Rethinking the Welfare State

by Tim Hitchcock, William Farrell

William Farrell talks to historian Tim Hitchcock about the origins of the welfare state and its influence on contemporary political narratives.


This interview explores the politics and history of the welfare state in Britain. It takes a much longer historical view than normal and focuses on institutions and events readers may be unfamiliar with. This is out of a belief that the conventional left political narrative about the welfare state has broken down and a new one is needed. The Labour Party, which created many of the public services now under threat, has been a lukewarm opponent of the coalition’s plans. The main opposition comes from the trade unions, but the focus of their national action will be over the pensions of their members, not privatisation or quality of care. Opposition from the users of welfare services has been sporadic and localised. This situation results from a left, both social democratic and radical, which is unsure over what kind of welfare services it wants and that has a limited ability to achieve its aims.

Tim Hitchcock is a historian of 18th century poverty and the co-creator of the website www.Londonlives.org. The website makes available 40 million words of manuscript material relating to crime and social policy in eighteenth-century London, including sessions papers, the archives of three parishes, of St Thomas’s hospital and of Bridewell. The site is designed to give free and key word searchable access to the raw materials of a history of social welfare and criminal justice. The ultimate aim of the project is to write a new ‘history from below’ exploring the relationship between working people and the institutions of social welfare and criminal justice. He spoke to William Farrell about how a grassroots understanding of the history of the welfare state can shed light on its crisis today.

What is the aim of the London Lives project and why should we go back to the 18th century to understand the welfare state?

I think that the real political deficit at the moment is the lack of models of how the individual interacts with the state. One of things that has happened since 1989 is that many of the broad intellectual structures that allowed the Left to understand the relationship between worker and capital, between state and working class, were made politically unacceptable, even if they weren’t wrong. They just ceased to be a discourse that could be used effectively to engage a broader public.

More fundamentally, the rise of the Western European Welfare State has created a situation in which the most powerful interaction the individual has with the state now lies in their engagement with social welfare. Whether that is in terms of medicine, or the
dole, or pensions, or childcare, it is as a patient, parent or pensioner, more than as a voter or political activist, that most people are confronted with the power of the state. As a result, these social welfare relationships need to be explored and explained. By examining how they work in the very different system current in the eighteenth century, it becomes easier to model the basic forces that shape them.

The rising importance of this relationship between the individual and systems of social welfare over the last half century or so makes them a necessary focus of politics. And yet many of the methodologies of the Left we inherited from the 19th and early 20th century were about the politics of the vote or of social inclusion. Many of the political campaigns of the last century were not directed at the politics of wealth redistribution, which is what the welfare state is. So going back to the eighteenth century also allows us to focus on systems of redistribution, and to do so in a context in which the traditions of contemporary politics are less intrusive.

And so one of the political points about doing 'history from below' (history that looks at working class behaviour from a working class perspective) and going back to the 18th century is that it allows you to think afresh, to eliminate a lot of the intellectual structures we inherited. The other thing about focussing on the eighteenth century is that between 1700 and 1800 the population of London was about half a million to a million people. With online digitisation projects, like the London Lives project, we can capture perhaps 60% of those people, 60% of everybody who lived in 18th century London. The numbers are small enough that we can start to model how the changing behaviour of identifiable groups and individuals might interact with social welfare and social division.

So how does the welfare system change in 18th century London and why?

