rate taxpayers then yes all those things [education, NHS, social security] we do feel totally entitled to use them. (A12UK)

Whilst these individuals felt that they had social rights, these were predominantly interpreted as the reserve of those who had ‘fallen on hard times’ and ‘not people like us’. Rather than a shared entitlement of collective membership, social rights (particularly social security and social housing) were understood as a measure of absolute last resort for households that found themselves ‘in a desperate situation’. Many affluent respondents felt that they would have to relinquish some degree of personal control if they were no longer financially autonomous from the state:

I don't feel like I want to have to rely on the state... I've planned that should I need to downsize the house and things I've got the capacity to do that... I feel that I've got more control if I can look after myself... (A8UK)

When discussing aspects of unemployment, poverty and inequality, many affluent respondents thought that a degree of paternalism over those claiming low-income social security was a necessary regulatory function of the welfare system. These individuals felt that this prevented ‘a problem of culture’ and ‘poor lifestyle choices’ developing amongst benefit recipients:

I'm a believer in the hand up rather than the hand out, I mean I think... if the government is providing x hundred dollars a week to a family, I think how that money is spent should have some control on it... so that it can't be exchanged for booze, cigarettes and betting (A9NZ)

For these individuals, social security was often seen as a tool for a societal residuum that both required and benefited from a degree of paternalism in welfare governance. In this sense, some affluent respondents thought there were, and should be, differentiated forms of citizenship where status and rights varied according to an individual's position, behaviour and civic contribution.

This aligned with the experience of deprived respondents who often felt that their material situation and engagement with welfare institutions excluded them from mainstream societal activities and opportunities. Some individuals felt that conditions and surveillance were unevenly applied with ‘one rule for us, and another for everyone else’. As such, both deprived and affluent respondents often gave expression to the idea that there were divergent terms of citizenship unevenly applied to different members according to their ‘class’, ‘income’ and ‘place’.

While I'm kind of addressed by the state's rules and obligations... I also feel that there are other opportunities and resources that are not made available to me because of my income level and education and I guess to a degree my class. (D4NZ)
Opportunities and education and work and leisure and exercise, fitness, opportunities in all those kind of spheres are out of reach because my partner and I don't have enough money... (D1UK)

The significant effort that went into ‘trying to survive’ on low-income social security meant that others felt like they were being ‘punished’ and ‘tortured’ by welfare

institutions and agencies. The cumulative effects of financial hardship and social stigma appeared to cause a significant degree of psychological trauma and stress for some beneficiaries.

In this country we're not entitled to a quality of life... we're only entitled to exist... I just wait for each day to pass... I wake up in the morning and I just can't wait for the day to pass so I can go back to sleep. (D6NZ)

For the majority of deprived respondents, their socio-economic marginality appeared to undermine a sense of citizen identity and common belonging. When asked, only a quarter of deprived respondents felt as if they were social citizens. Many felt that their worsening financial situation, arising from austerity measures and welfare reforms, excluded them from the material and figurative promises of citizenship. Some felt unable or unwilling to conform to prescribed forms of responsible citizenship centring on paid employment. Strikingly, a number of respondents said they would feel more like a social citizen if they were employed so that they could participate in domains of life that they were currently excluded from. Others felt that they lacked core life opportunities and social rights accessible to others:

Before the reforms I used to be able to cope and life was quite good... You know they weren't extravagant but at least you felt like part of society but this government, this particular party wants to isolate us (D11NZ)

I know that if I had a job I'd feel more like a social citizen than I do now at the moment being unemployed. I would feel as though I fitted into society more. Yeah if that happened... I would feel more like a social citizen. (D3UK)

I don't feel like a valued citizen at all. (D12NZ)

This contrasted starkly with the experience of affluent respondents. Overwhelmingly, these individuals felt that they were social citizens whose rights and responsibilities were conceived on a basis that was conducive to their lived experience and capabilities:

I think I'm a social citizen. I think as a taxpayer as a contributor to society I have the right to certain expectations but I also believe I have certain responsibilities to my country and to my fellow men. (A6NZ)

Yes I feel that I've got social rights probably...well... on the basis that I'm contributing financially to society (A13UK)

Overall, participants demonstrated how they occupied radically divergent 'material and immaterial spaces of citizenship' (Painter and Philo, 1995: 108). Due to the material and symbolic significance of inequality, deprived respondents were less likely to feel they had social rights. Perhaps most importantly though, these respondents were also less likely to feel like they *were* social citizens. For these individuals, the promises of equal membership and status were undermined by recent developments that worsened their lived experiences of inequality. By contrast, affluent citizens were more likely to feel like they had 'a stake in society'. This material and symbolic authentication affirmed their belonging and identity as 'active, productive and contributing' social citizens.

Conclusion

This paper confirms that those in a position of relative deprivation and affluence tend to experience divergent forms of ‘poor’ and ‘rich’ citizenship respectively. Despite policy programmes idiosyncratic to their institutional context, New Zealand and the UK exhibit a similarly bifurcated system of citizenship that appears to calcify, rather than moderate, inequalities arising from the vagaries of market capitalism.

As previously stated, the formal rights conferred to individuals are purported to safeguard an equality of status between citizen members. However, as this paper demonstrates, neither affluent nor deprived respondents tended to feel ‘equal with respect to the rights and duties with which that status is endowed’ (Marshall, 1950: 28). Both groups tended to think there were divergent terms of citizenship that were unevenly applied to themselves and others according to their position, behaviour and civic contribution. Both groups also differed significantly in the extent to which they felt like social citizens. By virtue of their earnings and employment record, affluent respondents were much more likely to feel that they had a legitimate claim to the status and rights of social citizenship. For deprived respondents, their lived experience of poor citizenship appeared to undermine a sense of citizen identity and common belonging. For these individuals, the distributional promise of citizenship had little purchase against the backdrop of regressive cuts and increasingly paternalistic forms of welfare governance. The inequalities arising from this did appear to have ‘cut too deep’ (Marshall, 1950: 76) and in a way that represents a further degradation of the ‘second-class citizenship’ experienced by many (Dwyer, 1998; Humpage, 2008).

Tonkiss and Bloom (2015) suggest that research exploring the exclusionary potential of social citizenship has tended to assume it is the absence or corruption of social citizenship that leads to inequities in resource and status. However, the findings presented in this paper suggest that citizenship can be understood as an instituted process through which existing forms of exclusion and inclusion are produced and maintained by the State. Overall, the evidence suggests that social citizenship, in its liberal permutation, is becoming increasingly bifurcated so that citizens are becoming ‘differently equal’ with respect to their status and rights.

ⁱ All respondents were asked whether they felt they had enough money to have a good quality of life.

ⁱⁱ D/A = deprived/affluent, # = respondent identifier, NZ/UK = country identifier

ⁱⁱⁱ All respondents were asked what they understood a social citizen to be and then the extent to which they felt like a social citizen. If participants were unsure, they were offered a description of someone that had certain social rights and responsibilities.

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