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Poverty and social inclusion: towards a 'life-first' understanding?

Brief

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2016 [no. 34]Mobilizing critical research for
preventing and eradicating poverty**POVERTY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION:
TOWARDS A 'LIFE-FIRST' UNDERSTANDING?**

by Hartley Dean



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Introduction

Insofar as social exclusion is a concept and a process associated, if not synonymous, with poverty, we might assume that social inclusion is a 'good thing' and, potentially, an antidote to poverty. Like social exclusion, however, the concept of social inclusion is as protean as it is popular. It can mean many things. There are on the one hand communitarian understandings of the term that regard social inclusion in terms of social belonging; of having and accepting one's natural or proper place within a hierarchical social order. Such understandings may be seen as an apologia for, or a defence of, what critics regard as, potentially, a form of 'adverse incorporation'². On the other hand there are liberal understandings that identify social inclusion with a particular definition of freedom; with having and accepting effective opportunities to participate in a notionally fair, open but potentially risky society³. The difference between these two extremes is rooted in contrasting attitudes to social security and personal autonomy: the communitarian understanding prizes the former over the latter; the liberal understanding, *vice versa*. We may agree that social inclusion is a 'good thing' for human beings, but disagree about the extent to which both social security and personal autonomy are necessary to living a 'good life'⁴, or whether indeed the two are to some extent inimical.

Drawing on a concept tentatively explored in a recent book⁵, I wish to suggest an alternative 'life-first' understanding of social inclusion. The term may be used to capture a conception of human welfare or wellbeing, and of social rights as a requirement of a good life; of a life lived in pursuit not of mere survival or even happiness, but of human fulfilment; of an ethical life during which we seek mutual recognition not only through love and solidarity, but also through rights; through the claims we make upon one another and can agree to as members of humanity⁶. A life-first understanding requires an acceptance of collective responsibility for the attainment of good lives, including lives led by distant strangers⁷. But it also entails a conception of social rights that are truly social, fluid and negotiable⁸;

In this Poverty Brief Hartley Dean¹ draws on his recent book, *Social Rights and Human Welfare*, in order to:

- Critically consider the relevance of the concept of social inclusion to the struggle against poverty.
- Address competing interpretations of social inclusion, while proposing an alternative approach based on a 'life-first' understanding, which prioritises the inclusive realisation of social rights as shared means by which human needs are articulated.
- Suggest that such an approach might potentially speak to actors in a variety of contexts and from across the ideological spectrum.

that are universal in reach, not form. Social rights provide the shared means by which we articulate human needs.

This is an idea that can be inflected in a variety of different ways. Within the realms of conventional political discourse a life-first understanding challenges narrow utilitarian thinking, since it recognises that life's meaning precedes the things that people might choose, or be made, to do. From within the spectrum of liberal thinking, social liberals as 'reluctant collectivists'⁹ are likely - implicitly or explicitly - to subscribe to some brand of Kantian deontological ethics that can accommodate elements of collective responsibility and which may be attracted for example, either to a Rawlsian conception of social justice, or perhaps to Sen's capability approach. Similarly, radical democrats and left-communitarians¹⁰, might rally in various ways around a life-first approach that emphasises the significance of life-guarantees through risk sharing and social insurance. There is scope for discussion of a life-first understanding within contemporary liberal and communitarian discourses.

The life-first understanding resonates most strongly with a Marxian theory of human need. Marx defined human needs in relation to human beings' species characteristics: the things that define what it is to be human. And he espoused a concept of 'radical' needs¹¹, by which he was alluding to the ultimate potential of humanity. His vision was of a society that might succeed from capitalism; a society in which the measure of things would flow from inclusive understandings of *need* (premised on fully human lives), rather than from fetishised conceptions of *value* (premised on the commodity form). There is no immediate prospect of capitalism's overthrow, but we can envisage how a life-first emphasis upon the development of social rights and democratic social planning might constitute the beginnings of what Soper¹² has alluded to as a politics of human need. Essentially the same insight is captured by de Sousa Santos' conceptualisation of an 'axiology of care'¹³: a theory that values care, not economic progress or commodities. De Sousa Santos suggests that as a means to challenge the orthodoxies of global capitalism we might explore alternative ways of thinking that emanate from the global South. Similarly, the ideas of Illich or Friere¹⁴, radically challenged the professionalised premises on which human service provision imported by the global South from the global North are founded, arguing instead for rights to health and educational provision to be premised on 'conviviality' and shared consciousness raising. There is also an important connection that can be made with

the feminist ethic of care¹⁵; an ethic which, once again, puts care centre stage, emphasising the extent to which human wellbeing depends on the social negotiation of responsibilities and relationships. The point about a life-first understanding is that it construes the human individual's need for autonomy not in terms of self-sufficiency, but in the context of social interdependency; it prioritises the integrity of the human being as a living social actor, rather than as a competitive utility maximising individual and agent of economic production.

Whether in the context of conventional ideological discourse or more radical interpretations of human need, a life-first understanding provides a foundation for a politics of social inclusion that resolves the tension between social security and personal autonomy, by prioritising the articulation of complex, variable and evolving human needs through inclusive negotiations of social rights: negotiations that must necessarily occur in a multiplicity of ways and at a multiplicity of levels, ranging from local dialogue to global treaty-making. A shared life-first understanding of social inclusion offers, perhaps, the holistic basis for a concerted struggle against poverty.

Notes

- 1 Hartley Dean is Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science.
- 2 See, for example, Wood, G. (1999). *Adverse Incorporation*. University of Bath, Global Social Policy Paper 2.
- 3 Giddens, A. (1998). *The Third Way*. Cambridge, Polity – pp. 102-3.
- 4 Aristotle (c. 350 BCE). *Eudemian Ethics - Books I, II and VIII* (1982 edn. translated by M. Woods). Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- 5 Dean, H. (2015). *Social Rights and Human Welfare*. Abingdon, Routledge.
- 6 Honneth, A. (1995). *The Struggle for Recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. Cambridge, Polity.
- 7 Titmuss, R. (1970). *The Gift Relationship*. London, Allen and Unwin – ch. 16.
- 8 Isin, E., et al. (2008). *Recasting the Social in Citizenship*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- 9 George, V. and P. Wilding (1985). *Ideology and Social Welfare*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul – ch. 8.
- 10 Such terms have been variously and loosely applied to thinkers as diverse as Sandel, MacIntyre and Walzer.
- 11 Heller, A. (1974). *The Theory of Need in Marx*. London, Alison & Busby.
- 12 Soper, K. (1981). *On Human Needs*. Brighton, Harvester.
- 13 De Sousa Santos, B. (2006). *The Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond*. London, Zed Books – p. 31.
- 14 Illich, I. (1973). *Tools for Conviviality*. London, Calder & Boyars; Illich, I., et al. (1977). *Disabling Professions*. London, Marion Boyars; Friere, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- 15 Tronto, J. (1994). *Moral Boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. New York, Routledge; Sevenhuijsen, S. (1998). *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care*. London, Routledge.

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