It starts off with a period in which you see the rise in a large number of workhouses which are run by the parish, the smallest unit of local government. From the 1720s they explode across the capital and across the country. The interesting thing is that projects such as the London Lives website allow you to look at how the designers of these workhouses all start off with an image in their minds of what workhouses were going to do. They are basically designed to take the adult, able-bodied poor and force them to work: a classic example of a ‘workfare’ system. But, what happens within just a year or two of the opening of most workhouses is that they are forced to abandon this agenda almost entirely. As a result of pressure from inmates and paupers, and the wider parish population, workhouses are forced to change. Although they were designed to hold 60% adult men and 30% adult women and 10% children; once the wider pauper population came into workhouses, it turned out that the population of paupers was actually 30% children, 50% adult women (accompanied by children), and 20% men (mainly elderly and disabled). In response to simple demand, re-enforced by public outrage at the treatment of elderly and disabled paupers, the workfare agenda collapsed, and workhouses were re-invented as a wider parish resource.
So what you end up creating within 10 to 15 years is a comprehensive system of welfare administered by local government, medical care for the poor, and orphanages; residential care for the elderly, for women with children and for poor children themselves. That transition from workfare to welfare is largely down to the demands of the poor and the absolute contradiction between the observable needs of a poor population on the ground and what workhouse designers thought they were going to find. I think that in this transition can be found an important kind of agency being deployed by poor Londoners. This is not a hugely powerful form of agency, it's constrained by poverty and health and need, and works in dialogue with the power of parish elites. But there are points in the process where pressure is being applied and change is happening.

The response to this pressure is in part the creation of bigger and more comprehensive workhouses, but it also creates change in the associated system of criminal justice. So what appears to happen is that following the failure of workhouses to find an adult male population to set to work; the elites of eighteenth-century London say 'if workhouses are full of the elderly, women with children, and children themselves, how can we discipline adult, able bodied men and women?' And the answer they arrive at appears to be by hanging them; or treating them as vagrants or transporting them. And gradually by the 1740s to 1780s what occurs is the beginnings of a system that is ever more effective at taking a criminalised proportion of the population, i.e. men and women aged 16-28, treating them in an ever more brutal way; while the poor relief system becomes more focussed on children, women with children and the elderly.

At the boundary between these two systems, poor relief and criminal justice, lay the vagrant removal system, which again, is forced to evolve in response to pressure from below. Although, along with the criminal justice system, that for vagrant removal initially becomes more efficient and commonplace, it is forced to evolve into something different over the course of the century. Through most of the eighteenth century, the City of London was removing several hundred adult men and women every year as vagrants; and supposedly setting them to hard labour and a whipping before sending them on their way. But again, as with workhouses, the labour discipline gradually fell out of use, while at the same time the numbers being removed grew substantially.

By the mid-1780s the City of London was removing between 2 to 4,000 vagrants a year. And the explanation for this increase appears to lie in paupers presenting themselves for removal, rather than in a change in elite policy. By the end of the 1780s, the City is not only providing horse-drawn transportation for thousands of migrants a year, but it is also providing medical care for an increasing number, with between 2 and 400 men and women being sent to hospital at the City’s expense. Increasingly, the vagrancy system ceased to be a mechanism of control and punishment, and became a subsidised, seasonal migratory system, with provisions for medical care along the way. As with
workhouses, the real needs of a poor population, overcame the explicit policy objectives built in to the system.

What conclusion do you draw from this for modern audiences?

The conclusion that I come to is that the cultures of pressure that the poor are able to exert by demand, by the rhetoric of appeal, by self-conscious use of their own needy bodies is a central component in the evolution of systems of social welfare both in the eighteenth century and now. Though there is an important distinction between the two. During the eighteenth century, the system was changing from one based in deference to one characterised by bureaucratisation. What you see is an evolution from a system of ‘doles and alms’ that was located in a one-on-one deference relationship between the pauper and the parish officer, to a system that becomes increasingly contained within a system of laws, and documents and forms. Suddenly, and as with most modern systems, you have a regulatory system that controls who gets what. And in the process, this empowers individual paupers to use the rules to influence the outcome of each request.

