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The Discourse of ‘Choice’: Retrieving Individual Agency on New Terms

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Abstract

A discourse of ‘choice’ has recently emerged as a response to contemporary problems of the western welfare state. However contending notions of choice reflects tensions between conservative liberal critiques of the welfare state and those emerging from progressive social movements. Pivotal to both critiques has been the value accorded to individual agency, which can be understood in terms of three distinct dimensions: the economic, the political and self-responsibility. This paper explores the shifting locus of agency over the last century and a half, from the individual to the state and back to the individual, in relation to the development and transformation of the welfare state. In recent years, conservative liberalism has dominated how individual agency has been understood and expressed. However this paper argues that it is important for individual agency to be retrieved from conservative liberalism and placed into the service of collectivist politics and social justice discourse.

Introduction

In recent years, in an increasing array of arenas through to public policy, the capacity to exercise 'choice' and to make 'good' choices has been valorised implicitly as an inherently good and desirable end in itself that does not require justification or explanation. This discourse of choice has emerged in relation to endeavours to address contemporary problems of the late 20th century western welfare state, reflecting a wide-spread concern that the welfare state and other agencies in relation to it have appropriated or otherwise undermined individual agency. Choice, though, is contested terrain. It reflects tensions between conservative liberal critiques of the welfare state and those emerging from progressive social movements. Pivotal to both critiques has been the value accorded to individual agency, and concern about its apparent erosion. This paper explores this pivotal but contested issue of individual agency, to retrieve it from the dominant discourse of conservative liberalism. It looks to the impetus towards individual agency that underpinned the cultural critique expressed by the late 20th century social movements.

To explore this issue, this paper begins by identifying three elements of choice in choice discourse currently appearing in the public arena. These are the economic, the political, and self-responsibility. These dimensions of choice are all underpinned by the idea of individual agency. Accordingly, the paper then examines the shifting locus of different socio-historical constructions of agency, referring to three phases. The first stage involves the 19th century classic liberal notions of individual agency which constitutes the 'natural' condition of 'man' as 'freedom'. This is contrasted to conceptions of feudalism fatalism. The second stage corresponds to the rise of the welfare state from early to latter 20th century. This period is characterised by a shift of agency from the province of the individual to 'society', where 'fairness' was espoused as a social goal to which all people were entitled and was to be guaranteed by the state. The third and current stage involves a reassertion of agency as the province of the individual, although on quite distinct terms to classic liberalism in spite of otherwise important continuities.

Over the last century, the welfare state has been the central bulwark against the reassertion of the immense and socially-destabilising poverty of the 19th century market-dominated society. Its material successes in terms of distributive justice have been considerable although unequally shared. It is also economically fragile and potentially subject to very serious reversals. In negotiating these problems in the 21st century, the problem of individual agency should be at its heart, as it is something that is valued across the political spectrum. To date, conservative liberalism has dominated how individual agency has been understood and expressed, while its critics have thus far not adequately dealt with it. However it is important for individual agency to be retrieved from conservative liberalism and placed into the service of collectivist politics and social justice discourse.

Choice and its three dimensions of individual agency

Community service messages are increasingly a common place particularly on free-to-air television. Recently some community service announcements have stressed (literally) the issue of 'choice' and the welcome or unwelcome outcomes arising from them. In one example, a community service message on the dangers of drink driving presents us with a young man telling the viewer about the severe spinal injuries he received in a car accident. The young man tells us

he is in this condition because had made ‘the wrong choice’ by choosing to drink alcohol then drive. Another one an automobile accidents was televised just before the Easter holidays, which is a notoriously bad time for car accidents. This time, viewers were urged to ‘make good driving choices’, such as taking rest breaks. In these instances, exercising (good) choices is an act of *self-responsibility*.

