

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF PREVENTION

Abstract

Prevention in public policy is much discussed but rarely theorised. This paper begins with a theoretical framework for reflecting on the political economy of prevention in advanced capitalist economies, one which integrates the analysis of preventive policies across the social, environmental and economic domains. The next two sections survey prevention initiatives in social policy and climate change policy respectively, mainly focusing on the last three decades and based mainly on UK evidence. The article then considers the relative absence of prevention in contemporary economic policy and management: today's neo-liberal economic and political order powerfully constrains preventive public policy. The final section sketches the elements of an alternative social political economy which prioritises preventive and precautionary policy-making.

Introduction

The case for preventive public policy is ever-present in large welfare states. Debates over health, crime, early years interventions and many other areas of social policy stress the advantages of prevention over coping, cure, compensation or confinement. This has been for a combination of normative and economic reasons: it is better for human wellbeing to prevent harm than to deal with its consequences, and it can be more cost effective. The current era of austerity only strengthens the case for prevention, while at the same time constraining its funding.

Yet there is also agreement that prevention rarely succeeds. Despite the shift in discourse over the last two decades from social compensation to social investment, Western and especially European welfare states remain predominantly a 'downstream' operation, addressing a variety of needs and harms that could in theory be prevented. One question addressed here is why this is so. My answer is that prevention initiatives are continually derailed by powerful ideological, interest-based and institutional forces.

To understand this combination of salience and impotence, I argue that the scope of prevention must be broadened to embrace not just social policy but environmental and economic policy too. This is a distinctive feature of a recent report *The Wisdom of Prevention* by the New Economics Foundation¹. It argues that these three spheres are inextricably and increasingly linked and interdependent, and must be addressed together to plan for a sustainable future. In particular social and environmental policy cannot be addressed independently of economic policy.

We shall see that each of these three domains of prevention poses quite different questions and deploys different conceptual frameworks. While the prevention framework is explicitly applied in social policy and environmental policy, it is much less prominent in thinking on economic policy. Yet it can be shown that effective prevention in both the social and environmental domains depends on a major re-orientation of the current economic paradigm. This necessitates a political economy approach embracing all three domains. I contend that the obstacles to equitable and sustainable preventive policies are located in the economy, sustained by neo-liberal ideology, and reinforced by the private interests and institutions that benefit from both of these.

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¹ Coote 2012

UK evidence. The next section considers the relative absence of prevention in contemporary economic policy and management: today's neo-liberal economic and political order powerfully constrains preventive public policy. I conclude that it is not possible to develop robust social and environmental prevention in a political economy driven by short-term, non-generalisable interests. In the final section I sketch the elements of an alternative social political economy which prioritises preventive and precautionary policy-making.

A conceptual framework

The dictionary defines prevention as stopping something (usually unpleasant) from happening. This definition is rather crude – it is all or nothing; either threat or risk X is stopped or it is not. A more useful alternative definition of prevention is 'to reduce the probability of a risk occurring'² I shall take this to mean public policies to reduce the risks of significant *harms* befalling a population, following the centrality of the concept of harm in our earlier work on a theory of human need³.

Coote⁴, drawing on health policy analysis, distinguishes three levels of public interventions:

1. Upstream interventions: to prevent harm before it occurs, usually focusing on whole populations and systems;
2. Midstream interventions: to mitigate the effects of harm that has already happened, usually targeted at groups or areas consider 'at risk';
3. Downstream interventions: to cope with the consequences of harm that has not – or cannot be – avoided, usually concerned with specific cases.

In particular, upstream interventions address not the immediate causes of harm but the 'causes of the causes'.⁵ It is concerned with 'the adaptation of circumstances to individual need, rather than the adaptation of individuals to circumstances'; such interventions target prevailing economic and social structures, rather than adapting individuals to them.⁶

Theories of prevention

Though there are numerous theorisations of prevention in specific policy domains (some surveyed below) theories of prevention *per se* are notable by their absence. In two papers Richard Freeman undertakes 'a self-conscious attempt to theorise a domain of activity which is often left undertheorised'.⁷ He argues that prevention is a product of modernity, being bound up with the welfare state and the authority of professional and scientific expertise. Prevention policy is built on several basic foundations. I will concentrate on two: *first, scientific understandings of cause and effect and the possibility of prediction; and second, a capacity for controlled intervention by government in social life.*

Both of these foundations are contested. In understanding the social world there are contending theories with different notions of causality, with conflicting value bases and with different conceptions of the role of public policy. In numerous areas of social policy there is contention: between structural and individual approaches, between contextual and rational actor models, between medical and social explanations, etc. Alongside these differences, there is the sheer

² Cf. Holzmann and Jorgensen 2001

³ Doyal and Gough 1991

⁴ Coote 2012, 9

⁵ Marmot 2005, 1101

⁶ Freeman 1992, 39; Freeman 1999

⁷ Freeman 1999, 233

empirical challenge of identifying causality when modelling complex chains and changing social contexts. Perhaps Foucault's critique of the relationship between knowledge and power, and his allied notion of surveillance, constitute the most powerful relativist rejection of the possibility of prevention⁸. To answer these critiques I consider each of Freeman's foundations in turn.

