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Eco-social policy in the liberal world of welfare: the institutional opportunities for socio-ecological transitions in Anglo-Saxon regimes

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Introduction

In responding to the environmental crisis, most social policy commentators suggest Global North welfare states will at least require adjustment to compensate their worst-affected citizens. More fundamental change would be necessary under the low- or no-growth scenarios some argue will be required to adequately reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (for example, Buch-Hansen and Koch, 2019). The concept of eco-social policy has been developed to describe such developments. It refers to interventions which simultaneously seek to address environmental and social goals (Gough, 2017). Scholars have identified various existing policies as potentially eco-social (for example, Mandelli, 2022), such as just transition commitments made in the European Green Deal (EC, 2020), but the term has also been applied to normative proposals developed by scholars working on possible post-growth welfare state futures (for example, Gough, 2017).

Comparatively, *welfare capitalist regime theory* (WCRT) has been used to assess the institutional arrangements likely to facilitate or obstruct the development of eco-social policies (Gough, 2017). Associated particularly with Esping-Andersen's *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (1990) and the varieties of capitalism literature (for example, Hall and Soskice, 2001), this suggests the prospects for welfare state reform are determined primarily by the social embeddedness and institutional path dependencies (Pierson, 2000) associated with at least three welfare regime types: conservative, liberal and social democratic. Based loosely on this framework, Dryzek (Gough et al, 2008) 'provisionally concluded' that social democratic regimes were best placed to coordinate successfully environmental and social interventions to develop eco-social policies, with liberal ones most problematic. More recently, this conclusion has been theoretically and empirically challenged (Buch-Hansen and Koch, 2019; Graziano and Zimmermann, 2020).

However, as this chapter shows, much work in this area relies on quite superficial conceptualisations of the causal mechanisms and processes by which existing institutional frameworks are said to inhibit or facilitate reform, with most explanatory attention given to corporatist institutions. Largely absent is any systematic engagement with the array of more recent regime-related analytical concepts (for example, self-undermining policy feedback and policy entrepreneurs) used to explain unexpected welfare state change in the last two decades (Häusermann, 2010; Jacobs and Weaver, 2015). As will be explained below, this creates particular problems for the theorisation of eco-social transitions in the liberal world.

To address this issue, and thus surface additional possible processes for eco-social change in liberal welfare systems, this chapter uses the recent WCRT literature to highlight the various ways existing welfare state institutions offer opportunities as well as obstacles to reformers – how institutions can be destabilised and reformed in the face of endogenous policy pressures and exogenous structural challenges, for example, population ageing, deindustrialisation and so on. Following Häusermann (2010), it will be suggested that the concurrent nature of such challenges opens up multi-dimensional policy spaces, particularly in circumstances of policy instability, important for eco-social transitions because of their potential in generating cross-class, multi-actor coalitions as drivers of welfare state change.

Empirically, the chapter uses these tools to consider the recent rise of one proposed eco-social policy – working time reduction (WTR) – on the public agenda of a liberal welfare system, the UK. This development is unexpected using the standard WCRT model given liberal regimes have been strongly associated institutionally with long working hours (to be discussed later in the chapter). The UK case study details the generation of self-undermining feedback in this policy space in the face of broader structural labour market changes, exacerbated by a contingent 'dramatic focusing event', the COVID-19 pandemic (Jacobs and Weaver, 2015). This has taken the form of worker burnout and labour shortages, which importantly have influenced some employers to reconsider their support for the long hours regime. The case study shows how policy entrepreneurs associated with eco-social agendas have used the resulting multi-dimensional policy space to engineer new coalitions for change. This process remains at an early stage: the UK's long hours paradigm retains strong supporters, but the case shows liberal systems can create institutional opportunities, not just constraints, to the advantage of proponents of eco-social change.

The chapter is organised as follows. First, the standard WCRT model explanation of eco-social transitions is explored and the potential role for more dynamic forms is outlined. In a second step, this dynamic framework is applied to the recent UK politics of WTR.

WCRT and theorising eco-social transitions

Welfare capitalist regimes have provided the conceptual foundation for comparative social policy analysis for over three decades. They are conceptualised as self-reinforcing, complementary institutional configurations, the features of which are determined over time by the developing balance of economic, political and social forces (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Hall and Soskice, 2001). They have been used analytically to explore the interaction between institutional arrangements set up at a previous historical juncture to address a range of contemporaneously salient social issues, and the institutional arrangements required at a later date to address significantly new issues. WCRT expects earlier arrangements to strongly influence later policy developments, with each world of welfare responding distinctively to new external challenges (Pierson, 2001). Such processes are influenced by institutions' social underpinnings – a legacy of earlier class-based interest and ideological struggles – and path dependencies (Pierson, 2000). The latter include the costs of starting again or establishing new capacity; the fact that political actors' skills, practices, beliefs and expectations are strongly attuned to the current paradigm; and external social actors' resistance to changing institutions upon which significant economic and social decision have rested (Pierson, 2000). All generate self-reinforcing feedback.