Another recent advertisement on television promoted a specific brand and type of head-ache relief medication. In it, a man states it is ‘his choice’ to go out drinking of an evening and ‘his choice’ the following morning to take a head-ache relief medication to prevent his subsequent hang-over from interfering with his work. This is a commercial aimed at selling a product, so the *economic* dimension of choice is quite apparent – the company is hoping to convince potential customers to choose their product over competing ones. In addition, though, the advertising strategy invites potential customers to see identify themselves as some-one who is in charge of their own life – in this case as some-one who knows how to have a good time and still turn up the next day in sufficiently good condition to carry out their work responsibilities. That is, there is assumed to be a positive identification with the notion of being *self-responsible*.

More recent examples from commercial advertisements emphasise choice based on good information. An insurance company television commercial states that simply rolling over your insurance means your company does not have to work to keep your custom. The viewer is urged to learn more about the competing providers, and in particular the products of the company running the commercial. Clearly the viewer is being asked to make an *economic* choice: invited to engage in choosing from an array of products with hopes by the advertiser that their own product might be chosen. Secondly, they are also being invited to make good choices that benefit their own welfare, that is, to be *self-responsible*, as indicated by their being asked to be active rather than passive when insurance falls due. Thirdly, they are being asked to make and informed choice based on ‘good’ information. This is a *political* choice in the context of new legislative disclosure requirements: the potential buyer can use the information to decide for themselves without mediation by, for instance, an expert or government agency which product they will choose. This third point is more clearly illustrated in the example below.

Recent correspondence from a new non-state power supplier encourages its customers to choose one of its energy plans. The choices on offer are the status quo, a 5% cost reduction, or a 3% energy cost reduction that includes some of the power sources from renewable resources. Choice here has an *economic* dimension in that the customer is being offered choice from a range of products offered by that same company, ostensibly to provide sufficient diversity to avoid their custom being taken elsewhere. The customers are also being encouraged to exercise choices that will benefit their welfare from their own perspective: the trade-off between electricity costs and environmental protection. In this way making choices is associated with being *self-responsible*. It is also a *political* choice when understood in terms of the context of public debate about the unacceptable amount of greenhouse emissions and the current federal government’s commitment to reducing them. A stronger way of expressing this is that the customer is able to indirectly express a political view on public policy priorities, in this case their views on the relative importance of greenhouse emission reduction vis-à-vis the cost of electricity.

The above examples indicate some of the ways that choice discourse is entering the public domain, and its different elements. Underpinning all three elements of choice is the idea of individual agency. This has important implications for the rationale and the ways that choice discourse has been articulated through welfare state reform and public policy. The following section examines changing constructions of agency and its shifting locus over the last century and a half.

Agency as a historical construct

The significance of the pronounced assertion of the discourse of 'choice' in recent years and its corresponding valorisation of individual agency tacitly implies a perceived past and possibly prevailing condition characterised by impoverished individual agency. However, agency is a social construction meaningful only in its historical context. With this in mind, this paper identifies three major historical phases of 19th century classic liberalism, 20th century welfare state and discourses of 'fairness', and late 20th-early 21st century neo-liberalism. Each phase reflects distinct approaches to agency, and illustrates the shifting locus on agency: originally located in the individual, its shift to the state, and then more recently the shift back towards the individual.

Classic liberalism and agency

Classic liberalism was defined against a critique of the apparent fatalism of feudalism. Feudalism involved beliefs about the fixedness of human nature at birth, embodied traditional common law rights and obligations, and entrenched power relations and property rights associated with the monarchy and divine authority. Thus the feudal order presented an obstacle to the social change being promulgated by a new wealthy economic class. This class aspired to put the successes of the scientific revolution to practical application to create new sources of wealth, and on this basis they challenged feudal arrangements. For instance, they promoted land alienation and dispossession of peasants to substitute their labour with machines, new forms of production and social relationships such as the factory system, and urbanisation as concentrations of peoples and resources. Feudalism was seen as lack of freedom in that feudal custom and ways of life pre-determined individuals' fates and provided no incentives for change. Accordingly, liberalism conceptualised freedom as, for instance, ending peasant bondage to land, land-owners tenuous land tenure according to the whims of the monarch, and pre-determined roles or class expectations and obligations that might forestall alternative possibilities (Shapiro 1958, 27-39; Merquior 1991).