Scientific understanding: ontology and epistemology

Here I draw upon earlier work with Len Doyal on theorising human needs.⁹ This project encountered similar doubts that human needs can be coherently and consensually defined, emanating from diverse directions including liberalism, phenomenology and post-modernism. Our answer is that, cutting across cultural and value differences, there is an irreducible notion of 'serious harm', defined as 'fundamental disablement in the pursuit of one's vision of the good'. The avoidance of harm constitutes the most basic human interest¹⁰. This enables us to define basic human needs as those universal preconditions for avoiding serious harm, which we identify as physical health and autonomy. This approach shares some features with Sen's concept of 'functionings' and more with Nussbaum's 'central human functional capabilities'.¹¹

This does not take us very far in rebutting relativist critiques of the justification for public, including preventive, policies. If it is accepted that certain universal harms and needs exist, we also know that the satisfiers of these needs are almost always variable and very often context-specific. Both we and Nussbaum argue that a conceptual bridge *can* be built across this gap. In our case it is by identifying 'universal satisfier characteristics' - those properties of goods, services, activities and relationships which enhance physical health and human autonomy in all cultures. In this way 'scientific understanding of cause and effect' plays a role in developing public policies including preventive policies.

However, such codified scientific knowledge is never enough. All effective policies to avoid harms and to develop appropriate need satisfiers must also draw on the experientially grounded knowledge of people in their everyday lives and contexts. Thus effective policy making requires a *dual strategy*, bringing to bear both the codified knowledge of experts and the experiential knowledge of those whose basic needs and daily life world are under consideration. To foster such a challenging process will require radically enhanced participation, empowerment and new forms of deliberative dialogue. Only by utilising such a dual strategy, I would argue, can effective, upstream preventive programmes be devised and implemented.¹²

Intervention capacity: political economy

Turning to the second of Freeman's preconditions, what factors explain the prominence, role, nature and effectiveness of preventive strategies adopted by particular governments in particular policy areas at particular times? Is not government capacity for controlled intervention always limited? If anything is it not weakening in the modern globalised world?

To answer this question I build on historical and comparative welfare state scholarship over the past four decades. This literature has identified five factors or drivers of social policy development in the West over the last century: the 'five I's' of Industrial capitalism, Interests, Institutions,

⁸ Foucault 1980; Freeman 1992

⁹ Doyal and Gough 1991

¹⁰ Doyal and Gough 1991, 55

¹¹ Gough 2003; Gough 2013b

¹² The case for the dual strategy is made at greater length in Doyal and Gough 1991, chapter 15. I return to these issues in the final section.

Ideas/Ideologies, and International Influences¹³. Though developed to explain social policies I believe this framework can be applied to the contemporary emergence of environmental policies too¹⁴. In this paper I will focus on Ideas, Interests and Institutions in seeking to understand the development and pattern of modern preventive public policies.

Ideas and ideologies. Ideas and ideologies – clusters of views on the nature of the world and normative beliefs about what governments can and should do – play a central role in shaping the goals, scope and nature of preventive strategies. The ongoing disputes between libertarian, liberal and social democratic perspectives on the harms of unconstrained markets and the role of the state are clearly relevant to views about the desirability and extent of prevention policy. Similarly the *form* of prevention varies according to ideological persuasion. Youth crime can be prevented by fortifying public buildings, introducing metal detectors in schools and child curfews; or by neighbourhood development programmes and more holistic programmes to promote child wellbeing¹⁵. Obesity can be reduced by stomach stapling operations or by regulating sectors of the food industry or numerous interventions between these two. Harm from prospective climate change can be reduced by cutting emissions or by adapting infrastructures or behaviours. Real world preventive strategies are highly contested, and will be shaped by dominant paradigms in society.

Institutions. Public policies, including preventive public policies, are shaped by institutions. These include the nature of political systems, their form of political representation, the administrative bureaucracies of modern states, and the form of integration of interest groups in the policy making process. To give three examples: representative democracy will favour short-term policy-making following electoral cycles, militating against longer term preventive strategies. The extensive welfare states of the Western world have built up powerful ministries which seek to protect their policy areas and block overarching preventive initiatives. Third, these in turn bequeath policy legacies, commitments and path dependencies: welfare states pre-empt resources being applied to prevention due to the ‘double fiscal burden’ such investment strategies impose.

Interests. Behind ideas often lurk different organised interests. These include the professions created by and dominant in welfare states, including medical, pedagogical, accountancy-based and other interests. In addition a plethora of NGOs have emerged propounding various forms of preventive policy, but notably oriented to targeted, midstream interventions. The influence of trades unions has diminished within Western countries since the 1970s, but the power of corporate and financial interests has clearly grown, reflecting both their structural power and their ‘voice’ in modern polities. In social policy two business lobbies are important: those sectors supplying inputs to state services, which cover a growing range from producing drugs to running care homes and prisons; and those whose products cause harms to health or wellbeing which social policies try to ameliorate. Both wield considerable power, alongside professions, to inhibit or shape prevention policy. In climate change policy, industrial and commercial interests play a big role in opposing or supporting mitigation programmes.

These notes provide some conceptual elements with which to confront and rebut current scepticism about the knowledge and capacities of modern states to undertake preventive measures. I return to address some of these issues in the final section. But we can note that the need to establish a moral and technical foundation for preventive policy has gained new urgency from the environmental crisis, and especially from the threat to the ability of our planet to sustain human life as a result of escalating climate change. This is the ultimate ‘serious harm’ which is calling forth new, unprecedented preventive efforts. So far all have proved inadequate, but this does not invalidate

¹³ Gough 2008; Gough and Therborn 2010

¹⁴ Gough 2013a

¹⁵ Hayward 2007; France, Freiberg and Homel 2010

their overriding moral justification. This is the central reason why preventive policy must now take a broad perspective across the three spheres of society, environment and economy.

The above framework can provide a checklist to which I will refer when seeking to explain ‘government capacity for controlled intervention in social life’.

