Diffusing ideas for after-neoliberalism:
The social investment perspective in Europe and Latin America

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Abstract

By the mid-1990s neoliberalism had begun to reach its economic, social and political limits. International as well national and even sub-national social policymakers in and concerned with Latin America and Europe began to converge around new ideas about doing social policy, characterised here as the social investment perspective. The first section of the article documents this convergence across two regions. The second section then identifies three social mechanisms that supported this convergence. The first began in the heyday of neoliberalism, and involved *opening space* for legitimate alternatives. A second was the *polysemic* character of social investment as a quasi-concept that could penetrate and link numerous policy communities. The third was *boundary-crossing*, as distinctions that had separated analysis and action in the two regions fell away.

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Beginning in the 1980s, neoliberalism's ideas and practices profoundly challenged and destabilized post-1945 political projects, policy arrangements and practices of governing. Both in Latin America, where the Washington Consensus reshaped economies and political institutions, and in the member countries of the OECD world there was a move away from the perspectives on social policy developed in the three decades after 1945. In particular, there were concerted efforts to roll back existing guarantees to social protection in the name of a larger role for the market, families and communities.

Neoliberalism had, however, limits and by the mid-1990s political space for new perspectives widened. In particular, the discourse of international as well national and sub-national social policymakers began to cohere around new ideas about "developmental welfare states." Manuel Riesco (2007: 3) describes the principles of new developmental welfare thinking this way: "these viewpoints value macroeconomic policies that promote employment, raise incomes, and achieve other 'people-centred' economic outcomes. … [they] prefer social programmes that are 'productivist', and investment oriented, that is, social programmes that promote economic participation, and generate positive rates of return to the economy." Anton Hemerijck summarises the idea of the European "developmental welfare state" as depending in large part on a "child-centred social investment strategy" and a "human capital investment push" (Hemerijck, 2007: 12-13).

As these two quotations make clear, the notion of "investment" and particularly "social investment" underpins this policy perspective. Starting from this observation, this article addresses two questions: (i) when and where did the social investment perspective emerge as an answer to classic neoliberalism; and (ii) what were the social mechanisms of its diffusion? Each of the two main sections of the article addresses one of these questions.

The first section documents convergence around the key objectives of a social investment perspective. The definition of convergence adopted here is that of Knill (2005: 768), who writes: "…policy convergence can be defined as any increase in the similarity between one or more characteristics of a certain policy (e.g. policy objectives, policy instruments, policy settings) across a given set of political jurisdictions (supranational institutions, states, regions, local authorities) over a given period of time. Policy convergence thus describes the end result of a process of policy change over time towards some common point, regardless of the causal processes." The focus in this article is only on converging policy objectives; instruments and settings continue to vary widely across jurisdictions. Nor does the article address the implementation of the social investment perspective via specific instruments and settings; that would involve another project altogether.

The article does analyse the spread of ideas, expressed in the form of diagnoses of policy challenges and the objective of overcoming them, suggesting that the spread was the result of three social mechanisms. Thus the second, and significantly larger section, turns to an identification of the processes and mechanisms of diffusion of ideas about the social investment perspective.[1] There is a now a large literature that examines the diffusion of public policies across space.[2] A recent overview identifies four distinct theories: constructivism, coercion theory, competition theory, and social learning, three of which allocate analytic attention to the diffusion of ideas (Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett, 2007). Relying on elements of constructivism and social learning, this article identifies three social mechanisms that contributed to the turn towards a social investment perspective.

Converging around a social investment perspective

The discourse and practices of many international as well national and even sub-national social policy makers reflect a global anti-poverty consensus (Noël, 2006: 305), traversing the development community, including that tuned to Latin America. It is also found in the European Union, where social inclusion gained co-equal status in the 2000 Lisbon agenda with more traditional themes of employment (the European Employment Strategy), health and pensions.

Naming this consensus "anti-poverty" is too limited and broad-brush, however. Identifying an agreement within the development community around an objective for what is now awkwardly called "pro-poor" policies or the "poverty reduction paradigm" provides no indication of how the goal of reducing poverty is to be attained. Policy logics and instruments can widely diverge. They can include neoliberals' promotion of globalisation in the belief that there will be trickle-down effect "raising all boats" and social conservatives' promotion of marriage as the way "to lift families out of poverty." Nor does the identification of a consensus about the risks of social exclusion and the need to work on social inclusion provide any information about how countries, international organisations or NGOs will act on that consensus. Policies could – and have – ranged from workfare (work requirements in exchange for access to social benefits) to promoting early childhood education, in-work benefits, conditional cash transfers, or extended public services.

This section of the article describes one policy perspective that describes a specific logic for fighting poverty. It is the *social investment perspective*. This social policy perspective rests on three principles. First is the notion of learning as the pillar of the economies and societies of the future. This principle leads to significant policy attention to human capital, beginning with pre-school children. Second is an orientation to assuring the future more than to ameliorating conditions in the here and now; this leads to promotion of social spending designed to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and a focus on children. Finally, there is the idea that successful individuals enrich our common future and investing in their success is beneficial for the community as a whole, now and into the future, a vision which easily leads to child-centred policy interventions (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2006: 435).

No claim is made in this article that all countries have adopted the social investment perspective. In western Europe, liberal and social democratic welfare regimes moved more quickly to take up the discourse and policy practices of social investment than did either Bismarckian regimes or the European Union itself.[3] In Latin America only some countries have moved in this direction. Others have selected to return to state-centric development strategies, privileging redistribution of resource rents to the poor. And yet others are still mired in their classic neoliberalism. There are, however, increasing signs that a number of countries in Latin America as well as in western Europe as well as a number of international organisations are replacing their neoliberal ideas with the three principles of the social investment perspective.