In this sense, individualism was a fundamental tenet of 19th century classic liberalism and its subsequent reformulations through the 20th century. Furthermore, agency was considered the province of the individual. This is a philosophical position that equates individual agency with 'freedom'. That is, the 'free' individual is by definition recognised as rational, self-interested, purposeful, and entrepreneurial. Failure to express or experience agency is to be 'flawed'; for your agency to be undermined is to lose your freedom. The welfare of individuals accordingly resides with their own agency and their freedom lies in their taking responsibility for themselves. The classic liberal state was one dedicated to the freedom to act on your own agency without interference - 'negative freedom' (Berlin 1969; Merquior 1991, 15-29). The absolute and social

value of individual agency, or freedom, was sufficiently high that state coercion directed at individuals deemed recalcitrant about their own welfare responsibilities, such as the 'idle unemployed', was legitimised.

Agency as the province of the individual was an economic position as well, in that it was a cornerstone of capitalism: capitalist market relations are predicated on the agency of individuals. Indeed, the market was understood as a natural mechanism emerging from, and allowing the expression of, peoples' supposed human nature. The role of the liberal state was to maintain the conditions of freedom, and thus of individual agency, through protecting the free market from 'interference' (Shapiro 1958, 27-39). Free market advocates defended the market as the most efficient and fair means for producing and distributing goods and services. More importantly for this discussion, it was also a main guarantor of freedom for the way it allowed individuals to determine their own welfare arrangements. That is, the market was a means of exercising choice according to one's own volition, and in this sense economic and political agency were conflated. Furthermore, the market created an apparently centre-less network of transactions that allowed a minimalist role for the state – only as protector of the transactions and underpinning contracts. However it also had a moral dimension: exposure to market forces provided a means for disciplining the individual into acting on their own agency: failure to do so or do so successfully could have dire effects on their welfare, such as failing to meet the minimum requirements to sustain life. In this sense, participation in the market individual agency of self-responsibility and conflated political and economic agency.

The classic liberal order had emerged from supplantation of formal power from the monarchy and to the propertied classes, with rule by divine authority being replaced by self-government (Shapiro 1958; Merquior 1991, 15-29). As the guarantor of freedom, the state's role was to provide the legal framework to protect the freedom of the market. This role involved, for instance, enforcing contracts, preventing or dismantling monopolies or other means of price or wage-fixing, and ensuring recalcitrant (such as 'lazy') individuals were coerced into a condition of freedom. Thus the responsibility of the state towards the individual was one of establishing and up-holding the 'rules of the game'. Agency as a province of the individual, then, is central to classic liberalism, philosophically, economically and politically. It is a particularly strong element of Anglo-derived liberalism from which dominant Australian political institutions and culture have derived. This stands in some contrast to European liberalism which was tempered by other factors which could better countenance a more active role of the state in mediating between the individual and the social world (Bramsted & Melhuish 1978, 39-52). Nonetheless, freedom is the embodiment of individual agency, and this is primarily expressed through capitalist market relations and enforced through self-government of the propertied classes.

The philosophy of individual agency in classic liberalism located blame with the individual when they failed to thrive, and accordingly legitimised coercive action towards them. However, the latter 19th century was characterised by massive social change associated with mass poverty and unemployment, and unstable domestic and international economies. As a backlash to the misery of the working poor, collective action of the workers movement emerged as did political philosophies as a critical counterpoint to liberalism (Beilharz 1989, 137-141; Mishra 1981, 3-8). Socialism proposed a new kind of relationship between social world and individual where the causes of misfortune were located in the social sphere, in particular the economic, rather than

with the individual. Accommodations to liberal philosophy in the face of these developments recognised the importance of social context as a contributor to the outcomes of individuals. For instance, ‘unemployment’ began to be seen as a social condition and not just the property of the individual (Walters 1994, 273-75). Liberal ideas of freedom had been reconceptualised to recognise some role for the state in welfare outcomes – ‘positive liberty’ (Berlin 1969). Individual agency nonetheless remained the bulwark of freedom.