Social policy and prevention

Social policy is a major site of contemporary debates and policy innovations concerning prevention, and has fostered a wide range of studies and research. I shall here briefly survey health, crime and early years intervention, mainly drawing examples and evidence from the UK over the past three decades. The tripartite division between upstream, midstream and downstream interventions, noted earlier, has its origins in medicine and health. It has since been adopted and adapted across other areas of social policy, as illustrated in Table 1. Despite numerous policy commitments and initiatives, the finding is that – with some notable exceptions - preventive interventions have been marginalised and, when pursued, focus almost exclusively on midstream or downstream measures.

Table 1

	Upstream	Midstream	Downstream
Social risk management ¹⁶	Prevention: reduce the probability of a downside risk	Mitigation: reduce the potential impact of a future down-side risk	Coping: Relieve the impact of the risk once it has occurred
Health ¹⁷	Prevent the onset of undesirable states	Early stage disease detection and interventions	Minimise impact of disease
Crime ¹⁸	Reduce crime events by modifying the physical and/or social environment	Identify at- risk populations and potential criminals and address the causal risk factors	Stop criminals committing more crime, eg via imprisonment
Social work ¹⁹	Prevent the emergence of a problem	Early identification of problem; amelioration and containment of serious problems	Avoid further harm to client

Health

The founding idea of the British National Health Services was preventive but the reality has been utterly dominated by treatment. Pressure by the Health Education Council, Chief Medical Officer and various reviews such as the Wanless Reports of 2002 and 2004 have continually urged preventive initiatives alongside the NHS: restraining smoking and alcohol being two consistent themes²⁰. And as the cost of the treatment-oriented NHS has mounted there has been growing interest in the cost-containment potential of effective health prevention²¹. The New Labour government developed a more coherent preventive health strategy beginning with the pathbreaking 1998 Green Paper *Our Healthier Nation* and put in place some initiatives to implement it. However, this approach was again soon side-lined when PM Blair announced his 2000 Health Plan to greatly expand expenditure on the treatment-oriented NHS. And many of the New Labour preventive initiatives have not survived the change of government.

¹⁶ Holzmann and Jorgensen 2001:541-2

¹⁷ OECD 2009; NPHP 2006

¹⁸ Brantingham and Faust 1976

¹⁹ Hardiker, Exton and Barker 1991

²⁰ Allsop and Freeman 1993

²¹ Knapp, McDaid and Parsonage 2011 provides a recent example

Two linked debates have dominated the whole period: between different ideologies and between interventions targeted at individuals or social structures. First, the very idea of preventing ill-health could be seen as a Fabian one, entailing proactive government and a degree of 'social engineering'.²² The New Right or neo-liberal arguments concerning individual liberty and consumer sovereignty gained prominence in the later 1970s and have not relinquished that position. The 'nanny state' slogan has wormed its way into the national psyche.²³ Yet this counter-ideology has not removed prevention from the political agenda, rather redefined it in terms of altering individual behaviour and 'life style choices'.

The second debate has been between interventions targeted at individuals or at social structures. Those arguing for more structural, upstream interventions have kept up a continual presence, from the 1978 WHO Alma Ata declaration and the 1980 Black Report, to the 1998 Acheson Report and the 2010 Marmot Review on health inequalities in England. The most radical focus is on the 'pathogenic nature of modern social structures' and the current 'obesogenic environment' of energy-dense food, motorised transport and sedentary life-styles.²⁴ The Marmot Report proposes a preventive strategy extending to fair employment and good work, a healthy standard of living for all, and healthy and sustainable places and communities. But all these proposals have had little traction. Rather the dominant strand of preventive intervention has been biomedical (eg statins), targeted early years interventions (eg immunisation, nutrition during pregnancy, parenting classes) and health education and life style change (eg smoking cessation).

Can the framework presented earlier explain both the subaltern role of prevention in health policy and the dominance of individualist interventions? I briefly consider some of the arguments.

Ideological and epistemological. It is difficult to gather clear evidence of the effectiveness of primary preventive health measures, particularly those that accrue in the medium term or long term. Both biomedical science and economics (the dominant epistemic community in social science) favour targeting individual bodies and individual behaviours. The search is for individual pathogens rather than the social context of disease (Davis 1979). Since the 1970s the role of medical sociology has been side-lined, and with it alternative, contextual methods to evaluate different policies.²⁵

Institutions. The institutional structures of health and the governance structures of modern capitalist societies weaken the scope for structurally-oriented preventive health. Powerfully organised medical professions around the NHS reproduce a political constituency advocating and favouring curative therapies. In addition, all modern medical care systems indirectly, through their costs, weaken health promotion and prevention.²⁶ Managerial reforms in the NHS coupled with progressive privatisation of some functions have generated new systems of payment-by-results, which, by favouring outputs that are easily measurable and attributable in the short term, further weakens the capacity to deliver preventive health measures.²⁷

Interests. Outside government are two powerful business lobbies. One, representing drugs and medical suppliers, campaign for preventive measures that represent profitable niches to supply goods and services.²⁸ A second lobby, representing businesses producing potentially health-harming

²² Freeman 1992: 40

²³ Kings Fund 2004

²⁴ Davis 1979; SDC 2010

²⁵ Davis 1979; Asthana and Halliday 2006; Mays, Pope and Popay 2005

²⁶ Evans and Stoddart 1994

²⁷ Kings Fund 2004

²⁸ See Foote and Blewett 2003 on the USA

products, campaigns assiduously to prevent prevention, as with the current arrangements for ‘self-regulation’ in the food and drinks industry. A final sector with a powerful impact on prevention is the media, which favour dramatic curative events and health ‘crises’ of various sorts, and give very low prominence to public health: no illness or crisis, no story!