The social investment perspective represents an approach to social policy different from the social protection logic of post-1945 welfare regimes as well as the safety-net stance of neoliberals.[4] During their consolidation in the 1950s and 1960s, systems of social protection in Europe and the Americas were grounded in the shared objective of providing a measure of social security via health, pensions, unemployment insurance and other programmes to the worker and his family. The developmentalist state in Latin America "was born out of the same process that generated Keynesianism and welfare states" in Europe (Draibe, 2007: 241). However, whereas a variety of welfare regimes were present in Europe after 1945, in Latin America the corporatist form dominated (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Yashar, 1999: 80).

The neoliberal perspective of the 1980s assaulted this social protection model. Neoliberals popularised the diagnosis that social spending and state intervention were in conflict with economic prosperity, and thus the state was labelled the source of the problems of many countries. Internationally as well as domestically neoliberals downplayed the role of the state and promoted "structural adjustments" that would make markets distributors of well-being, families responsible for their own opportunities, and the community sector the final safety net. Describing neoliberalism in Latin America Evelina Dagnino writes (2005: 2):

> … as a part of the neoliberal agenda of reform, citizenship began to be understood and promoted as mere individual integration to the market. At the same time and as part of the same process of structural adjustments, consolidated rights are being progressively withdrawn from workers throughout Latin America. In a parallel development, philanthropic projects from the so-called Third Sector have been expanding in numbers and scope, in an attempt to address poverty and exclusion …

Janet Newman and her colleagues (2004: 204) use very similar words to describe changes that occurred in European countries under neoliberalism: "… governments – in the UK, the USA and across much of Western Europe – have attempted to shift the focus towards various forms of co-production with other agencies and with citizens themselves through partnerships, community involvement and strategies of 'responsibilisation'."

In the 1980s policy redesign was the norm.[5] Some existing social citizenship rights were privatised, with the most draconian assaults being on public pension systems in Latin America

(Madrid, 2002). Generous public pensions were one of the targets of neoliberals in Europe as well (Bonoli, 2000). Ideas about social solidarity also shifted as poverty and social exclusion were fore grounded and attention to the rights of the so-called mainstream faded. In Chile under the dictatorship for example, "… social spending was to reach the truly needy and not 'special interest groups' such as organized labour and organized middle-class professionals and public servants" (Schild, 2000: 282). Similar notions of a divided society, with social policy attention focused on the margins and on those "at-risk" of social exclusion were increasingly popular not only in neoliberal Britain but also in France, the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the International Labour Organisation and some agencies of the UN (Jenson, 1998; Deacon, 2000: 7).

In contrast, the social investment perspective recognises a legitimate role for state action, but only of a certain kind. As the 2007 Peruvian anti-poverty law put it: "we have to move from a vision based on social spending to one based on social investment."[6] The final communiqué of the OECD social ministers in 2005 was just as blunt: "social policies must be pro-active, stressing investment in people's capabilities and the realisation of their potential, not merely insuring against misfortune."[7] The perspective by no means rejects the premise of both post-1945 welfare regimes and neoliberalism that the market ought to be the primary source of well-being for most people; it too emphasises the importance of paid employment and other forms of market income. But, whereas neoliberals assumed that market participation was the solution, the social investment perspective includes a suspicion that the market may not be producing sufficient income for everyone, that poverty and social exclusion are real problems requiring more than simply "a job." There is a basic recognition that opportunities – and increasingly capabilities – are neither equally nor equitably distributed.[8] Some public spending, such as conditional cash transfers or childcare services, may be needed to ensure that children can be sent to school, to pre-school, or to the doctor, for example. Parents may not have enough resources, and therefore they will not able to "choose" to invest in their children. Nor will all adults be able to enter the labour force, if basic services and supports are unavailable.

In Latin America, the goal is often to ensure better coverage for those left outside corporatist social protection systems, particularly in the areas of health and pensions (Cortés, 2007: 10-11; appendices; Fiszbein, 2005: 5). In Europe, high rates of precarious work and economic restructuring have generated enthusiasm for "flexicurity" as a way of assuring some measure of income security even when job stability is a thing of the past. The European Union, for example, incorporated the principle of flexicurity in the 2008-10 *Integrated Guidelines for Growth and Jobs* and launched a travelling *Mission for Flexicurity* in 2008.[9] ECLAC is also calling for flexicurity arrangements (2007: 112ff.).

A common social investment prescription is the need to "make work pay," not simply by making it compulsory and competitive with social benefit rates but also by supplementing wages, providing low-cost services, or both. For example, in-work benefit programmes provide supplements to earned income when market earnings are judged to be insufficient. Examples are Britain's Working Tax Credit (instituted by New Labour in 1999)[10] and France's *prime pour l'emploi* (since 2001). A survey in 2003 found that eight of the EU 15 countries had instituted an in-work benefit (Immervoll *et al*., 2007: 35). Affordable child care services are also frequently identified as necessary if women's employment rates are to rise.

Latin American countries have followed another strategy for dealing with the failure of labour markets to provide sufficient income. Faced with high levels of poverty as well informal employment and "truncated" social protection regimes that provide little coverage to much of the population, they have been experimenting with cash-transfer programmes (Fiszbein, 2005; Standing, 2008). In particular, conditional cash transfers that are income-tested and conditional on certain behaviours with respect to schooling and health care for children have become widespread. By 2007 they were being used in 14 Latin American countries (Bastagli, 2007). Presented in the words of their promoters, CCT "…hold promise for addressing the inter-generational transmission of poverty and fostering social inclusion by explicitly targeting the poor, focusing on children, delivering transfers to women, and changing social accountability relationships between beneficiaries, service providers and governments (de la Brière and Rawlings, 2006: 4).