Liberal accommodations: state agency and welfare

Overwhelming harsh circumstances forced the labour movement into pragmatic politics to deal with class-based welfare issues. The precedents established by liberal accommodations above and the strategic use of the universal franchise saw the proliferation of an increased array of state interventions into the market. By early 20th century, protection of domestic economies put some limits on international trade in efforts by the state to maintain domestic employment; new forums for arbitrating conflict between employer and employee groups and for negotiating wages and conditions became new state responsibilities; and some state involvement in income protection for some people such as the aged and widowed, through insurance schemes or direct income transfer. The liberal accommodations established generally unintended precedents for legitimising socialised or collectivised forms of provision in which the public sector became an important locus for their production and delivery (Ashford 1986, 30-44). In Australia, its colonial heritage had fostered a comparatively strongly interventionist state at least in provision of industrial and urban infrastructure in the absence of other ways of funding them (Dicky 1980, 96-140). While poverty was not eliminated and despite the hegemonic power of individual agency and coercive self-responsibility, significant precedents were established which increased the areas the economic life for which the state was then deemed responsible, with enormous repercussions in the latter half of the 20th century.

After WWII the trend towards socialised liberal democracy was strengthened to various degrees across the western world in an era that seemed to promise endless prosperity in the context of an increasingly educated and politically mobilised citizenry. That is, outcomes for individuals were increasingly seen as constructed out of social conditions to which not every-one was equally exposed. The areas of state responsibility to which it was held accountable via the democratic process continued to expand into more areas of social and economic life emerged (Ashford 1980, 294-99; Watts 1987, 108-19). This was an uneven development, with social democratic reforms being stronger in European nations than in English speaking ones, and with US as the least developed in this direction. In the first half of 20th century, class had the significant framing issue for claims about social justice and fairness, and economic and socio-economic issues dominated. By the latter 20th century, the proliferation of policy areas increasingly differentiated sources of disadvantage and difference, such as age, gender, ethnicity and race, in the context of economic inequality. Increasingly collectivised public provision particularly in the areas of health and education were made available, as well as continuing in other areas considered important for quality of life, such as water and power supply. To the collective politics of unionism were added movements and organisations promoting their constituencies’ agendas in a context of greater capacity to destabilise government and influence elections. The public sector emerged as a significant economic sector operating according to a rationale quite different to the market, as a locus of production and distribution of goods and services. The state’s role in managing the

economy was also increased, as demand management strategies legitimised claims from other sources for income support and supplementation by the state.

In Australia, by the 1970s, the notion of equal opportunity essentially encapsulated the welfare orientation of the state in the attempt to reconcile individual responsibility with that of the state, and to reconcile liberalism with the increasing socialisation of state policy (Dicky 1980, 213-34; Watts 1987, 108-19). Notions of fairness and social justice lay in the state achieving the preconditions for a successful economy which could provide employment and wealth generation capacity from which all would benefit. It also lay in universal provision to ensure important welfare requirements were available for all, and targeted provision to address diverse and particularistic welfare needs – such as for groups identified as experiencing disadvantage. The combination of accelerated economic growth and social stability arising from the changes saw massive growth in welfare policies, market interventions, the growth of the public sector, and massive increase in prosperity.

Until the early 1970s hopes that poverty would be eliminated were dashed. Socio-economic issues, festering particularly in relation to issues of disadvantage, became more acute as western governments attempted to negotiate the 1970s economic crisis with economic austerity measures that impacted heavily on the working poor and middle classes. In addition, from across the political spectrum, a new set of tensions arose in relation to the new institutional arrangements of the welfare state. To the on-going criticism of the market were added criticism of the welfare state: both the public sector as the market alternative and the policy framework over-arching its operation came under challenge (Offe 1984; Pierson 1991, 69-5; Garton 1990, 151-71). These tensions lay with the institutional arrangements of the welfare state which had generated new kinds of problems, exacerbated by policies of economic austerity.