In considering the implications for social policy of climate change, Dryzek loosely used this framework to reach the 'provisional conclusion' that social democratic, coordinated capitalism was most suited to managing environmental and social policy interaction in a way that mainstreams both environmental and equality concerns (Gough et al, 2008, p 330). He focused on the state's size and nature in such regimes, particularly the incorporation of corporatist institutions. Thus, strong, inclusive and integrated welfare institutions create bureaucratic capacity and interest intermediation well suited to manage holistically the eco-social challenge (Gough and others, 2008). Ideationally, these arrangements are framed by 'ecological modernisation' discourses, facilitating business support. Proportional electoral systems integrate Green Party representation, further embedding this approach (Gough, 2017).

Liberal welfare capitalism is less conducive, according to Dryzek, mainly because its state is not corporatist (Gough et al, 2008). Here, strong liberal ideological and institutional legacies mean smaller and less coordinated states. The preference for neo-liberal market solutions (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Hall and Soskice, 2001) inhibits environmental and social policy interaction particularly because of the power of carbon-based energy producers (Gough, 2017). Majoritarian, first-past-the-post electoral systems constrain minor party growth (Carter, 2013). The development of eco-social policies is

thus unlikely to move beyond targeted compensations for those affected by transitions (Gough, 2017).

Dryzek accepted his 'provisional' conclusion required much fuller exploration, but this has not so far been forthcoming. Instead, the focus has been mainly on empirical tests of the regime-based argument (Koch and Fritz, 2014; Zimmermann and Graziano, 2020). These are still at an early stage, are mainly quantitative and tend not to operationalise eco-social developments in ways designed to highlight policy interaction.

However, more importantly, this research area is inhibited by the limitations of its theoretical foundations. The focus on corporatism in determining environmental and social policy interactions leads particularly to the inference that these are unlikely in liberal welfare states. In the next section, it is suggested that the greater institutional fluidity in all regimes highlighted by more recent WCRT-related scholarship means this conclusion at least requires more nuance.

WCRT and institutional change

The standard WCRT model did not rule out institutional change entirely but argued it was strongly bounded (Pierson, 2001, p 415). Increased attention to the circumstances in which more significant institutional change occurs arose in light of empirical evidence from the early 2000s of greater than predicted welfare state reform (for example, Bridgen and Meyer, 2014). In this more dynamic form, WCRT has been used to highlight how institutions shape as well as constrain change and the varying strategies political actors use to facilitate such developments. The conceptual tools generated are valuable, as will be seen, in understanding recent eco-social policy development in the following case study and, it is argued, more generally in liberal regimes. Attention is given to three main processes: i) the generation by institutions of self-undermining feedback (Jacobs and Weaver, 2015); ii) the existence of concurrent structural challenges to welfare states that generate new multi-dimensional policy spaces (Häusermann, 2010); and iii) the importance of strategic interaction and policy entrepreneurship in this fluid reform context (Häusermann, 2010).

Self-undermining feedback refers to the generation by existing institutions of 'unanticipated losses' which undermine rather than reinforce existing arrangements (Jacobs and Weaver, 2015). These can develop because of new structural contexts (exogenously) or be created by repeated incremental reforms to existing frameworks (endogenously). Particularly when losses strongly affect erstwhile supporters, this can lead to a search for policy alternatives (Jacobs and Weaver, 2015, pp 444–449). Transformational change might occur where 'unanticipated losses' are concentrated or where a 'dramatic focusing event' concentrates policy makers' attention (Jacobs and Weaver, 2015, pp 444–449).

With regard to structural challenges, recent analysis of welfare state change has highlighted the broad range of pressures concurrently confronted (for example, post-industrialism and globalisation). This generates widespread institutional 'misfits' and unexpected losses (self-undermining feedback), with varying implications for different policy actors (Häusermann, 2010). Reform debates become multi-dimensional, with a variety of policy actors proposing a range of reforms to deal with the losses they perceive as most important.

This multi-dimensional policy space creates opportunities for coalition formation to challenge existing institutional arrangements. Alliances can form between groups who favour change even if the particular nature of the change they desire is different. Packages of reform are often the consequence (Häusermann, 2010). Policy entrepreneurs and brokers are vital to such processes, facilitating coalition formation by publicising problems, developing workable policy solutions (Sabatier and Wiebe, 2007; Häusermann, 2010) and increasing support by 'demonstrations of credibility' of policy proposals (Jacobs and Weaver, 2015, p 449).