This emphasis on breaking the intergenerational transfer of poverty is a key idea of the social investment perspective, making it "child-centred" (Jenson, 2001; Lister 2003; Sen in Morán, 2004). One expression of the idea comes in the form of an emphasis on investments in human capital as the route to future success. For example, the Mexican government describing its national social development programme, *Oportunidades,* called for "investing in human capital": "Quality education means that educational achievements translate into real access to better opportunities to make use of the benefits of that education. There will be payoffs from the investment in the form of increases in the basic skills of poor Mexican girls, boys and youth" (Secretaría de Desarrollo Social, 2003: 65). Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder (1999) said in their manifesto for a "third way": "The most important task of modernisation is to invest in human capital: to make the individual and businesses fit for the knowledge-based economy of the future." The focus orients social policy at the European level, having gained the status of one of the Guidelines for Growth and Jobs for 2005-08, and being a key theme in the 2008 *Renewed Social Agenda*.[11] Investing in human capital, described as a "future orientated policy" for ensuring social inclusion, has been jointly promoted by among others the finance ministries of Sweden, Germany and Britain.[12]

Another and very clear expression of the social investment perspective is the emphasis on early childhood education and care (ECEC). Whereas "childcare" is part of a strategy for mobilising female labour force participation, ECEC focuses on the long-term advantages of providing public support for early childhood education. In the last decade, and across all regime types, putting public money into ECEC has become the norm, justified as an investment in children's futures, with collective as well as individual payoffs. As the OECD's important publication *Starting Strong II* put it, "a central issue for OECD governments in relation to early childhood funding is not whether to invest, but how much and at what level" (OECD, 2006: 20). It then goes on to say (OECD, 2006: 37):

> The move towards seeing early childhood services as a public good has received much support in recent years from economists as well from education researchers [who] suggest that the early childhood period provides an unequalled opportunity for investment in human capital … A basic principle is that learning in one life stage begets learning in the next. … "The rate of return to a dollar of investment made while a person is young is higher than the rate of return for the same dollar made at a later age."

The Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean makes virtually the same claim (ECLAC, 2007: 117):

> In order to promote greater educational equity in Latin America, it is not enough to universalize primary education (the second of the Millennium Development Goals); it is also necessary to meet three further challenges concerning coverage and continuity.

> The first is to assure universal access of children aged between 3 and 6 to quality pre-school programmes which can contribute to their general training and, as an indirect effect, improve education outcomes at the primary level.

So too does the Inter-American Development Bank which has been promoting early childhood care and development (ECCD) since the mid-1990s (Morán, 2004: chapter 1). Since the mid-1990s in Latin America there has been a flurry of new early childhood programmes, sponsored by national governments and international agencies providing preschool childcare;[13] the OECD's (2005) overview of ECEC in its member states describes the increase in public involvement in ensuring better service provision.

Future-oriented, child-centred, committed to using human capital investments by states as well as families to prepare for the knowledge-based economy, accepting a certain "informalisation" of the labour market, seeking to avoid "spending to insure against misfortune" but willing to make "investments" that will increase capabilities, the social investment perspective informs the action programmes of a number of governments and international agencies. How did this position take hold?

Was neoliberalism displaced simply by the weight of its failures? Its promises had been grandiose: freeing markets and reducing the role of the state would generate well-being for all. By the mid-1990s, however, straightforward neoliberalism had hit an ideational, political and economic wall. The promised cutbacks in state activity and massive savings in state expenditures failed to materialise (Castles, 2005), despite the insistence by neoliberals that their main goal was slashing state expenditures. Social problems deepened in the North as well as the global South and poverty rates mounted, notwithstanding neoliberals' promise that structural adjustments would reduce poverty. A fifth of Britain's children lived in poverty in the mid-

1990s and the child poverty rate had tripled since the 1970s (UNICEF, 2000: 21). In 1997, the Asian crisis destabilised the international economy in a frightening way. As Moisés Naím, editor-in-chief of *Foreign Policy,* said about the "global brand" invented in the mid-1980s and labelled the Washington Consensus: "What was implemented was usually an incomplete version of the model and its results were quite different from what politicians promised, the people expected, and the IMF and the World Bank's econometric models had predicted" (1999: 5 of 26). There was a rethinking of what "development" in a broad sense should involve, and a search for a "post-Washington Consensus" that would pay more attention to social problems (Margheritis and Pereira, 2007: 38).

As these results and patterns were revealed and recognised, the alternative we have labelled the social investment perspective began to coalesce. This process was not an automatic one. Interpretations of neoliberalism's weaknesses had to be constructed and alliances assembled to spread the critique and alternative proposals. The next section documents the processes by which convergence around a social investment perspective occurred, identifying the three social mechanisms that underpin its diffusion.

Ideas in competition and movement

To uncover the process by which the ideas underpinning the social investment perspective captured attention in both Europe and Latin America, it is necessary to ask how ideas spread. This question directs attention towards processes of diffusion. Again, and as already noted in the introduction, this article focuses on policy objectives and therefore, does *not* address the impact of the enactment of an idea into policy.

The literature on diffusion of public policy – and as a subset, policy ideas – is the appropriate literature for this article. Here the recent and thorough overview by Frank Dobbin, Beth Simmons and Geoffrey Garrett (2007) provides a useful starting point.[14] While the focus of their review essay is diffusion of public policies and therefore their enactment, the literature covered also provides much information about the emergence and consolidation of new policy perspectives. Of the four theories of diffusion that they identify, two will be particularly useful. Constructivists looking at policy diffusion stress the power of norms, purveyed primarily by international organisations and their experts or epistemic communities more broadly, to induce changes in behaviour and action (Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett, 2007: 450-54). While some of the constructivist literature is far too structuralist in its orientation (ideational factors *do* things) and the insistence that ideational factors are "primary" is too categorical, the scepticism about coercion by powerful international organisations and hegemonic countries is a useful corrective, as is obviously the emphasis on ideas. Secondly, theories of social learning examine processes by which policy makers learn from their own experience or that of others, diffused through a shared fund of knowledge among elites (Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett, 2007: 460-62). Again the literature is large.