Thus, notwithstanding the ethical and economic arguments for upstream prevention, the dominant discourses, backed by powerful interests and institutions, have blocked any significant switch in priorities. New Labour did increase the share of preventive health spending during its term in power, but it was dwarfed by the overall NHS budget and retains a low share of 3.6% of total health expenditure.²⁹

Crime

Crime is another policy area where preventive discourses figure greatly. It is also one with quite well established links between ideologies, theories and policy recommendations (see Table 1). Much of the 20th century was dominated by sociological theories of crime as threats to social cohesion meriting just deserts punishment. From the 1960s onwards this was coupled with dispositional theories asking why certain groups committed crimes and research on identifying at-risk groups and developing midstream forms of prevention. In the 1960s and 1970s a critical criminology perspective emerged which briefly situated crime in the context of capitalist inequality and the state justice system and suggested more radical upstream approaches.

The 1980s saw a rather clear paradigm shift towards a neo-classical criminology and rational choice theory.³⁰ This focused on the ‘rationality’ of certain forms of crime, notably theft and burglary, for certain groups. The preventive policy derived from this was ‘situational crime prevention’, notably fortifying buildings and properties, CCTV surveillance, internal locking and metal detectors in schools etc. Such ‘upstream’ prevention was concerned to modify the built environment, with little attention to the social environment; at the same time downstream prevention was boosted via a continually rising rate of imprisonment. The Coalition government is also developing new ways of privatising prevention, instituting a payment-by-results policy - here focused on outcomes not outputs - to incentivise ‘offender management’. This provides a range of providers with incentives to encourage the rehabilitation of offenders. It requires a large administrative apparatus, measurable and attributable indicators of outcomes, systems to track individuals through programmes, and monitoring of unforeseen consequences³¹, all of which can encourage ‘gaming’ by private contractors.

The model of ‘technical prevention’ endorses focussed, short-term, cost-effective programmes, consistent with individualist rational choice theory. It can also be explained in terms of dominant interests and institutions. Criminal justice bodies and the police play a greater role compared with social work and probation professions: for example, the new ‘Secured by Design’ policy is actually administered by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO). Furthermore the model provides large new profitable opportunities to a burgeoning security industry and multinationals like G4S: an interconnected and self-perpetuating dynamic is emerging involving ACPO, private security companies and a public standards culture.³² Ideas, interests and institutions act together to reinforce a limited and flawed model of crime prevention.

Early years

²⁹ OECD 2009

³⁰ Hayward 2007; Kautt and Pease 2012

³¹ Nesta 2012

³² Minton and Aked 2013

The idea of intervening in the rearing and education of pre-school children became dominant in the 1990s.³³ In particular, New Labour after 1997 developed a range of initiatives such as the *Every Child Matters* Green Paper, the Children's Act 2004, Sure Start, the Children's Fund and On Track. This linked to the preventive strategies in health noted above. The motivation was to prevent, or at least stem the worsening of, a series of social problems including truanting, youth crime, poor school achievement and employment prospects, and 'welfare dependency'. The rationale was both value based, seeking to move away from the predominantly punitive strategies of the 1980s and early 1990s, and economic, seeking to forestall rising costs to welfare and penal services.

Risk Factor Analysis, imported from the US, became an important tool in predicting the targets for such secondary intervention. It led to the relative neglect of the sociological life course approach, of the dangers of stigmatisation, of the role of structural factors, and of transactions between individuals and contexts.³⁴ This 'empiricist psychometric' approach³⁵ applies *a fortiori* to the recent reliance on neurological findings on brain growth championed in the Coalition government's *Early Intervention Report*.³⁶ Critics are also concerned that too much emphasis is now being placed on policing families and 'parenting' – a neologism reflecting a new and explicit arena of policy intervention.

The report *Backing the Future*³⁷ advocates an alternative 'universal and holistic' preventive system for the early years. It draws on cross-national research demonstrating the effectiveness of Scandinavian social and family services in reducing a wide range of social problems, from NEETs to teenage births, from crime to mental health. These combine both extensive universal benefits with selective programmes targeted at families and individuals in need. While this is not a cheap option, the report shows that the costs of not preventing are higher. Indeed it advocates social bonds, redeemable over a ten year period, to finance social and family services without tax costs.³⁸ However, the Scandinavian preventive approach stands in stark contrast to the dominant strategy in the UK which remains targeted on individuals not structures. To reverse this would require a shift in welfare regime conflicting with major interests and institutions – currently pressing for a radical reduction in the scope of the British welfare state.³⁹

Summary. Discourses of prevention have proliferated across social policy - within health, crime and early years intervention - over the last three decades, a period coinciding with the maturation of welfare states and continual attempts to manage long-term cost pressures. This situation of 'growth to limits' is now overlaid by unprecedented short-term cuts to manage fiscal crises brought about by the 2008 crash. Though the economic environment strengthens the efficiency case for prevention, in practice policy initiatives have been derailed by powerful ideological, interest-based and institutional forces. In all three fields of social policy, such preventive policy that has occurred has been downstream or midstream, for ideological reasons, and because it has been in the interest of dominant players and institutions. Where, as in crime, 'primary' prevention strategies have been developed they have adopted a technical rather than social form of interventionism.

³³ Smith 1999

³⁴ France et al 2010

³⁵ Taylor-Gooby and Zinn 2005

³⁶ Allen 2011; cf Bristow 2011

³⁷ Aked et al 2009

³⁸ See also Mulgan et al 2011

³⁹ Taylor-Gooby 2013

Environmental policy: preventing climate change

The domain of environmental policy is quite different. It is potentially enormous, covering pollution of air, water and land, species extinction, threats to global resources, including oil, water and food supplies, and much more. I will concentrate only on the threat of climate change. In the words of the Garnaut Report, this poses ‘a truly complex and diabolical policy problem’⁴⁰, for reasons which can be linked back to Freeman’s twin foundations for preventive public policy.