Importantly, with respect to eco-social transition in liberal regimes, processes based on these dynamics can create opportunities for ostensibly weaker social forces. Thus, Häusermann shows how, in a multi-dimensional policy space, gender equality in continental pension systems has improved in recent years (2010, pp 4, 23), notwithstanding that women's political power has not markedly increased.

In short, dynamic WCRT provides a well-established foundation for understanding the circumstances in which, in the context of concurrent structural challenges to welfare states, cross-class political coalitions can form to engineer significant reforms taking advantage of self-undermining feedback. In what follows, these insights frame a case study of the recent UK politics of working hours which shows how liberal systems can create opportunities for eco-social change as well as obstacles. This analysis starts by outlining the reasons WTR is regarded as a potential eco-social policy.

Working time reduction as an eco-social policy

WTR is a normative eco-social policy proposal particularly associated with post-growth commentators (see also Büchs in this volume). Environmentally, it is argued this could substantially reduce GHG emissions and broader environmental degradation by lowering economic output – reducing income and consumption – and thus limiting the throughput of natural resources (for example, Knight et al, 2013). Increased leisure time might also encourage people to engage in time-intensive and more sustainable consumption patterns (Druckman et al, 2012). Some evidence suggests rebound effects, due to increased leisure-related emissions (for example, Buhl and Acosta, 2016), but this is less likely where income is reduced (Shao

and Shen, 2017). With respect to the UK, King and van den Bergh (2017) project that the introduction of a four-day week could realistically reduce GHG emissions by 15 per cent. Socially, evidence suggests WTR could ease unemployment (Jackson and Victor, 2011), with shorter working hours also linked to individual health and well-being improvements and lower stress (Buhl and Acosta, 2016).

Working time reductions and liberal welfare states

Under the standard WCRT model, moves towards WTR would be unexpected in liberal welfare regimes given their political economies and associated institutions. Long working hours, it is argued, are an inherent feature of their market-based production systems' approach to ensuring the supply of collective goods, transferable skills and industrial peace (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Burgoon and Baxandall, 2004). Markets are thus left largely unfettered to coordinate wage, skill and investment decisions in the absence of coordinating and collaborative state, social partner and industrial and financial institutions. Labour market regulation is absent and productivity improvements rely on low non-wage costs and employment maximisation. Welfare systems are complementary: benefit levels are low, reducing reservation wages, with work a precondition for more generous welfare support. Employees adapt to the regime's reward of mobility, flexibility and 'switchable' general skills. Unregulated labour markets and low tax regimes lead to comparatively generous disposable incomes for skilled employees. Lower-waged employees use employment flexibilities and long hours to maintain a basic standard of living. Empirically, with respect to working hours, most data over the last 30 to 40 years confirms this model, consistently showing hours longest in the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, although the gap with countries in other regime types has recently narrowed (Burger, 2021).

The contemporary politics of working time in the UK

Yet, notwithstanding these institutional constraints in liberal regimes, WTR has emerged quite strongly on the public policy agenda of some liberal countries in recent years (for example, the UK and New Zealand). In the UK, this has involved supportive parliamentary motions (Chung, 2022), social movement mobilisation, large pilot studies involving employer implementation of four-day weeks (4 Day Week, 2023a) and polls suggesting quite high levels of business support (Ibbetson, 2019). These developments are detailed and analysed below. They have occurred in economic circumstances (low growth, declining real wages) not obviously conducive to such a policy. In the following sections, these developments and their limitations are explained using the dynamic WCRT conceptual

tools outlined. We start by considering the structural challenges faced by the UK labour market in recent decades.

Concurrent structural challenges

The UK has been affected by both the two main structural challenges comparative political economists suggest have affected working conditions and hours in Global North labour markets over recent decades (Burger, 2021). The first involves increasing precariousness at the lower end of the labour market as a product of changing international markets, increased global competition in manufacturing and a concomitant growth of service sector employment (Eurofond, 2018). Among many lower-skilled workers, further upward pressure has been put on working hours as means to ensure income reaches subsistence level. Core workers have generally been shielded from these pressures, but many in these groups have faced the second challenge: intensified competitiveness of skilled and professional labour markets due to a mix of internationalisation, information technology and increased education, which has expanded the size of the skilled middle class (Burger, 2021). Employment vulnerabilities have risen, work has intensified, and hours have lengthened.

