Historical amnesia: linking past, present and future in politics and policy

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Abstract
This article explores the problem of historical amnesia in politics and policy. It suggests that forgetfulness about past experience, past policies and past knowledge is a dangerous condition. Drawing on several recent examples, it explores the implications of this form of amnesia and its relationship to another disorder of the politics of policy making: the fetishization of certain objects such as community. Taking up the issue of the contemporary politics and policy of austerity, the paper points to the importance of learning lessons from the past and not surrendering policy making to the proclaimed urgency of the present and future. It concludes that such forms of ‘telling the time’ are critical political devices.

Keywords: Amnesia, fetishism, knowledge, poverty, community, austerity

In celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Social Services Research Group, I was preparing to talk about the shifting ways in which knowledge has been produced, used and valued over the last forty years since I walked out of the doors of Aston University (just up the road from here) clutching my undergraduate degree. This seemed an appropriate topic for such an occasion, but several things I heard in the course of the day made me abandon my original intention and turn instead to problems of how we think about the connections between past, present and future in the field of policy (and in the politics of policy). Let me just sketch the things that provoked me to change my mind. First, there was an injunction to turn our attention to the future, rather than focusing on the past. Second, there was a claim that, in thinking about social care, ‘austerity is the new real’. Third – and here my blood pressure began to reach dangerous levels – was the claim that where we had all criticised Sir Keith Joseph’s ideas about a cycle of deprivation when he publicised them in the 1980s, now we all used the idea as a matter of course.

At this point I should apologise to the person who was then sitting in front of me. When that last claim was made, I confess that I shouted – probably a little too loudly – ‘Oh no, we don’t’. I certainly don’t count myself as part of a ‘we’ that now uses such ideas unproblematically, and I rather resent being spoken for in such a manner. It was probably this issue – and the manner of assembling this ‘we’ that now trails in Sir Keith’s wake – that was at the core of my decision to talk differently and, in particular, to address the problem of historical amnesia. By historical amnesia, I mean the disposition to omit, forget or delete aspects of history that are, at least, inconvenient for the politics and policies of the present. Such amnesia occludes aspects of past policy making, past politics and – crucially for this setting – past knowledge that might interrupt the future being projected in the contemporary politics and policies. It is, I will suggest, an unfortunate and potentially dangerous disposition.

I will work my way backwards through these provocations about the past, present and future and add some others as I go. That should enable me to end with the problem of the injunction to think about the future, rather than being obsessed with the past: an injunction that I think misrepresents the role of time and knowledge in the policy making process – with unfortunate (and potentially
dangerous) consequences. But speaking of unfortunate consequences, let me turn my attention to the strange revival of Sir Keith Joseph. It is certainly true that I, like many others, criticised his idea of cycles of deprivation as an account of poverty and inequality in the 1980s. It was itself a rather impoverished version of not very convincing American scholarship addressed to the culture of poverty (Lewis, 1969). This cluster of explanations was consistently attacked for ‘blaming the victim’ (Ryan, 1971). That is to say, they located the causes of poverty and immiseration among the poor themselves rather than in the economic, social and political conditions that distributed inequality in advanced Western societies. Such critiques were well established by the time that Joseph floated his version and I don’t intend to rehearse them here.

However, I am troubled by the notion that we all use those ideas now. I am troubled in part because it seems to me to be an unwarranted slur on the audience (Do we? Do we all?) but also because it implies there has been a sort of gentle cultural shift in world of policy and practice in which ‘we’ have all come to terms with things we once found either wrong or offensive (or perhaps both). Upsetting though that idea is (and I have never knowingly used the idea of cycles of deprivation as a way of thinking about inequality), it is still not quite the problem of historical amnesia about politics and policy. Historical amnesia here involves forgetting what government politics and policy have done about cycles of deprivation. If we must talk about cycles of deprivation, then we should pay attention to what governments have done to create them. From the governments that included Sir Keith Joseph in the 1980s, through to the present coalition of austerity, we have seen the pursuit of economic and social policies whose effects have systematically marginalised some places and some people – leaving them structurally outside the various ‘economic miracles’ of the free market, and increasingly poorly supported by what used to be a welfare state. If we do now have cycles of deprivation – involving the reproduction of marginalization and immiseration across generations – we must look to government policy as the agent that has made Sir Keith’s bleak vision come true.