Critiques of welfare state agency

Progressive social movements

From the 1970s onwards, popular criticisms proliferated about the apparent failure of the welfare state and liberal democracy to adequately address a broad range of welfare issues (Keane 1984). From this general temper of discontent coalesced forms of social and political action often outside the usual political conventions of party politics and lobbying. An underlying premise of this otherwise quite diverse social movement was the value accorded to individual agency and a concern it was being stifled.

The counterculture was a radical movement associated with the new left. It differed from the old left by eschewing 'bureaucratic socialism' as merely a tyranny of a kind different to the tyranny of the market. The counterculture endeavoured to create the conditions, at least on a micro-scale, for individuals' direct immersion and participation in human-scale political, economic and social practices. Their project involved a cultural critique rather than instrumental political action, where 'the medium is the message'. The main efforts towards social change were not directed at public policy but to changes in how people lived their lives (Pakulski 1991 refers to 'the politics of moral protest' and Melucci 1989 to the 'nomads of the future'). 'The system', or more specifically 'industrial society', was seen as contributing to a culture of disempowerment,

alienation, and spiritual malaise. The ethos of the counter-culture was to lead an 'authentic' life - outside the regulation, regimentation, and dehumanisation of industrialised and bureaucratised society (for a discussion on the Australian movement see Munro-Clarke 1984; Altman 1988 and Docker 1988). The counterculture was dedicated to creating a new society based on the two pillars of 'personal power' and 'community power' (Cock 1979). In the early 1980s the Society for a Sustainable Society, an organisation within the counter-culture, advocated 'self-reliance' as a key notion, referring to economic and personal self-autonomy and self-responsibility (see the AASC newsletter *News From Home*). These are examples of some of the ways that concerns about individual agency were expressed in the counter-culture.

The professions of social work and a number of health and educational areas also were targets of criticism by the temper of discontent, seen as part of the 'system' that controlled and dehumanised people (see Illich et al 1977; Yeatman 1994). Interestingly, many in these professions shared this view and sought to revamp their professions from within. For instance, the community development movement emerged - its role ambiguously a supplement to the institutionalised welfare system as well as alternative to it (Ife 1999, 212-15; Kenny 1994). A central aim was to assist in the creation of conditions in which individuals could regain control of their lives, and for communities of people to become more self-sustaining. This involved the development of human-scale forms of welfare provision, that was both more under individual or local control and more responsive to needs. This form of welfare service was at odds with conventional elitist and bureaucratic forms of professionalism and professional services. In this way, revitalising of individual agency was a paramount consideration, expressed through discourses of disempowerment and empowerment. The community development and community welfare movement generally became more professionalised during the 1980s and onwards, remaining dependent on state funding with some subsequent loss of autonomy.

At the same time there was a more generalised although less radical demand from organised citizenry for an expansion of opportunities for more direct avenues of political participation in public policy beyond what liberal democracy historically had offered (Carter & Stokes 1998, 1-2). Direct participation was important in two ways. Firstly, it was seen as a means to improve the capacity of the state to more effectively respond to diverse needs. Welfare policy and state regulation was criticised for being insufficiently fine-grained to address either individual needs or the needs of specific cohorts such as those based on gender, ethnicity and age. For instance, industrial regulations tended to protect the able-bodied male worker more than other groups such as women and the less-able bodied; women tended to be more reliant than men on welfare payments and so bore a disproportionate burden of surveillance and other invasions of privacy; Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities were often placed at the receiving end of culturally-insensitive policies. Secondly, participation as a direct experience for the participant was valued in its own right; authority for participation was effectively by virtue of being an affected person or otherwise having an interest. Governments began to respond in a variety of ways including providing opportunities for peak bodies of selected civil society organisations to be consulted, and provision for submissions from organisations and individuals over policy changes. These developments have contributed to a popular expectation to be heard by policy-makers and involved in policy.