While it is not fully clear in the UK whether lower- or higher-skilled workers have been most affected by these challenges, there is strong evidence that the proportion of full-time workers undertaking extreme hours (that is, more than 49 hours a week) in the last three decades has risen compared to the 1970s and 1980s (Burger, 2021). Comparatively, the most recent International Labour Organization data shows the proportion of full-time employees working more than 49 hours per week in the UK significantly in excess of selected European comparators (ILOSTAT, 2023) (see Table 20.1).

The rise of self-undermining feedback

Until the last few years, only unions and the left wing of the Labour Party expressed concern about the impact on working conditions and hours of

Table 20.1: Average annual share of full-time workers working 49 hours or more in the UK, Germany and Sweden 2012–19 (%)

	UK	Germany	Sweden
Total	21.3	15.8	13.4
Male	24.8	18.7	16.3
Female	14.6	10.0	9.2

Source: ILOSTAT

the UK's low-regulation labour market (Bell, 2019). Existing arrangements seemed firmly locked in, the basis for employers' and employees' work-based decision making and policy makers' assumptions about labour market policy.

In the last five or so years, and particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, this paradigm has begun to be challenged by some employers as well as the 'usual suspects'. This is in the face of rising evidence of self-undermining feedback generated by the UK's liberal labour market, to which the 'dramatic focusing event' (Jacobs and Weaver, 2015, p 448) of COVID-19 appears to have directed concentrated attention. Two developments are most important. The first is evidence of rising well-being problems, specifically employee burnout. This condition is defined by the World Health Organization as 'a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed' (WHO, 2019). It can lead to a range of (mainly mental) health conditions, which in turn increases absenteeism, worker turnover and other problems (Demerouti et al, 2021), and is more likely when work intensification increases, particularly when this involves long hours (Schaufeli, 2018). Workers in the UK seem to have been particularly susceptible to burnout in work undertaken since the 1970s (Demerouti et al, 2021), but the COVID-19 lockdowns significantly worsened the situation. Research undertaken by Glassdoor (cited in Mayne, 2024) found a significant spike in employees reporting issues with burnout in their regular reviews of workplace attitudes. Comparatively, a McKinsey survey of 30,000 employees across 30 countries soon after the pandemic found the UK had the third worst employee mental health score, and the worst for a European country (Brassey et al, 2023).

The second development is related to the first. There is evidence since COVID-19 of a sharp increase in employees permanently leaving the labour market, particularly those within ten years of retirement. Commonly known as the 'Great Resignation', this has led to significant labour shortages. Thus, according to the Labour Force Survey, in the two years up to August–October 2022 there was a 1.3 percentage point rise in the number of 16–64-year-olds in the UK reporting themselves as inactive (House of Lords, 2022, p 12), with the rise in numbers much greater among workers above 50. Health problems related to COVID-19 was one driver of these developments, but not the most important. Rather, many workers in their late 50s and early 60s, mainly from the middle sections of hourly wage distribution, used the opportunity presented by COVID lockdowns to permanently leave the workforce, often using early access to occupational or private pensions to do this (House of Lords, 2022, pp 26–30). For many this was a 'lifestyle choice', a conscious move out of the workforce to escape work intensification and stress (House of Lords, 2022, p 29).

Significant labour shortages experienced by UK employers in the last two years have in part been caused by these developments. These peaked

in June 2022, when UK job vacancies rose above 1.25 million, an almost 50 per cent rise compared with just before COVID-19 (ONS, 2023). They have fallen back since but remain close to a million, with the number of employers reporting worker shortages the middle to higher-wage part of the labour market in the year up to July 2023 rising by around three percentage points (ONS, 2023).

In summary, the UK's long hours and work-intensive labour market has recently generated important 'unexpected losses' – self-undermining feedback – as a counter-weight to the self-reinforcing feedback traditionally associated with liberal UK institutions. These developments have been thrown into sharper relief by a 'dramatic focusing event', COVID-19. Such processes are expected, in the framework already outlined, to stimulate a search for policy alternatives, particularly when they negatively affect erstwhile supporters of existing institutions. As the next section shows, there is evidence this has been occurring.