Here is the core of my trouble with historical amnesia. If we forget the history of policy, the history of its effects, the history of the accumulation of evidence and varieties of knowledge – how can we hope to make new and better policy? Unless we know something about how we got here, how will we escape? Historical amnesia seems to me to stand at the intersection of two rather different pressures. The first is the drive to newness and innovation – such that what some have called ‘policy hyperactivity’ dominates, driven by the desire of governments to be seen to be doing something. The second is the rather more wilful (re)writing of history to edit out inconvenient elements. This is selective amnesia and is perhaps best exemplified by one of David Cameron’s accounts of the need for a Big Society. I offer a fairly lengthy extract to give a clear sense of how this selective amnesia works:

For centuries, the state expanded in order to help achieve a fairer society. This expansion took many forms. There was the passing of legislation - like the Poor Laws and Factory Acts. There was the introduction of financial help - like sickness benefits. There was the empowerment of institutions - such as local authorities being charged with clearing sums. And in one particularly progressive moment, there was the marshalling of the whole power of the state to abolish slavery. All this meant that by the eve of World War Two, central authorities were involved in setting minimum wages as well as controlling rents and helped provide unemployment insurance, pensions, and public housing.

And in the immediate post-war period we saw the creation of the welfare state. Both main political parties backed a comprehensive system of social security that included universal healthcare and
education, and unemployment and pensions benefits.

What was the effect of this state expansion? It is difficult to be completely certain because for much of the twentieth century, research on poverty levels used inconsistent measures. But from the evidence we have, we can say with some confidence that up until the 1930s poverty fell compared to the years before.

Understandably, in the immediate aftermath of the Great Depression, poverty did begin to rise. But during the 1940s there was a fall in poverty of between ten and twenty percent compared to the 1930s. By the 1960s we are on firmer ground, as consistent statistics on household income began to be produced for the first time. And this data shows that between 1961 and 1968, the number of people living in severe poverty fell by 900,000 and the gap between the richest and poorest fell.

So the evidence suggests that up until the late 1960s, the expansion of the state to advance social justice was not only well-intentioned and compassionate, but generally successful. However, even in this period, it's important to look at the complete picture. Some state extensions helped tackle poverty, others were less effective. Some did so while encouraging responsibility and local pride at the same time others undermined these virtues.

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But since the immediate post-war period, the most significant extension of the state has taken place under the current Labour government. In 1997, government spending as a proportion of GDP was 38.2 percent. Next year, it is forecast to rise above fifty percent.

... So did it work? Did the rapid expansion of the state since 1997 succeed in tackling poverty? Did it reduce inequality? Well, it would be churlish to deny that some progress has been made.

Indeed it would be rather amazing if there had been no progress. In the past decade, public spending has doubled. Health spending has almost trebled.

Since 1997 the Government has spent £473 billion on welfare payments alone - that's as big as our whole economy in 1988. Much of this has been channelled through tax credits and income transfers and as a result, there has been a measure of success in lifting those just below the poverty line to just above it.

But, quite apart from the fact that it turns out much of this has been paid for on account, creating debts that will have to be paid back by future generations; a more complete assessment of the evidence shows something different - that as the state continued to expand under Labour, our society became more, not less unfair.

In the past decade, the gap between the richest and the poorest got wider. Indeed, inequality is now at a record high. The very poorest in our society got poorer - and there are more of them. The incomes of the bottom ten percent actually fell by £6 per week between 2002 and 2008 before housing costs, and £9 per week after housing costs. The number of people living in severe poverty has actually risen - not fallen, risen - by 900,000 in the past ten years. (Cameron, 2009)

This is an impressive story and one that, for a Conservative, is relatively generous about a history of state involvement and investment. But – oddly – a large chunk of recent political history goes missing. ‘Up to the late 60s’, he observes, the expansion of the state was generally successful... but ‘since 1997’ inequality rose and society became more unfair. In the process, however, the 1970s, 1980s and most of the 1990s disappear... almost as if nothing of interest happened. And while I am sympathetic to the pressures of editing speeches to length, it is strange to omit the longest period of post-Second World War Conservative rule: the Thatcher and Major governments of 1979-1997.
Of course, it is true that this period would interrupt the story that Cameron wished to tell about the continuing, unchecked and eventually counter-productive growth of the state. It is also true that it would complicate the story about deepening inequality and unfairness a little, since this was a process inaugurated and intensified during the 1980s and 1990s by the economic and social policies pursued by Conservative governments. And, of course, it is true that including the eighteen years of Conservative rule would call into the question the proposition that deepening inequality is linked to the excessive growth of the state. So, let me repeat my earlier claims: if we do not know how we got here, how can we hope to escape? More precisely, how can we even hope to identify the problems that policy is supposed to address?