The most useful approach to diffusion, in this broad literatures, sees it as a process not an outcome: "Diffusion … refers to processes where national policy-makers voluntarily, that is without being formally obliged by international agreements or forced by external actors, adopt a certain policy innovation and in doing so draw on policy models which have been communicated in the international system" (Busch and Jörgens, 2005: 861). This definition is adopted here because it allows consideration not only of country-to-country diffusion but also the role of international organisations in the diffusion of ideas and practices (Deacon *et al*., 1997 and Stone, 2004, for example). Defining diffusion as a process also generates the search for the mechanisms that underpin the diffusion process (Busch and Jörgens, 2005: 861).

A mechanism specifies the "nuts, bolts, cogs and wheels that move a process forward," and that account for an observed correlation (Campbell, 2004: 63). In the situation examined here, the observed correlation is the appearance of the social investment perspective in both Latin America and Europe and in international organisations as well as national settings. By identifying mechanisms it is possible to provide a plausible account of how observed phenomena are linked. Such attention to social mechanisms is appropriate for understanding processes of change such as diffusion (Tilly, 2001; Campbell, 2004: chapter 3).

In his overview of the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of approaches based on mechanisms, Charles Tilly identifies three types. Environmental mechanisms alter the settings in which action occurs, and among the words used to describe such mechanisms is "expand." Cognitive mechanisms create changes in individual and collective perception, and they are "characteristically described through words such as recognize, understand, reinterpret, and classify." Relational mechanisms shape and alter connections among people or groups, and among the words used to describe them are ally and attack (Tilly, 2001: 24). The next sections reveal that each type of mechanism was important for the emergence of the social investment perspective and its diffusion.

Delegitimising TINA: Creating space for alternatives

The first mechanism that supported the emergence of a social investment perspective is an environmental one. Political space is an essential ingredient in policy learning (Murphy, 2006: 210). Even while neoliberalism still held sway, this mechanism worked to expand the political space for discussions of alternatives to standard neoliberalism whose proponents had made TINA – there is no other way – their mantra. Initially the two regions initially remained quite separate, one space being created within the world of the agencies of development and a second in Europe. In the world of development agencies, criticism targeted the structural adjustment paradigm, promoted by the Bretton Woods institutions and by “institutions and networks of opinion leaders … including ‘think tanks, politically sophisticated investment bankers, and world finance ministers, all those who meet each other in Washington and collectively define the conventional wisdom of the moment’” (Murphy, 2006: 221, quoting Paul Krugman). Opposition to the TINA mantra appeared in organisations less committed to this Washington Consensus. The UN agency that many thought could – and should - confront the World Bank’s structural adjustment template was the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), but it chose not to do so. “UNDP’s low profile left the job of directing the public battle of ideas to UNICEF” (Murphy, 2006: 227; also 223ff.).

UNICEF took the lead by promoting the concept of “adjustment with a human face” and re-focusing attention on the negative consequences of structural adjustment for the most vulnerable. The starting point for the critique was the failure of neoliberalism’s promises, and the mounting evidence of worsening conditions on the ground (Jolly, 1999: 1809). These observations generated a decision in the first half of the 1980s to undertake research to gather (and in some cases foster the creation of) appropriate data, and these led eventually to a series of UNICEF reports and studies about the need to pay attention to the situation of the poor during structural adjustment (for an account see Jolly, 1999). These studies provided UNICEF, a “social” agency, with the tools to engage the battle of ideas and to help generate the “New York dissent” to the economists purveying the Washington Consensus (Murphy, 2006: 220-31; Jolly, 1999 recounts the meetings in which this “battle” occurred). Nor were the actors unaware that the objective was to change ideas. Richard Jolly, who led this initiative for UNICEF, explicitly locates it with reference to J.M. Keynes’ famous dictum about the role of economists’ ideas and to Thomas Kuhn’s approach to paradigm shifts (Jolly, 1999: 1808). In these early years, ideas about “adjustment with a human face” involved more a recalibration of the neoliberal position than a full-blown alternative. Nonetheless, with their diffusion the terms of debate and of engagement changed, within UN and other agencies and within civil society.

The fact that UNICEF was leading the charge had a secondary but important consequence for the political space within which the social investment perspective emerged. Critics of the macro-economic focus and lack of concern about distribution and social justice of the Bretton Woods agencies found themselves drawn to the political space created by UNICEF as well as the Economic Commission on Africa (much of this battle of ideas dealt with the African case) (see Murphy, 2006: 220ff.). As they entered this space they were obliged to speak from UNICEF’s mandate. This meant focusing on the consequences of macro-economic adjustment for children. This obligation led, for example, a long-standing left-wing political economist and expert on Africa like G.K. Helleiner to write a position paper in 1984 that would allow UNICEF to stand up to the IMF entitled: “IMF Adjustment Policies and Approaches and the Needs of Children.”[15] With UNICEF in the lead, increased attention to the needs of children as the beneficiaries of a re-jigged Washington Consensus was foreordained.