The first, scientific understanding of cause and effects and the possibility of prediction, is very problematic given, *inter alia*, the complexity of the global climate system, the inherent problems in predicting the effects of a unique, rapid, one-off shift in the parameters, and the complexity of the causal chain linking global warming to human welfare. The second, governmental capacity for controlled intervention, is also remarkably problematic. Climate change is a global phenomenon, yet no global agency has the necessary responsibilities and capacities. Climate change is an intergenerational issue posing threats into the very long term, far longer than the scope of any existing public policies. Climate change is also cumulative, so that short-term, high-cost measures are necessary to forestall vaguer, but potentially enormous, future costs. Thus one would expect little motivation or capacity by national governments to implement serious preventive strategies.

Yet despite these formidable obstacles, there are two areas of success. First, the global scientific consensus is growing stronger over time, martialled by the formidable reports of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.⁴¹ This is challenged by powerful ‘climate denial’ interests, yet, contrary to expectations, this sceptical current has made little headway in terms of public opinion in the West with the exception of three outlier countries: the US, Canada and Australia. Most surveys show public opinion in Western countries to be ambivalent – wishing to protect the earth’s environment but unwilling to pay a significant price to achieve this. There has been some increase in climate change scepticism in the UK since 2005 and overall levels of concern about the issue have also fallen, as have risk perceptions.⁴² But the great majority of world citizens believe that climate change is happening and is caused by human activity.

Second, national and regional prevention policies *have* been developed.⁴³ The EU has put in place the world’s most ambitious cap-and-trade programme, the Emissions Trading System (ETS). And the UK Climate Change Act 2009 is remarkably radical: a commitment to cut GHG emissions by 80% by 2050, with tough intermediate five-year targets, set in legally binding form, and with a statutory body, the Climate Change Committee, charged to monitor progress. This amounts to unprecedented preventive strategy. It even led, under New Labour, to the first national plan since the 1960s – the *UK Low Carbon Transition Plan*. Rather than planning for growth in outputs it planned for cuts in carbon and GHGs, but it contained all the features of state planning for prevention: goals, targets, costing of alternative scenarios, sectoral breakdowns, timelines, policy proposals and incentive systems. (This has now been abandoned as an implementation framework by the Coalition government).

However, in terms of global results the record is poor if not disastrous. The only binding global agreement, the 1992 Kyoto Protocol, is quite inadequate. ‘The message is strong and clear ... since the start of climate change negotiations in 1992 global emissions have more than doubled’.⁴⁴ This raises issues of global governance which are beyond the scope of this essay. Rather, let me consider

⁴⁰ Garnaut 2008; Steffen 2011

⁴¹ IPCC 2007

⁴² Gough 2011

⁴³ Jacobs 2013

⁴⁴ Bassi, Stern

why, at the *national* level, a certain progress in mitigation/prevention has been achieved (thus far), despite the scientific and governance obstacles noted above.

Ideas and ideology. The scientific consensus is solid and increasing over time. However there is an empirical link between extreme neo-liberal beliefs and denial of climate change. This has been stated most pithily by Martin Wolf, 'To admit that a free economy generates a vast global external cost is to admit that the large-scale government regulation so often proposed by hated environmentalists is justified. For many libertarians or classical liberals, the very idea is unsupportable. It is far easier to deny the relevance of the science'.⁴⁵ This has contributed in the US (and Australia) to fierce 'climate wars': the 'issue framing' of climate change has generated strongly polarised positions – it has become a crucial 'ideological marker'.⁴⁶ The hegemony of neo-liberal ideas poses an ever-present threat to climate mitigation.

Interests. Commercial interests in coal, oil and high energy-using industries, especially in the US, are funding vigorous public 'information' and lobbying campaigns to denigrate climate change science. Against this a 'green' agenda is advanced, from above and below. On the one hand, there has been an 'efflorescence of non-state activism': protest groups, counter-cultural movements, the green party, environmental social movements, transition towns and suchlike.⁴⁷ On the other hand, the interests of elites in reform can shift. Sectors of business understand the opportunities in green products and processes. Political elites understand the social costs of unplanned growth. These reformist elites will conflict with representatives of 'carboniferous capitalism' and libertarian politicians, and outcomes will partly depend on this balance of power.

Institutions. As a relatively recent policy domain, climate change policy-making has required the construction of new ministries, such as the UK Department of Energy and Climate Change in 2008. Several factors have facilitated this institutional emergence: unlike social policy there was no prior fiscal burden to be financed and the core programmes of climate change mitigation have required little public expenditure so far. Moreover, there is a substantial prospective role for the private sector in developing green industries.⁴⁸ There is cross-national evidence that institutional patterns of interest representation affect the adoption of climate mitigation policies. Corporatist rather than pluralist political systems enable leading EU countries, notably Germany, and the EU itself to advance an alternative strategy of green growth, based on aggressive carbon constraints and green technology.⁴⁹ However, there is evidence that the post-2008 economic depression has lowered concern for climate change and strengthened pressures for short-term remedies which may undermine national mitigation action in the future.

To summarise: the threat of climate change calls for unprecedented preventive strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in rich countries; but estimating causal effects and developing the capacity to intervene are daunting. Yet we find ambitious mitigation targets and programmes in place in certain countries, related to their configuration of ideological, interest-based and institutional features. This returns us to the economy, current economic models and styles of economic management.