Reform dynamics in a multi-dimensional policy space

The question of working hours and conditions has risen on UK employers' agenda as part of a broader consideration of how to address employee motivation, labour shortages and productivity. Employers are complaining of facing 'acute recruitment and retention challenges', with rapid staff turnover and the competition for people affecting firms in all sectors of the economy (CBI, 2023). This situation seems to have been exacerbated by Brexit. In this context, increased interest in WTR has taken two main forms. First, business consultants, particularly those associated with human capital management, are strongly active in this area, publishing reports, surveys and press briefings generally sympathetic to the need for business to at the least critically review the long hours culture (CIPD, 2023). The role of such advisers has long been recognised as important in the development of 'normative pressure' for change in the business world, legitimating new approaches and initiatives in circumstances of uncertainty and bounded rationality (Thrift, 2001). Second, a significant number of businesses have taken part in pilot experiments with shorter working hours, often implementing change permanently after the pilot and publicly extolling the benefits of doing so. Thus, between July and December 2022 the UK saw the 'world's largest four-day working week trial', which involved 61 companies and around 2,900 workers. Of these companies, 56 companies (92 per cent) continued with the four-day week after the trial, with 18 confirming it as a permanent change (4 Day Week, 2023a). Other surveys have found significant general support for WTR among employers (CIPD, 2023).

Crucially, into this multi-dimensional WTR policy space, now involving a range of cross-class actors with varying interests, policy entrepreneurs are

operating as agents of eco-social change. For example, 4 Day Week and Autonomy, the two campaigning organisations leading the campaign, have strong connections with the influential, green-oriented New Economics Foundation and are strongly embedded in academic networks associated with post-work and post-growth agendas (for example, Autonomy, 2023). They are facilitating multi-interest coalition formation based on campaigns and the development of workable policy solutions, particularly using 'demonstrations of credibility' to enhance the plausibility of WTR (Jacobs and Weaver, 2015) such as the employer pilots mentioned earlier (4 Day Week, 2023b). These organisations are careful to frame the case for WTR inclusively, highlighting particularly the productivity benefits to employers (4 Day Week, 2023b), but the connections and professional backgrounds of the actors involved attest to their more ambitious eco-social goals.

These developments do not mean any significant change is imminent, particularly in legislation. Many employers continue to question the feasibility of change and are unsure it is in their interests (CIPD, 2023). Among the more supportive employers, moreover, interest in WTR is focused particularly on productivity: the prospect that because shorter hours improve employee well-being, commitment and motivation, more will be done in a shorter amount of time (4 Day Week, 2023a). This is clearly at odds with the post-growth case for WTR, which focuses on reduced throughput and resource use.

However, overall, the case shows how liberal institutions can create opportunities for – as well as obstacles to – eco-social change. A significant and unexpected reform dynamic has developed on WTR, stimulated by the interaction of concurrent structural challenges and the unintended consequences of existing policies, facilitated and coordinated by policy entrepreneurs acting as agents of eco-social change.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown the utility of recent WCRT-related theorising on welfare state change for understanding the politics of eco-social transitions in liberal capitalism. To this end, it has focused on the recent politics of WTR in the UK context. WTR is a normative eco-social policy proposal associated mainly with the post-growth, sustainable welfare perspective, which would not be expected to gain much traction in the liberal world.

Yet, the UK case study shows the embryonic emergence of a cross-class coalition on WTR, facilitated by eco-social policy entrepreneurs, that involves some employers, business consultants, the labour movement, campaigning groups and think tanks. Framed in the context of the case for a Four Day Week, this has unexpectedly placed WTR quite strongly on the UK public policy agenda. Important and most unexpected, in this regard, is the increasing openness of the business world to change in this area.

The more dynamic forms of WCRT that were utilised highlighted conceptually that an important stimulus of recent reform dynamics was self-undermining feedback generated by existing institutional arrangements. Essential features of the liberal model, low-regulation labour markets and long hours, were shown to have generated 'unexpected losses' in the face of broader structural challenges to labour markets. Policy entrepreneurs, mostly associated with eco-social agendas, have taken advantage of these challenges, using the 'dramatic focusing event' of COVID-19 and 'demonstrations of credibility' using pilot experiments, to advance their prescriptions for addressing the structural challenges posed by the environmental crisis.

As expected in the dynamic WCRT literature, the WTR policy space in the UK is multi-dimensional. The interests of the various actors are not identical: employers' focus on increased productivity and unions' concerns about pay are not always consistent with the arguments made for WTR by post-growth proponents. Yet, as seen in other policy areas (Häusermann, 2010) once issues are placed on public agendas as part of such processes, increased opportunities develop for less powerful groups to embed their interests as part of reform packages.

The chapter has thus shown how institutional contexts associated with the liberal world might shape eco-social transitions rather than simply making them less likely. While it is highly unlikely the processes described in the UK case will recur exactly elsewhere in the liberal world, the dynamic institutional processes and mechanisms described are likely to be present in most policy areas, offering similar opportunities to proponents of eco-social change. The conceptual tools described in the chapter provide a good basis for identifying and understanding them.

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