Implementation of “adjustment with a human face” also depended upon neoliberalism’s claims about governance that were embedded in its critiques of post-1945 social policies and used to justify not only the privatisation of state services but also their decentralisation. Under neoliberalism “the role of the state shifts from that of ‘governing’ through direct forms of control (hierarchical governance), to that of ‘governance’, in which the state must collaborate with a wide range of actors in networks that cut across the public, private and voluntary sectors, and operate across different levels of decision making” (Newman *et al*, 2004: 204). Neoliberalism brought, therefore, increasing enthusiasm for decentralisation to local governments and for community involvement in governance, via non-governmental organisations. This is as true in Latin America as in Europe.[16]

This position on governance informed neoliberals’ action around the concept of social safety nets (SSN) (Reddy, 1998). These were meant to plug the holes and alleviate the worst effects of structural adjustment. While many critics made the – correct – point that this “social safety net approach,” treated social policy only as a response to market failure, nonetheless it was a major contribution to the idea that structural adjustment policies had to be tempered by concern for their consequences for the “most vulnerable.”

One of these safety nets was the *social investment fund*, used by several international organisations as their preferred policy instrument for addressing poverty in Latin America. Very much a part of neoliberalism’s arsenal, the first social investment fund was set up in Bolivia in 1986 (Van Domelen, 2003: 1-2). They quickly gained popularity with institutions like the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank because of the relative ease of creation and light bureaucracy (despite the weak evidence that they achieved their goals) (Lustig, 1997). The governance advantages of the social investment funds were vaunted as part of the arsenal to overcome the supposed limits of a too centralised state (IDB, 1998: i).[17] Also to be avoided were too powerful “interests,” such as unions of traditional corporatism.[18]

Despite emerging in neoliberalism, the design of social investment funds and the other forms of SSN helped enlarge the political space for considering alternatives to it. While demand was structured by the priorities of the granting agencies, reliance on local agencies and NGOs created space within which experiments with alternatives to macro-economic focused development could be undertaken in a bottom-up way (Van Demolen, 2003: 4)

In Europe as well discussions of alternatives to TINA also became more legitimate in the mid-1990s and ideas and practices of governance supported the working of this mechanism of enlarging space. In Western Europe, there had always been plenty of partisan space for critics of neoliberalism, on the political right and the left. However, the criticisms often lacked traction, making little headway against the claims of political neoliberalism. Several partisan Lefts in European countries struggled to maintain their traditional arguments, and virtually disappeared in the process. Others reworked their principles in significant ways, in effect remaking themselves in this process, as the British Labour Party had done by the mid-1990s, under the influence of several leaders (Lister, 2003). Similarly, around the institutions of the European Union, a grouping of policy entrepreneurs, experts, politicians, NGOs and unions all were working to legitimate the idea that it was necessary to "correct" the pro-business bias and neoliberalism of monetary union, a project being promoted as the one-best-way to create a common economic space (Jenson and Pochet, 2006; Hemericjk, 2007).

Commitment to decentralised governance also was part of the neoliberal agenda for Europe as well. In ways similar to Latin America, NGOS and local authority gained purchase within the system via the notion of partnerships. Coupled with neoliberals' definition of the problem as one of social exclusion, there is a strong link between "the 'new geography' of deprivation" and the "new orthodoxy of local partnerships" identified by Mike Geddes, with the instruments of governance promoted in this case by the European Union arising directly from within the space being opened via criticisms of standard neoliberalism (Geddes, 2000: 783-84)..

In some ways with respect to Europe, the OECD played a role similar to UNICEF for the development community. Rather than focusing on correcting the stance of other agencies (as UNICEF did) the OECD undertook an *autocritique*, however. The OECD had been the leader of the "welfare as a burden" position. At its 1980 conference on the welfare state in crisis, the organisation had begun diffusing the idea among its membership and within policy communities that "social policy in many countries creates obstacles to growth" (quoted in Deacon, 1997: 71). By the mid-1990s, however, concerns about stability and the limits of structural adjustment, in the OECD and elsewhere, bubbled up in the idea sets of OECD experts and officials. Social cohesion became a key word in policy discussion, and warnings appeared of the need to balance attention to economic restructuring with caution about societal cohesion, in order to sustain that very restructuring (Jenson, 1998: 3; 5).

The discursive focus on social exclusion and inclusion mushroomed, and was often expressed as a problem of child poverty as UNICEF weighed into the debate. The agency contributed to social learning via its detailed and comparative analyses of countries' situations, both in the global South and increasingly in the rich nations. UNICEF's Innocenti Centre published its first report on causes and consequences of child poverty in the United States in 1990, and its research programme generated important publications (with large cross-national comparative data sets) by the end of the decade focused on rich countries (UNICEF, 2000 for example).

This first mechanism of enlarging the political space led to questioning straightforward macro-economic prescriptions and practices for both Latin America and Europe. But the space opened up was filled by a cacophony of voices. Neoliberals by no means simply gave up, and the diagnosis of "lack of sufficient markets" kept many adherents. This enlarged space, moreover, was not a simple dualistic one. There was no simple stand-off either between two sets of ideas or two sets of international organisations: "the intellectual map of the global discourse on social welfare is more complicated than is suggested by the simple European social market (ILO) versus US liberalism (World Bank, IMF) dichotomy" (Deacon, 2000: 8). Nonetheless, while opening political space delegitimized TINA, the mechanism can not by itself account for the emergence of a social investment perspective. A second and relational mechanism comes into play to answer the question: why settle on social investment.

Polysemic discourse – a cognitive mechanism

Policy conflict about the way forward for social policy characterised the crucial middle years of the 1990s in and across national and institutional institutions (Porter and Craig, 2004; for useful overviews see Deacon, 2000; Murphy, 2006). A cognitive mechanism was at work, as perceptions of policy challenges shifted and possible solutions were reinterpreted. But, as we will describe, there was no consensus on a single meaning of social investment. It is this polysemic character that increased it diffusion.