I want to stick with the Big Society for a moment, not just to insist that a history of the state and inequality in this country would have to tackle the missing eighteen years and the intentional, systematic encouragement of inequality as an objective of economic and social policy. Nor would it be merely to raise the question of how the shifting role of the state towards providing corporate, rather than individual or household, welfare might be understood. Rather it is that the Big Society involves the most recent return of the most desired object in British social policy: the community. The community combines two psychological disorders in one: it is the focus of both historical amnesia and policy fetishism. In what appears to be a recurring cycle (albeit one that is perhaps increasingly speeded up), community is endlessly rediscovered as the holy grail of UK social policy. Community is simultaneously the object and subject of policy innovation – it is what government should create, enable or empower and it is the form in which we will all govern ourselves (better). Each time community is rediscovered, it appears to have no history. It is announced as though no government has ever addressed the idea before; as though no policies have ever been implemented; as though no research on their effects has been undertaken – and indeed as though no-one has ever thought or written about the problems of attempting to govern through community (by way of contrast, see Creed, 2006; and Mooney & Neal, 2008).

I do not mean this as a complaint: that no-one listens to academics (of course they don’t, and I long ago came to terms with that). The problem is that no-one appears to remember earlier policies and politics. As David Cameron announces the centrality of the community to the project of the Big Society (and promises to train thousands of community activists), can he not hear the echoes of New Labour’s enthusiasm for ‘community cohesion’? Or the previous enthusiasm for ‘community safety’? Can he not remember the recurring Conservative belief of the 1980s and 1990s that communities could be the basis of values, care and regeneration? Can he (or his policy makers or speech writers) not remember the ill-fated Community Development Programme launched in the 1970s? Time after time, community is summoned up as if it has been newly discovered. This is the combination of amnesia and fetishism that make community such a keyword in the politics of policy – it is hard to think of anything else that possesses the same kind of magical or totemic quality.

Let me turn to another contemporary fetish: the idea of austerity (and the claim that ‘austerity is the new real’). My long-standing interest in words and the ways in which they are used makes me want to interrupt when I hear such sentences: what is being claimed here? Who is making the claim? For what purposes are they making it? In particular, I am prone to be suspicious when people use the word real or its derivatives, such as ‘in reality’. Laying claim to the real is a powerful rhetorical device, and one that attempts to dismiss alternatives by implying their unreal, fantastic, or ivory tower quality. However, it is only a claim and one that should be treated with suspicion – both in general and in this particular case. Austerity is only one version of the new real – in both policy and political
terms. In the UK and elsewhere, ‘austerity’ names a particular set of political and policy responses to the economic crisis induced by the financial sector in 2007-8 (see the special issue of Critical Social Policy on Austerity, 2012). This set of responses rests on the rather magical transmutation of an economic crisis (in which private corporations were rescued by public intervention – and very large amounts of public funds) into a fiscal crisis (in which public debt and public spending are the ‘problem’). In the UK, the Coalition government has been an enthusiastic ‘early adopter’ of austerity, presenting it (as I have argued elsewhere, Clarke, 2012) as a paradoxical position of ‘virtuous necessity’: a necessity because (as Margaret Thatcher used to remind us) ‘There Is No Alternative’, but virtuous because it is a political choice (that others in the Eurozone, for example, have failed to make).

The last five years have been awash with such puzzling paradoxes, delicate ironies and glaring contradictions and I do not propose to explore them all here. But, in passing, I do want to celebrate the overturning of two of the foundational New Right/neo-liberal/neo-conservative views of public welfare. Since 1979 (approximately), ‘we’ have known that ‘we can no longer afford welfare’. It turns out that this was not exactly true: we can afford corporate welfare, but not welfare for citizens (who must be independent, and especially independent of the state). Since about the same moment, we have known that giving people money when they are in need is counterproductive – it induces dependence, saps moral fibre and leads to moral decay. Again, this basic neo-conservative truth needs to be qualified: such consequences happen if we give money to ordinary people, but extra-ordinary people (bankers, in brief) are strong enough to resist those social and moral effects, so it is OK to give them large amounts of money without worrying.

This probably sounds a little bitter – and it reflects the experience of having to hear these ‘truths’ repeated time and time again in the demolition of public welfare; and the speed with which such truths could be abandoned when cases of ‘genuine need’ suddenly appeared in the financial sector. But I should return to the main business of the present – the enthusiasm for austerity as the route to restoring ‘economic confidence’. It should be clear that, in political terms, austerity is not the ‘new real’: other strategies exist and continue to haunt the spiraling failures of austerity (in the UK and elsewhere).