This distinction between ‘deference’ and a rules based system is important, in as much as while you may be able to manipulate deference, the relationships involved are very personal and are likely to empower the person making the decision on the ground, leaving the supplicant no room for appeal. In contrast, a bureaucratic system of control places authority in a series of rules that can be deployed by either the pauper or the parish officer – though the parish officer is still in the more powerful position. In other words, there is a broader story that is relevant for modern users of the welfare state; which is that systems of relief can be reformed through resistance and demand; and that systems of rules are open to use by even the apparently least powerful. This is really all about suggesting to a modern audience that knowing the rules of a welfare state provides a powerful way of forcing it to evolve into a more generous and acceptable form; and that we probably need to be more suspicious than we are about systems that purport to rely on the good sense of ‘professionals’, rather than on an explicit set of rules. Modern NHS reforms, for example, are frequently presented as empowering local GPs, and through them, patients; but in fact, could have the intended or unintended consequence of creating a miserable deferential relationship between GPs and their patient to the serious disadvantage of the latter.

I can imagine that some people are going to read this whose reaction will be that that is a rather de-politicised analysis as it excludes political parties and mass movements. They are after all the ones who built the 20th century welfare state.

I agree that there is an important history of popular political activism and that it is hugely significant. But once you actually set up a system, it doesn't stop changing. And most of the forces shaping that evolution can be found at the door of the workhouse or in the hospital ward, where the culture that determines how a set of rules is applied
develops. It’s getting at these kinds of things, the changes that happen on the ground, that are lost if we restrict our analysis to self-conscious political activism.

You have argued that the Gordon Riots of 1780 were crucial to this process, especially on the criminal justice side of things. If anyone reading this has heard of the Gordon Riots it will be as a great moment of anti-Catholic bigotry, so you’d better explain.

The Gordon Riots are probably the least studied political upheaval in British history. The reason they are unstudied is that the Left is uncomfortable with the apparently bigoted anti-Catholicism, and opposition to toleration, with which they appear to start.

There are two points about this. First, the Protestant Association, who organised the event that led to the riots, were protesting against what they perceived as an attack on their communities, as defined by a shared religious system. They believed that even limited Catholic toleration, would undermine the role of the parish. The parish, the ‘welfare state in miniature’, was defined by Anglicanism and the church; and as a result Catholic toleration implied an attack on universal nature of the systems of self-governance and welfare provision associated with it. In many respects, despite the anti-Catholic bigotry, the Protestant Association can also be seen as an attempt to intervene in the changing relationship between parishioners and authority.

Second, and more importantly, as the riots evolved over a long week in June 1780, the character of the people involved simply changed. The rioters change from a group of lower-middle class ‘associationers’, set to defend the parish state, in to a much more working class attack on the central state. In the process, the focus of the riot moves from Catholic chapels and churches to John Fielding’s (founder of the Bow Street Runners) house in Bow Street, and hence to the then nascent police force. The rioters attack Lord Mansfield’s the Lord Chief Justice house in Bloomsbury; and then move on to a direct attack on Newgate Prison. Newgate had been built over the preceding seven or eight years in a brutal, neo-classical style; and the rioters simply pull it down, and set it alight, releasing some 100 prisoners, several of whom were waiting to be hanged. There were running battles in which 260 people were killed; including attacks on the Bank of England, the Inns of Court, the East India Company Buildings, and the New Prison at Clerkenwell. Almost every single building that might represent the state and authority in the minds of a broader population came under attack.

What started as a defence of the ‘parish state’ became an attack on the apparatus of the central imperial state; and most especially on the criminal justice system. The Gordon Riots represent the most direct and successful confrontation between a broader populous and the state that I can think of in modern British history. And I think it served as a catalyst in the creation of a much more self-conscious working class. It was Britain’s attack on the Bastille, and the riots deserve a much more nuanced analysis than they hitherto received.
What were the consequences of this?

Essentially, the state was forced to change the nature of the trial and the criminal justice system, in order to re-establish its authority in the minds of a wider public (reining in the power of groups such as the Bow Street Runners). But it was also forced to raise its own game substantially in order to create a more effective bureaucratic system. In many respects the riots can be seen as the impetus for the reform of criminal justice in the 1790s, and the 19th century creation of something that looks very much like a police state.