Analyses within the social-learning theoretical perspective have long understood the contribution of ambiguity to altering connections among people, groups and networks. They often note that the ideas that spread most are ones that can draw together numerous positions and sustain a moderate to high level of ambiguity. One of the classic and earliest studies of diffusion made this point: "To be Keynesian bespoke a general posture rather than a specific creed. Indeed the very ambiguity of Keynesian ideas enhanced their power in the political sphere. By reading slightly different emphases into these ideas, an otherwise disparate set of groups could unite under the same banner" (Hall in Hall, 1989: 367). More recently and also focusing on diffusion of ideational elements, Desmond McNeill designates as “an idea” (2006: 335) what Paul Bernard calls a “quasi-concept” (1999). For both the notion is that some “ideas” have a dual status. They have scientific legitimacy, often having been generated by academic research, but they also provide a common-sense meaning open to multiple interpretations. Social investment is one such quasi-concept.

As described above, the term “social investment” appeared in the development discourse in the 1980s, first as a minor instrument – the social investment fund – invented to respond to unanticipated shocks and then to correct certain effects of structural adjustment. The choice of the term reflects the supply-side orientation of the Banks and other bodies that promoted the instrument. Among economists and those familiar with markets, “investments” will always appear in a more positive light than will other instruments, such as “emergency transfers.”[19] The social investment perspective retains a supply-side focus, but adds the notion that lack of access to services (including education) can hinder adequate supply.

As the OECD moved away from its classic neoliberalism it became one of the first institutional promoters of the notion of social investment for Europe and elsewhere. Social investment was considered by many more institutions than the OECD, of course, but that IO gave it an early boost as an approach to “modernisation” of social policy. Ambiguous in its simultaneous backward and forward gaze, the term was useful for the OECD both to refer back to neoliberals’ preference for markets as decision locales and to make claims for new spending, all the while allowing a distinction to be made between the “bad old days” of social protection and promising future of social investment. Orientations adopted in a 1992 ministerial conference included the premise that “non-inflationary growth of output and jobs, and political and social stability are enhanced by the role of social expenditures as investments in society” (quoted in

Deacon *et al.*, 1997: 71). This position led to the argument that there was a need to spend rather than simply cut back in the social realm. The 1996 high-level conference, *Beyond 2000: The New Social Policy Agenda*, concluded with a call for a "social investment approach for a future welfare state." OECD experts immediately began diffusing a social investment argument structured in now familiar terms: "Today's labour-market, social, macro-economic and demographic realities look starkly different from those prevailing when the welfare state was constructed. … Social expenditure must move towards underwriting social investment, helping recipients to get re-established in the labour market and society, instead of merely ensuring that failure to do so does not result in destitution" (Pearson and Scherer, 1997: 6; 9).

This version of the social investment perspective is, of course, very different from the notion of emergency relief that had generated the first social investment funds in Bolivia and then around Latin America. Yet, despite this difference, they share the vision of the need for long-term investments and spending for the future.[20] Nor is this perspective simply an anti-poverty measure; social investments are for the middle-class too. It is an understanding of public interventions, in other words, that rallies those who want social policy to focus on education, including early childhood education, on training, and on making work pay as well as those who are concerned about child poverty. Following the OECD's key notion that social spending is not a burden but an investment in economic growth, the European Union could quickly move towards its own version, describing *social policy as a productive factor* under the Dutch Presidency of 1997 (Hemerijck, 2007: 2).

Intellectuals from a variety of milieus became the promoters of the social investment perspective, including its child-centred focus. Their contribution was often to expand the ambiguity of the concept further, however. Perhaps the best-known intellectual promoting social investment in the European context and in terms very similar to those already developed by the OECD in the mid-1990s is Gøsta Esping-Andersen. For him, a real "child-centred social investment strategy" is what the Nordic welfare states have been doing, and is done best there (Esping-Andersen *et al*., 2002: 51). This strategy is essentially one to ensure "social inclusion and a competitive knowledge economy" via activation, making work pay and reducing workless households, the need for all of which are included in the chapter on child-centred social investment (Esping-Andersen, *et al*., 2002: chapter 2).

His notions of social investment are quite different from those of another well-known European intellectual, Anthony Giddens (1998), who called in the mid-1990s for a "social investment state" that would invest in human and social capital. His formulations were close to those of Tony Blair's New Labour, which frequently described its actions as being social investments (Lister, 2003). In other words, Giddens' use of the idea of social investment was more supply-side oriented and more limited in its proposed interventions than were Esping-Andersen's proposals. It is not surprising, therefore, that the latter is critical of New Labour and calls instead for his own "truly effective and sustainable social investment strategy … biased towards preventive policy" (Esping-Andersen *et al*., 2002: 5). We see, in other words, not only a battle between two well-known intellectuals struggling for policy influence but also the range and ambiguity of the notion. Policy communities could appeal to one version or the other or even combine the two, as the European Union did in its preparations for the renewal of the Lisbon strategy between 2006 and 2008 (Jenson, 2008).

At the same time as social investment was making headway in Europe and Europe-centric organisations like the OECD, it was also being extended in Latin America. It was applied to slightly different economic ends but contained the familiar future orientation and focus on children and human capital. In addition to the examples given in the first section of this article, we can use that of the Inter-American Development Bank. This agency focused on child-centred social investment to achieve its development goals in Latin America. It sought to nudge its social development communities towards investing in children by promoting the need for Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) programming.[21] For the IDB, ECCD was part of a development strategy (hence the adjustment of the name), although the 1996 materials justifying "why invest in early childhood care and development" deployed exactly the same arguments and cited the same social facts and the same experts that their counterparts in Europe were using at the time: invest now for future pay-offs; prevent failure rather than compensating for it, and so on.[22] Then in 2004 its social development section also published *Escaping the Poverty Trap. Investing in Children in Latin America* with a chapter by Amartya Sen entitled "Investing in Childhood." Sen used his capabilities approach in this analysis and asserts that "… the ultimate and common goal is to improve young children's capacity to develop and learn," while the first instrument his identifies is "empowering parents" (Morán, 2004: 64 and 63).