Jamie Peck (2010) has described the characteristic tendency of neo-liberalism as ‘failing and flailing forwards’ – since the fantasy of a free market solution never works and needs state action to correct its failure. But the fantasy continually drives failure forwards – what is needed is more neo-liberalism, since it was imperfectly implemented last time. It will work, it must work – if only we try harder. The Stanford professor (and Kaiser Permanente healthcare corporation advisor) Alain Enthoven’s relationship to the NHS perfectly captures this tendency. As one of the original advisors on marketizing NHS reform he promoted the internal market (1985). He later carried out a return visit to review progress and was rather disappointed (1999). However, he attributed the failures to not taking market reforms far enough… more could and should be done. I confess that I view this approach to policy as most closely resembling the mediaeval medical enthusiasm for bloodletting: if letting blood doesn’t work, then let some more flow, and some more until the miracle is achieved (or not…).

The same tendency towards historical amnesia, it should be noted, is true of ‘austerity’: we have been here before (and not just in the post war British sense, see Kynaston, 2010). Austerity is not just not the new real, it is not even new. Latin American and African nations were subjected to International Monetary Fund driven ‘austerity’ measures (aka structural adjustment) during the 1970s and 1980s with desperate economic, social and political consequences. A recent study by Ponticelli and Voth has traced the relationship between
fiscal austerity measures and social and political disorder in Europe over the twentieth century with interesting results. They argue that a ‘general pattern of association between unrest and budget cuts holds in Europe for the period 1919-2009. It can be found in almost all sub-periods, and for all types of unrest’ (Ponticelli & Voth, 2011, p.26). They conclude that ‘[t]he frequency of demonstrations, assassinations, and general strikes rises monotonically with the scale of cuts. Only in the case of riots is there a small decline for the biggest cut-backs. In the case of demonstrations, the frequency of incidents appears to rise particularly fast as expenditure cuts pass the 3% threshold’ (op cit., 3).

Let me return to the general point: amnesia is not a good foundation for policy-making. If we forget what we already know about austerity and its effects, we risk making the policies and suffering the same consequences. If we forget what we already know – about marketization, about the uses and limits of community, about anti-poverty programmes that target the failings of the poor – then we risk repeating both the mistakes and the effects that they produce. As I noted earlier, I don’t underestimate the pressures – in an intensely mediatized and politicized world – to come up with new, glossy and innovative policies to address contemporary problems or to dramatize them in spectacular ways, for example by making them subject to the rule of a Tsar (and there’s another unfortunate piece of historical amnesia…). I also recognize the ways in which policy-making is framed, contained or trapped within shifting conventions of what is knowable, thinkable and sayable: such as, you can’t solve problems by throwing money at them; don’t make people dependent; we can no longer afford X or Y; the individual/ family/ community is the foundation of society (delete as appropriate – it is possible to believe all three, apparently). But we also need to treat amnesia as a significant contributor to policy and the politics of policy (for a fuller discussion of the problematic relationship between time, public policy and public management, see Pollitt, 2008).

In an article about New Labour and public service reform, I argued that one of the critical pieces of political-cultural work they engaged in was ‘telling the time’. This emerged from a specific puzzle about time: research that we had conducted (in 2003 and 2004) about people’s view of themselves of users of public services suggested they rarely thought of themselves as ‘customers’ or ‘consumers’ (those foundational identities so beloved of modernizers and marketizers). But everywhere I spoke about this work and the popular reluctance to identify with these ‘modern’ identities, I was told that the research was already out of date, or that we had mistakenly studied the wrong sort of people: people who were ‘old’ or at least ‘old-fashioned’ in their thinking. I argued that in such comments:

A particular sort of time is being told… The time at stake in these comments is constructed around characteristic temporal imaginaries that seem to play a potent role in New Labour and neo-liberal discourses. Distinctions between old and new, or between traditional and modern, work on constructing a flow of time between Past and Future. In these distinctions, the Past appears as the location of our troubles, mistakes and misfortunes. In contrast, the Future holds out the promise of overcoming such conditions. The present tends to be less discussed – merely a staging point on the necessary, inevitable and desired trajectory towards the Future. But in the present, the work of political discourse is to distribute people, orientations and political imaginaries to either the Past or the Future. Strange collectivist orientations, conceptions of publics, communities and categories of membership are – in this view – merely residual. They are the left-overs of older formations: the detritus of collectivism, welfarism, or social democracy. And such detritus will inexorably be washed away by the river of time.

(Clarke, 2007, p.245)
So, to return to the beginning of this presentation, I am put on my guard when told that we should turn our attention to the future, rather than think about the past. ‘Telling the time’ is always a politically charged process in which the groundwork for policy is being constructed. This is not to deny the problems of the present, nor the challenges of the future. But we might be better prepared to confront both of them if we build on the knowledge that we have developed about the past rather than denying its relevance. Historical amnesia, I have suggested, is a dangerous disorder and a shaky basis for policy making.

References


Notes on Contributor

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