Economic policy and management

⁴⁵ Financial Times 14/05/2013

⁴⁶ Christoff and Eckersley 2011

⁴⁷ Lipschutz and Mckendry 2011

⁴⁸ Gough 2011

⁴⁹ Christoff and Eckersley 2011

Preventive economic policy is not much discussed as such. An online search of ‘prevention’ and ‘economic policy’ reveals a large number of studies of the influence of economic policy and economic performance on the effectiveness of prevention in numerous other domains: famine, obesity and health, inequality, group conflicts, peace-building, disaster prevention etc. But there were relatively few on prevention as a goal within economic policy and management – the major exception being proposals to prevent a repeat of the 2008 financial crash and banking bailouts.

This reflects the domination of economics by ideologies – in the sense of combined normative and explanatory views of the world. Economic policy and management is riven by the clash between the competing paradigms of neo-classicism and Keynesianism (or some form of ‘Keynes-plus’). Neo-classicism or neo-liberalism displaced Keynesianism in the late 1970s and remains the dominant economic paradigm across the OECD and much of the globe. The extraordinary financial crisis has done little to dent its hegemony. Thus I begin by exploring the paradigm clash and ideological transition around 1980 in some detail, before briefly noting the underlying role played by interests and institutions in this shift.⁵⁰

Ideologies. Keynesianism dominated until the mid-1970s, and it founded what could be regarded as a precautionary, preventive style of economic management. Fiscal and monetary policy was to be used to maintain aggregate demand and near-full employment, with resulting social and economic benefits. The automatic stabilisers of tax and welfare spending could be regarded as *primary preventive* economic mechanisms. However, anomalies within this system began to accumulate, notably the combination of stagnation and inflation, which posed great challenges to the Keynesian paradigm, first its instruments and techniques, and ultimately its goals. After a period of both ‘puzzling’ and ‘powering’ it was displaced, initially in the English-speaking world, with what I will call for short neo-liberalism.⁵¹

It is useful to distinguish two ‘counter-revolutions’ here: Hayekism and neo-classical economics, both with profound implications for Freeman’s twin bases of preventive economic management. Hayek’s⁵² philosophical foundations - of markets as catallaxy and society as a spontaneous order - deny the rationale and capacity for any but minimal forms of preventive policy. Social explanation is impossible if society or its representatives cannot conceive of the causal connections between policies and outcomes in a scientific way. Furthermore, should the state try to intervene in markets to prevent harm, this would be coercive, since the constraints on market actors’ opportunities would be intentional.⁵³

The second, neo-classical counter-revolution abolished the distinction between uncertainty and risk, abandoned the idea of a distinct macro-economic method, and advanced the belief that markets are powerfully self-stabilizing. ‘Rarely in history can such powerful minds have devoted themselves to such strange ideas’.⁵⁴ With their triumph, government intervention in numerous areas of the economy was rolled back: contracting-out and quasi-markets spread in social policy, cap-and-trade and market incentives spread in climate mitigation, privatisation and deregulation ruled in economic policy. Skidelsky and many others have demonstrated the role of this model in bringing about the 2008 crisis.

⁵⁰ Drawing notably on Hall 1993, Skidelsky 2009, and Turner 2012

⁵¹ Hall 1993

⁵² Hayek 1976

⁵³ Plant, Lesser and Taylor-Gooby 1980

⁵⁴ Skidelsky 2009: 109-110

Where did this leave preventive economic policy, and notably primary prevention? In a series of influential writings, Majone⁵⁵ argued that a new form of policy-making, the ‘regulatory state’, emerged to complement the shift towards a privatised economy. Its goal was to rectify market failures, notably the abuse of monopoly power and excessive externalities. This might be thought to offer the prospect of a new form of preventive economic management. However, Majone himself argued that the sole normative justification for such intervention is, and should be, *efficiency*: to improve positive-sum outputs for the economy as a whole. This required regulation by expert agencies – the Ofgems, Ofwats and Ofcoms of today’s world. Such a regulatory structure is not conducive to joined-up thinking in economic management. Nor can efficiency objectives be separated in practice from equity or sustainability goals and dealt with in a separate box. For example, the UK policy of obliging energy companies to reduce emissions and increase renewables hurts lower income households the most, since raising energy charges to pay for them is highly regressive.

Following the 2008 crisis the case for a reinvented Keynesianism - or rather of a new paradigm which embraces but moves beyond Keynes - is re-emerging. Recognising the radical uncertainty of the future in all economic management provides the starting point. According to Keynes, capitalism, as the engine of accumulation, exacerbates this radical uncertainty. From this it follows that government should pursue *precautionary* policies. Such preventive economic policies would include: taming finance, via substantial re-structuring of financial markets; an active macro-economic management; and the socialisation of considerable sectors of investment. For example, the investment aspect of social policy would be emphasised, and new ways of ‘valuing what matters’ established.⁵⁶ Adair Turner, past Chairman of the UK Financial Services Authority, argues that governments should seek to maximise stability not growth, and even proposes making explicit distinctions between good and harmful, or ‘socially useless’, economic activity.⁵⁷

However, the solid reality remains, in the words of Colin Crouch, ‘the strange non-death of neo-liberalism’.⁵⁸ To understand the persistence of such anti-precautionary economic policies, we must move beyond the domain of ideas and ideologies and recognise the role of interests, institutions and power which sustains them.