These progressive movements and citizens' demands mobilised around a wide range of issues. Underpinning the issues, however, was the persisting thread of individual agency and the value accorded to it, from radical countercultural projects to more mainstream demands for enhanced avenues of political participation. Individual agency has been couched in particularistic ways, such as self-reliance, empowerment, self-management, and political participation; in some instances has involved a retreat from pragmatic politics of political parties and the government policy-making arena in favour of lifestyle politics. Nonetheless, its strong momentum continues today.

New Right

Since the late 1970s the political ascendancy of the new right has assured that policy makers have been acquainted with their views on the problem of the welfare state. The market was seen as burdened with the cost of the 'un-productive' public sector, and putting a strain on the private sector at a time when international competitiveness was essential to national economic survival (Pierson 1996, 1-9). The central problematic for the new right was that of 'dependency'. Dependency refers to the undermining of freedom through the imposition of state regulation on the market and all spheres of social life. It was often expressed through the discourse of 'the nanny state' where people were cosseted 'from the cradle to the grave' and thus condemned to live in a state of un-freedom (for instance, see Segalman and Marsland 1989, 9-14; Hayek 1994). Regulation of the market was seen as a prime problem for its contribution to undermining the productive capacities of the economy. For instance, labour market regulation was strongly criticised for providing buffers between workers' performance and the consequences: workers were equally rewarded for unequal performance and thus incentives to improve were greatly reduced. Managers were seen as hobbled by regulations which underpinned their capacities to respond effectively and in a timely way to changing circumstances or new opportunities. In this sense, individual agency was seen as being undermined by a regulatory framework that was antithetical to freedom.

The welfare system was seen as contributing to dependency of a different kind, again associated with both de-linking people from the consequences of their actions and providing disincentives for their own agency. Direct income support was criticised for fostering passivity in those who received it, as it was seen to remove incentive for people to take responsibility for themselves. The collective provision of goods and services was seen as problematic on a number of fronts. Apart from de-linking individual actions from consequences, it left to the state and other agencies decisions that should remain with the individual about how they lived their life (Downes 1998; Harvey 2005, 64-7). They were suspicious of state policies that determined schooling and health care, believing these kinds of decisions should be driven from below by those engaging in the services. Pressure groups were seen as unduly influencing politicians, as politicians caved in to misguided though popular demands. Welfare policies were seen to be in the hands on bureaucrats and professionals, who acted for and on behalf of people without an authoritative basis to do so. For instance, bureaucrats operated according to bureaucratic models which by nature are formal rational modes not necessarily aligned with the substantive goals of the policy. Professionals were seen as a self-serving group with a foot-hold in the state apparatus and educational institutions, operating according to specialised forms of knowledge and practice not open to public scrutiny and accountability. Thus the democratic mandate was not considered

an appropriate basis for determination of policy as it was a significant factor in driving policies that ultimately undermined individual agency.

The solution for the new right was elegant: market mechanisms displace non-market forms of production and distribution, and form the basis of political/economic choice along the lines inspired by classic liberalism (for instance, see Downes 1998; Osbourne and Gaebler 1992). That is, marketise and converge the public sector into the private sector; disempower civil society organisations such as unions and welfare lobbies that mobilise and speak collectively; reduce the power and authority of professionalism in welfare-related areas including in educational curriculum which reinforce their knowledge base; and deregulation policies to introduce more diversity and flexibility through all areas of social and economic life. This strategy is not simply a narrow economic argument. It is a bid to restore the apparently lost state of freedom, of individual agency, and the right of all people to the freedom of experiencing the consequences of their own actions (Williams 1996, 249). This is also seen as a fundamental issue for improving economic performance from which would benefit.