In other words, what I find in this material, is evidence of the co-evolution of poor relief, criminal justice, violence and politics, moving together step-by step, in a complex dialogue. The pressures exerted by the poor on the state force the evolution of that state and forced, in turn, a dramatic reaction in opposition, which in its own turn hastened the evolution of the state once again.

That is to say we can find agency in the behaviour of all participants, but it is not an unmediated agency. It is absolutely a dialogue that helps to explain and explicate how systems of local government, systems of social relations, actually evolved. At its heart, this is the simple point that underpins the London Lives project.

One of the ways you can use London Lives to test certain elite policy assumptions about working people's behaviour, for example Jonas Hanway's attack on parish nurses.

This forms a further micro example of how these evolutionary processes work. Jonas Hanway attacked parish nurses in order to pursue his own reform agenda. Essentially what he wanted was for government and the parishes to be obliged to use and fund the Foundling Hospital, the hospital he helped establish. What he did was put together a whole series of statistics about individual nurses and traduced them by name, including Hannah Poole. He argued they were essentially murderers of infant children: that the parishes were putting children into their hands simply to kill them. What resources such as London Lives allows you to do is trace all the activities of those nurses, and what emerges from that is that Hanway was being fast and loose with his depictions and statistics. Actually, parish nurses were small scale business women, running what might be characterised as care homes, taking in women from the streets for child birth in very difficult circumstances and actually achieving a success rate at least as good as that achieved for the same group in places such as workhouses and charitable hospitals. In this instance, the detailed analysis of parish records, first of all, saves the reputation of a group of women that have been traduced as child killers in the literature for 300 years. It also reflects the role of elite discourses in creating ‘reform’, and the extent to which these discourses cannot be reliably used to depict the workings of social welfare.
In London Lives you can find ‘benefit fraudsters’ or single mothers, people who are still popular stereotypes in debates about the welfare state. How should we use that kind of material?

There is benefit fraud, both now and in the eighteenth century. The only real question is what do you make of it? There are going to be people who use the site to evidence things I don’t agree with, who use the existence of fraud to traduce the system. On the other hand, by posting large bodies of primary sources online, everybody can test the evidence. The more people who look at the original, the more people are empowered to do the analysis and to contradict authority, academic authority and every other kind of authority.

One conclusion on the benefit fraudster side could be that in any kind of bureaucracy this is just what happens, it’s the 10% wastage.

I think benefit fraud is one of those areas where agency is expressed and systems are encouraged to evolve. It is precisely when a modern system or a historical system is forced to confront how it doesn’t work the way it is supposed to. As a result, it encourages discussion and negotiation about how it should work. Some of the best discussions in the present are precisely driven by these stereotypes, in as much as you then have to stand back and say ‘why is that occurring? How do we change the system so that it achieves what we want it to do in terms of real need and social dislocation?’ The anxiety about fraud is counterproductive, when it brings the system in to disrepute, but the debate fuelled by this kind of anxiety is actually part of the civil discussion that every community has to have with itself.

Some historians would challenge your whole approach. Gareth Stedman Jones in The End of Poverty? says the great breakthrough is by the thinkers of radical enlightenment like Tom Paine. They realised, through their reading of Adam Smith, that it would be possible to abolish poverty.

Gareth Stedman Jones is essentially an historian looking at ideas and he sees in ideas an agency that I don’t see. I actually believe ideas follow behaviour and experience. The changing experience of poverty and inequality are the true driving forces in all this and the ideas and the pamphlets are a kind of epiphenomenon on an underpinning reality.

He also once said that the welfare state created by the Atlee government in 1945 was ‘the last great flowering of late Victorian philanthropy’.

The only real problem with this perspective is that it doesn’t take seriously the role of the state in its most inclusive form – it seems to simply exclude the parish from the equation. If you like, there is certainly a nationalisation of philanthropy in the twentieth century, but it followed on from the Victorian de-nationalisation of the same charitable impulse. As a result, I see an important equivalence between the eighteenth-century
parish and the modern welfare state, and believe the Victorian attempt to limit the state’s role is actually aberrant.