As these examples, and they are only examples, of intellectuals within policy communities working and reworking the notion of social investment show, the concept is polysemic and can be used in a variety of policy directions. A wide range of epistemic communities have been able to deploy the notion because it has the flexible qualities of a quasi-concept. It has scientific credentials but also a common-sense meaning. Moreover, both the scientific and common-sense versions are open to multiple meanings. Sometime the focus has been on children, and their parents' needs have been quite secondary.[23] Other times, investing in children was proposed as a way to help parents; getting them into the labour force or empowering parents were the key objectives. Sometimes the best investments were human capital expenditures and other times health and social justice or even gender equity came to the fore. This cognitive mechanism of polysemic discourse helps rally a range of actors and networks in the process of diffusion.

But more was still needed. As we have seen, neither the patterns of scientific nor common-sense usage follow geography. The promotion of investments in early childhood education appeared simultaneously in Europe and Latin America, and in both regions the same arguments about the advantages of investing in human capital for the future were made, citing often the same data and experts. In both Europe and Latin America Amartya Sen's capabilities approach was deployed to support prescriptions for developmental welfare states. Human capital investments were promoted as legitimate forms of state spending in both regions. Decentralised governance practices were promoted in both Latin America and Europe. Therefore, while the discourse of social investment has been polysemic, the voices singing their particular version of its praises have transgressed the traditional boundaries between "developing" and industrialised societies. It is the third mechanism at work that has allowed this to happen.

Boundary crossing – a relational mechanism

Convergence around ideas such as social investment has involved crossing worlds of knowledge. The third mechanism that underpins the process of diffusion is a relational one; boundary crossing sustains links and alliances across disparate networks and policy communities. This concept has been developed by those who study science policy and "… it aims to explain linkages between different social worlds and the negotiations that are part of what appears objective and value-free codified knowledge" (St. Clair, 2006: 64). The mechanism of polysemic discourse had made social investment into a classic boundary object: "… both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. These boundary objects allow members of different communities to work together around them, and yet maintain their disparate identities" (St Clair, 2006: 65). The concept of boundary work can be adopted and adapted here, in order to highlight three types of boundary crossings that have occurred as the notion of social investment has been diffused.

First, there has been the classic movement across the border of universities and political organisations. International organisations as well national policy communities rely on university-based analysts to help develop their arguments and provide extra legitimacy to them. As the constructivist and other literature has documented, economists and their theoretical and methodological tools frequently predominate (Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett, 2007: 452). As the Washington Consensus began to unravel, so too did the acceptance of the scientific credentials of certain economists. Moisés Naím (1999) recounts the disputes among economists in Washington and elite American universities about what should be done in light of the financial crises of the mid-1990s. As we have seen, in the "battle of ideas" about structural adjustment and its effects, UNICEF both mobilised university-based development experts like G.K. Helleiner and moved to arm itself with the quantitative data that would permit it to make claims in the economistic world of the IMF (Jolly, 1999: 1809). The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) set up a research programme on *Social Policy in a Development Context* with the stated objective to "move [thinking] away from social policy as a safety net . . . towards a conception of active social policy as a powerful instrument for development working in tandem with economic policy" (quoted in Deacon, 2005: 22), and to do so it has utilised the services of large numbers of social scientists, sociologists and political scientists as well as economists. The

OECD and European Union have also called upon a relatively limited set of academics to comment on welfare state reform, and therefore there are appearances and reappearances across the institutions by the same experts. The experts mobilised by national – and increasingly local – governments are too numerous to mention. As these academically-based experts intervene – usually at the behest of the institutions – they capture and systematise as much as they invent conceptualisations that can then be deployed more broadly within the institutions.

A second form of boundary crossing that allowed ideas to diffuse in unfamiliar circuits was the breakdown of the uniqueness of "development economics." "One of the undoubted historical contributions of the Washington Consensus is that it marked the end of the de-coupling between development economics and mainstream economics that had gathered steam since the 1970s" (Naím, 1999: 7 of 26). Neoliberals rejected the post-1945 stance that there was an economics for the "developed world" – most often defined as Keynesian – and one for the "developing world" – most often focused on import substitution industrialisation. This breakdown of a boundary allowed the two worlds, each with its "economic-technocratic nexus" (McNeill, 2006: 346), to begin to merge, and the separate literatures that drove "development studies" and "policy analysis" began to overlap.

It was not only hard-core neoliberals who drove this boundary crossing, however. Within organisations as well as across them, boundaries blurred. As already noted, UNICEF focused it exposés of "child poverty" on Europe and North America as well as on poor children in the global South. The 1995 Copenhagen Summit on Social Development, a key step toward the Millennium Development Goals, presented its declaration as a response to "profound social problems, especially poverty, unemployment and social exclusion, that affect every country," in this way promoting a social development and social investment perspective that applied to the

North as well as the global South.[24] Within the OECD, learning across units was taking place: the OECD official responsible for drafting the new orientations for social policy in the early 1990s was "learning perhaps from parallel work of the OECD Development Centre which, in its review of the dynamic South East Asian economies concluded that 'limited but effective action by the state … [has led to]… rapid return to growth'" (Deacon *et al*, 1997: 71).

An additional factor that encouraged this cognitive mechanism of boundary crossing between the "first" and "third" worlds was the collapse of the "second" world. After 1989 numerous agencies turned to their attention to the situation of the former Soviet bloc, seeking prescriptions for its integration into global capitalism and liberal democracy. The hybrid character of that region challenged the standard distinction between development and mainstream economics as well as the paradigms of the other social sciences.