Choice, public sector reform, and social and industrial policy

Conservative liberalism has had a strong influence on the political agendas of governments in Australia and more broadly in the west since the late 1970s. The recent trend towards corporatisation, out-sourcing and privatisation of public sectors assets such as air travel telecommunications, and power and water supply has underpinned public sector structural reform, strengthened in Australia by the recommendations of the Hilmer Report (see Australian Parliament 2003). These developments have been defended by their advocates for introducing competition into the production and distribution of collective goods and services that were previously immune to it. This development is linked to a strong economic agenda associated with public and private sector productivity and efficiency issues. They introduce economic 'choice' in the narrow sense of creating opportunity to choose from a range of products and services, contemporaneously or sequentially depending on the funding arrangements. However these structural reforms and their role in the construction of 'choice' are not entirely governed by economic considerations. They also reflect strategies to improve responsiveness, referring to popular demands for a more diverse array of state provision and also more control over them by those in receipt of them. In this sense, these broader changes towards marketisation reflect attempts at improved capacity for a more direct political choice without mediation and collectivisation through political processes. They also reflect attempts towards improved capacity for self-responsibility through opportunities for active direct engagement in how individuals choose to address their own welfare needs. The new legislative disclosure requirements noted above are an important development to facilitate all three dimensions of choice.

An example of this has been the outsourcing of the Commonwealth Employment Service to private and not-for-profit providers, their funding agreements conditional on compliance with state policies and directives about matters such as eligibility and monitoring of the benefit claimants (Grant 1998). In the first instance, the provider has the choice to enter into the funding arrangement or not, when faced with funding conditions at odds with its mission such as many voluntary organisations have experienced (Laragy 2002). Secondly, benefit claimants are

provided with a choice of providers, much as a consumer may exercise choice in the commercial marketplace. It allows for exercising a political choice in that the product is a state-funded service with a line of accountability back to the state and to the community. It allows for the exercise of self-responsibility through requiring the individual to make a choice about which provider is most beneficial for their needs.

Moreover a further step towards self-responsibility is introduced through the implementation of contractual relationships between welfare claimant and the provider, such as for the Mutual Obligation policy (Moss 2001: 3-8). This policy involves a choice in the limited sense of choosing or not choosing to enter into a contract with a provider in order to access benefits: on the provider's terms, and in turn set by the government policy enforced through funding conditions. This capacity for choice is intended to enforce self-responsibility upon the benefit claimant – through fulfilling the conditions of the benefit such as demonstrated evidence of actions aimed at reducing the claimant's need for the benefit or their refusing the benefit and seeking an alternative means of support. That is, this is coercive self-responsibility - not a plea as in the community service announcements, not a suggestion as in the insurance commercial, not an opportunity as in the power supply plan options. This notion of coerced self-responsibility as a requirement is an issue I will return to a little later.

Industrial relations reforms under the previous Labor and more recently the Coalition Federal governments have pushed for increased 'flexibility' (Jamrozik 2001; Ozaki 1999). This clearly is linked to economic discourse of efficiency and productivity. However, the discourse of choice has been strongly present in the rhetoric of reform, as indicated by the name given to radical industrial relations reforms by the previous Federal government - 'WorkChoices'. These industrial reforms also underpin micro-reform in the private sector and structural and micro-reform in the public sector, to attempt to provide more choice for employers and for employees. For instance, the introduction and often coerced take-up of Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) was a strategy to undermine collective agreements and replace them with more 'direct' contractual relationships between individual employers and employees. This development took place in the context of stripped back awards, fewer allowable matters in the workplace agreements, and other changes which facilitated the AWAs becoming a much stronger and individualised locus of industrial conditions than had been seen for nearly a century. Employers thus would be afforded increased latitude to exercise choice in their role as managers – more staff flexibility and less intervention by external regulations or parties. This would expand the area of economic choice in terms of more prerogatives in productivity matters, and also self-responsibility to the extent that managers would be afforded more scope in determining employment conditions.