Interests. Neo-liberalism serves the interests of powerful capitalist agents, and in turn strengthens their power. Crouch argues that it serves the interests of giant corporations, which are ‘more potent than states or markets’. This power is based on both structure (their ability to engage in ‘regime shopping’ within a globalising world economy) and agency (their capacity and willingness to put vast funds into lobbying and political funding). The end result is no less than the ‘capture’ of governments by corporations, a process begun in the US. For others⁵⁹, it is the financial sector which drives neo-liberal policies and benefits most from them. As industry declines and is outsourced from the West, most notably in the UK, capitalism becomes financialised with numerous consequences. As a result, instability increases culminating in the 2008 crisis. But this only strengthens financial capital as its structural position becomes more critical to national economic survival.⁶⁰

Institutions. Thus governments, starting with the American and British, become more beholden to these private and sectional interests and ideas. Indeed, governments and capital become more entwined and the ability of democracy to temper this is eroded as ‘winner-takes-all politics’ takes

⁵⁵ Majone 1994

⁵⁶ Aked et al 2009, Kersley and Coote 2013

⁵⁷ Turner 2012

⁵⁸ Crouch 2011

⁵⁹ Including Glyn 2006, and Dumenil and Levy 2011

⁶⁰ Wolf 2013

over.⁶¹ Streeck⁶² even argues that the economic elites have become so rich that their interests become divorced from their interests in the survival of the system. There are no longer any collective constraints on personal greed and all claims of social need are side-lined, beginning and most notably in liberal market economies dominated by financial interests, such as the UK.

Conclusion thus far

If this general argument is true, the obstacles to equitable and sustainable social and environmental policies, including longer-term preventive policies, are profound. They are located in the economy, sustained by neo-liberal ideology, and reinforced by the private interests and institutions that benefit from them.

In different areas of *social* policy, prevention discourse flourishes, mainly fostered by cost concerns of large welfare states, now facing big cuts. However, most policy is directed to the alteration of individual and family behaviours, rather than to larger social structures. This is the result of dominant ideas which undermine the rational case for coherent longer-term social interventions, ideas that are in turn maintained by powerful interests and institutional biases.

In *environmental* policy, specifically climate change mitigation, we find at first a contrasting and paradoxical picture. Despite the manifold knowledge and capacity problems in mitigating future global warming at the global level, a reasonably coherent primary prevention strategy is emerging in the EU including the UK. However, the cross-national evidence suggests this is likely to be more effectively implemented, if at all, in economies with stronger traditions of state intervention.⁶³

In *economic* policy and management, the global dominance of neo-liberal ideas, economic models and values blocks the emergence of an alternative strategy for an equitable and sustainable social economy. Preventive action in the economy, society and environment can make little headway in an atmosphere hostile to bold public initiatives. This hegemonic climate is supported by, and reinforces the power of, dominant corporate and financial interests.

Thus the current economic model hinders the necessary regulatory, fiscal and mobilising initiatives within the public sphere which are essential, I would contend, for a coordinated social-environmental-economic preventive strategy of the sort advocated by the New Economics Foundation at the start of this essay. Within social policy, for example, contracting-out spawns and subsidises a growing network of private providers, and a new form of private-interest government. Within climate change mitigation it has seen off effective carbon taxes and new public investment in eco-system maintenance.

There is growing cross-national evidence that supports this conclusion but qualifies it in important ways. Goodin and his colleagues have demonstrated in great detail that social democratic forms of capitalism, typified in their study by the Netherlands, have outperformed US capitalism. This has occurred across all major socio-economic outcomes – poverty, inequality and social integration – with the German form of capitalism achieving a respectable second place. Their more recent work shows that the same pattern holds when looking at a healthy work-life balance, a balance which serves both social and environmental prevention goals.⁶⁴ Comparative research on environmental

⁶¹ Hacker and Pierson 2010

⁶² Streeck 2011

⁶³ This in no way implies that mitigation programmes by rich countries are adequate; but success here requires global agreement plagued by collective action problems.

⁶⁴ Goodin et al 1999; Goodin et al 2008

regulation and climate mitigation shows that the leaders in the developed world are the coordinated economies such as Germany and social democratic welfare states such as the Nordics.⁶⁵

The conclusion is that there are potential synergies between radical preventive social and environmental policy, and that these can be realised in more coordinated forms of capitalism. Integrated prevention is possible and cross-national research offers evidence of its actual realisation in certain capitalist contexts. This more hopeful conclusion is developed in the final section by returning to some of the theoretical issues raised at the start of the paper.

Towards an alternative social economy and integrated prevention

An alternative, preventive social-economic model needs to address, inter alia, three issues: the shibboleth of 'consumer choice', how to reach consensus on just and sustainable forms of preventive intervention, and the preconditions for integrated policy-making. This returns us to the normative, scientific and governance issues raised in the introduction.

1. Sustainable needs versus consumer sovereignty.

Hayek and neo-classical economics together helped cement the prime position of consumer sovereignty in economics and as a central, taken-for-granted, normative stance in policy-making. We have seen how this has inhibited various strands of preventive public policy (with some hard-fought exceptions, such as smoking cessation). Yet all serious studies, by scholars in political science, law and behavioural sciences, demonstrate that consumer preferences are endogenous to socio-economic systems. Our wants are shaped by structures, interest groups and private and public institutions. Thus to proclaim respect for consumer choice as the taken-for-granted foundation of preventive policy is to respect the current factors and forces shaping preferences as either optimal or unchangeable.

This is rejected by scholars from a wide range of positions: '(In the face of current levels of obesity) it is quite fantastic to suggest that everyone is choosing the optimum diet, or the diet that is preferable to what might be produced with third-party guidance'.⁶⁶ 'Any welfare approach based on the presumption that individuals are always the best judges of their own interest falls at the first hurdle: many people neither understand nor accept the conclusions of the science of climate change'.⁶⁷

Thus it is essential to qualify the pursuit of want-regarding principles with ideal-regarding principles, to use Brian Barry's terms.⁶⁸ I have already argued that human *need* provides just such an alternative measure of value. Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum proclaim capabilities and functionings.⁶⁹ There are differences between these concepts, but these are less important than the opportunity all offer to operationalise ideal-regarding principles. In developing these alternative value measures, disciplines other than economics will play a powerful role, one which has been displaced in recent decades. Economics is by far the most dominant 'epistemic community' in the modern world, and economists such as Stiglitz, Turner and Skidelsky recognise the harm this is doing. To develop more structural, primary forms of preventive policy, the full range of social (and historical) sciences need to play a greater public role.

⁶⁵ Scruggs 2003; Christoff and Eckersley 2011

⁶⁶ Sunstein and Thaler 2006:237

⁶⁷ Hodgson 2012

⁶⁸ Barry 1965

⁶⁹ See for a comparison Gough 2003; Gough 2013

2. *Codified and local knowledge.*

In determining the evidence for making preventive interventions, I have argued that two sorts of knowledge must be tapped. First, there is the best available codified knowledge, including scientific/ technical knowledge of causal relationships between harms/ need satisfaction and other factors, and comparative anthropological knowledge about practices across cultures and sub-cultures, states and political systems in the contemporary world. Second, is the experientially grounded knowledge of people. If upstream interventions are to be negotiated, all groups must have the ability to participate in devising need satisfiers and to contribute to policy-making. 'Preventing harm is arguably most effective when it involves change from the bottom up: people and organisations becoming more resilient: building up their own immune systems, both literally and metaphorically, so that they become less susceptible to harm; changing attitudes and capabilities so that they are better able to withstand harm by taking positive actions themselves'.⁷⁰

Thus any rational and effective attempt to resolve disputes over ways of improving the satisfaction of human needs, including preventive action, must bring to bear both the codified knowledge of experts and the experiential knowledge of those whose basic needs and daily life world are under consideration. It 'requires a *dual strategy* of policy formation which values compromise, provided that it does not extend to the general character of basic human needs and rights'.⁷¹ This dual strategy calls for new forms of participatory processes and deliberative dialogue, already much explored and piloted in numerous areas of life.

It is not inconsistent to extol the virtues of participation while being extremely critical of actually existing representative democracy, as the Nef report recognises: 'While the *processes* of preventing harm may well be more effective if they are participative ... the *politics* of prevention offers a formidable challenge to democracy, perhaps especially where the environment is concerned'. Quite apart from the domination by powerful lobbies, the decline of value-based political parties results in a representative democracy built on aggregating preferences, as expressed in 'median voter' theories. Moreover, there is an inherent conflict between electoral cycles and the long time frame of environmental pressures, resource planning and investment.

3. *A political economy for preventive policy-making.*

The Brundtland Report famously defined sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.⁷² To achieve this requires certain procedural and material preconditions.⁷³ The procedural preconditions refer to the ability of a nation (which I shall take as the relevant economic unit at this stage) to define basic needs and appropriate need satisfiers in a rational way and to prioritise the need satisfactions of different groups, including future generations. These preconditions entail that the *composition of output* in an economy becomes as much an object of policy as its size and distribution. Following Baumol⁷⁴ and Turner we should foster a principled debate on the distinctions between productive, unproductive and destructive outputs in the economy. This returns us to much earlier discussions of productive and unproductive labour, of luxuries and necessities, of inputs essential for reproducing people, communities and ecologies.

⁷⁰ Coote 2012:18

⁷¹ Doyal and Gough 1991, 141

⁷² Brundtland 1987

⁷³ Doyal and Gough 1991, part 3; Gough 1992; Gough 2000 ch.2

⁷⁴ Baumol 1990

Using this framework I have tried to evaluate the ability of three forms of capitalism to achieve these preconditions: neo-liberal capitalism, statist capitalism, and corporatist capitalism.⁷⁵ Of these, corporatist capitalism has the potential to integrate market forces with two other methods of coordination – state intervention and public negotiation. It can in theory provide elementary forms of dialogic democracy to advance these material preconditions. By contrast, neo-liberal capitalism fails to achieve the first precondition - to identify sustainable needs; indeed true neo-liberals glory in the fact that there is and should be no central debate on, or prioritisation of, the goals of the economy. By frequently denying the existence or knowability of individual and social needs it cannot or will not challenge consumer demand except in isolated cases. Thus needs not backed up by relevant knowledge and/or purchasing power will go unmet. By deregulating markets to the maximum extent, the ability of consumer-citizens to define need satisfiers is also diminished. Democratic distortions are numerous and increasing, as financial and corporate power is unleashed and freed from democratic restraint.

Yet the ability of capitalism to meet material preconditions for human well-being is not to be dismissed. Markets can utilise the dispersed knowledge of millions of separate actors to achieve historic improvements in material standards of living. On the other hand, there is the well-established litany of market failures requiring state regulation and intervention; to regulate and redistribute incomes to prevent soaring inequality; to protect consumers against the power of commercial lobbies and advertisers; and to prevent degradation of future natural resource stocks via regulation of property rights, preservation of stocks of natural capital and fostering of longer-term time horizons. Even in the most deregulated forms of capitalism governments will pursue some of these forms of regulation; but the continual pressure under neo-liberalism is to undermine them or roll them back altogether, as the disciples of Ayn Rand now demand in America.

To conclude, Freeman's presumptions for effective public prevention policy are not necessarily out of reach. They can be reconstituted within a more collective, precautionary political economy which prioritises meeting need and avoiding harm, which pursues a dual strategy and which fosters dialogic democracy. In so doing it can draw on the experiences of alternative forms of coordinated capitalism, as they still exist across Europe and as they emerge across the world.

⁷⁵ Gough 1994; Gough 2000. This ventures into the well-researched territory of varieties of capitalism which cannot be discussed here. See for example Hall and Soskice 2001 and the recent critique by Streeck 2010.

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