The discourse of choice embodied in recent industrial relations reforms has also applied to employees, although again forms of choice grounded in coercion. In terms of economic choice, the more freed up labour arising from reduced job security provisions would facilitate increased job availability and thus increased job mobility, and consequently more choice of jobs. It would open up opportunities to exercise political choice in that employees could choose which set of employment conditions they preferred through direct negotiations with their employer rather than being mediated through 'third parties' such as unions or state agencies such as the Industrial Relations Commission. Deregulating income, conditions and job security also aimed to coerce

self-responsibility by exposing employers more directly to the consequences of their work performance in the context of a competitive labour market. The reasserted agency of the employee, as flexible, creative, and productive, would contribute to improved economic performance.

These quite radical reforms to the structure and operation of the public sector and specific welfare-related policy areas including the industrial relations system seem to resonate at least at a superficial level with the momentum towards the reassertion of individual agency present in the social movements. However, the public sector and policy reforms are substantially underpinned by conservative liberal approaches to the reassertion of individual agency, and have attracted much criticism on this basis.

‘Choice’ as individual agency - a terrain of conflict

In the face of the failures of the modern welfare state the new right has dominated the political and cultural agenda to which the left has been largely been only responding. Accordingly conservative liberal discourses of choice have been strongly influential in policy reforms. Yet these reforms have been enormously contentious. Attention by their critics has been drawn to the intrusion of private sector discourse and organisational rationale into the public sector, to the extent they appear to be converging (or instance Brennan 1998, 130-36). The economic rationale has been well-noted, and its association with the power of the business community to influence government policy directions. These developments have been strongly criticised on the basis of social justice considerations about the adverse consequences of these policy reforms for vulnerable groups such as those on low-income, women, youth, Indigenous Australians, the retired, amongst others.

Others have pointed to the coercive aspects of policies such as Mutual Obligation (for example, Moss 2001, 1-14) and some WorkChoices requirements (for example, Guille 2006, 14-9). Central to this concern is that the individualism of conservative liberalism is reproducing classic liberal approaches to ‘blaming the victim’. That is, the conservative liberal construction of ‘choices’ actually constructs coercive frameworks that manipulate individuals rather than offer genuine choice, and holds them responsible for circumstances in the social and economic spheres over which they have little or no control. These criticisms also point out the reforms’ contribution to a broader power shift away from collectivist forms of social protection that have been in place for nearly a century; this development has increased the exposure and vulnerability of individuals. The debate between advocates of the policy reforms and their critics has accordingly been largely dichotomised into opposing position such as regulation versus deregulation, or market choice versus political participation.

While the notion of individual agency in the choice discourse underpinning government reform policy has been largely appropriated by conservative liberal discourse, it is important to recognise that individual agency is revered across the political spectrum. Some social justice advocates have to some extent referred to this issue of individual agency. For instance, Walters discusses the discourses of the ‘active society’ and ‘active labour markets’ although he is critical of them in relation to the conservative direction of public policy reforms (Walters 1997, 224-29). Martin suggests that critics of conservative liberal individualism have neglected to address

human agency when focusing on issues of disadvantage, yet it is an issue they must address (Martin 2004, 79). Some others have endeavoured to reappropriate individual agency. For instance, Marston and Watts go some way towards addressing issues of individual agency, proposing an ‘ethics of flourishing’ that involves ‘an active welfare subject’ quite different from that of conservative liberalism (Marston and Watts 2004).

It is important to remember the creativity of the new left movements in the 1970s in reasserting and expressing agency. This momentum is now mainstream perhaps – but this only demonstrates how it is valued across the political spectrum and in people’s hearts and minds. It also suggests that even conservative liberal discourses of choice could have widespread resonances in the face of the lack of alternative discourses of individual agency grounded in social justice. For those critical of conservative liberal approaches to individual agency as expressed in the discourse of choice, it is important to recover individual agency on new terms consistent with social justice and collective politics.

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