Finally, the third form of boundary crossing was the creation of new and larger coalitions of institutions and NGOs and other actors in their orbit. This blurring of boundaries is most familiar in the European Union, which as an institutional complex of 27 member states has the explicit mission of, if not harmonising social policy practices, certainly fostering coordination by exchanging best practices. While member state governments maintain their room for manoeuvre, ideas about social problems and solutions, including elements of the social investment perspective, are moving rapidly from place to place, and from level to level. As described above, there was also the creation of a coalition around an anti-poverty paradigm that included actors from several UN agencies, the World Bank, national governments and the OECD (Noël, 2006; Deacon, 2005). A third example comes from NGOs which maintain broad-based contacts across regions. These are too numerous to describe but one that is particularly relevant for the spread of the social investment perspective is the Progressive Governance Summits, in existence since 1999. Membership includes Chile and Uruguay, with Brazil partially integrated. It has an on-going focus on social policy, social cohesion, and investing in children.[25]

Concluding remarks

This article makes two contributions to analyses of global social policy. The first is to document the evidence for cross-regional convergence around a new perspective on social policy. Sometimes termed a time of post-Washington Consensus and sometimes "after neoliberalism," the years since the mid-1990s have seen national governments and international organisations as well as the European Union moving towards what has been termed here the social investment perspective. This approach to social policy is oriented towards the medium and long-term future, making it child-focused and committed to using human capital investments by states as well as families to prepare for the future knowledge-based economy. Within the logic of this perspective, social policy has other objectives than social protection; it should avoid "spending to insure against misfortune" but be willing to make "investments" that will increase capabilities. The vision of employment that informs it recognises that "informalisation" of the labour market will characterise the future rather than the stable and often industrial employment that was the expectation in the years after 1945. While other analyses have followed the story within regions, this article shows that there convergence across Latin America and Europe. Moreover, the direction of movement is by no means from the second to the first.

The second contribution is to identify three social mechanisms that allowed the diffusion of this social policy perspective across two very different regions of the globe. One mechanism – creation of space for alternatives – operated primarily in the heyday of neoliberalism. The second was particular to the social investment perspective itself. The polysemic discourse of social investment, like Keynesianism before it, allowed it to penetrate numerous networks, carried by the many intellectuals working within and alongside national governments and international agencies. Thirdly, the social investment perspective could spread across two quite different regions of the world and speak to their needs because borders of difference had been broken down. Boundary crossing as a relational mechanism depended on the shifts in the contours of scientific disciplines (the breakdown of distinctions within the economics profession) as well as the expansion of cross-regional networks of political exchange among NGOs and governments.

It is, or course, impossible to say whether these prescriptions for after neoliberalism will ever achieve hegemony or even longevity. Enduring change is recognisable only after the fact. Nonetheless, characterisation of the on-going process will help to sort through some of the cacophony that continues to characterise the world of global social policy.

Notes

[1] Of course the described convergence might have been the product of simultaneous but autonomous ideational change. Each region (and each country) might have invented the social investment perspective independently. This option, while logically possible, seems not very probable, however, given the degree of similarity in ideas and even some instruments.

[2] Literature addressing ideas and politics is now large. Much of it is concerned to weight ideational factors with respect to other potential explanatory factors, summarised sometimes as interests or institutions and sometimes as material factors. The puzzles identified are often "how much do ideas matter" or "how do ideas exert effects" in public policy (Margheritis and Pereira, 2007; Campbell, 2004: chapter 4, for example). These are *not* the issues addressed in this article.

[3] For a discussion of the advantages of a social investment perspective modelled on the practices of Nordic social democracy see, among others, Esping-Andersen *et al.*, 2002. For a discussion of the perspective in liberal welfare regimes see, among others, Dobrowolsky and Jenson (2005) and Lister (2003).

[4] See Deacon (2005: 20-21) on the predominance of the safety net position under neo-liberalism.

[5] Francis Castles' detailed quantitative data analysis of the original OECD countries documents that this was more redesign than cutbacks. Spending levels were stable (Castles, 2005: 414-19). In Latin America in the late 1980s state spending did decline significantly, but then it rose again (Draibe and Reisco, 2007: 48; 104-09).

[6] Decreto Supremo No 029-2007-PCM, 30 March 2007.

[7] At http://www.oecd.org/document/47/0,3343,en_2649_34487_34668207_1_1_1_1,00.html. Consulted 10 April 2009.

[8] The social investment perspective deploys ideas about social exclusion that are often in line with Amaryta Sen's (2000) notion of capabilities. See, for example, ECLAC (2007) (which has a chapter entitled "Opportunities, capabilities and protection"), the World Development Report 2007 (which has a chapter entitled "Opportunities, capabilities, second chances), the IDB (2008: 5), which describes its analysis of social exclusion as "following Sen"), and the European Union which used the language of capabilities in its "stocktaking" process in 2007 (European Commission, 2007) that led to the *Renewed Social Agenda* in July 2008 (European Commission, 2008). See also Porter and Craig (2005: 392).

[9] See http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=102&langId=en, consulted 10 April 2009.

[10] From 1999 to 2003 it was called the Working Families Tax Credit.

[11] For the integrated guidelines see http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/cha/c11323.htm and the *Renewed Social Agenda* (COM [2008] 412 final) see http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=547&langId=en, both consulted 10 April 2009. For a more detailed presentation of the European Union's reliance of the social investment perspective and including the human capital focus see Jenson (2008).

[12] See the Building Bridges project, and particularly *Building Bridges II. The importance of human capital for growth and social inclusion*, issued in March 2008 on http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/social_bridges_ii.htm. Consulted 10 April 2009.

[13] For an inventory of World Bank programmes, the vast majority of which were implemented after 1996, see Akimushkina (nd: 7-12).

[14] For another overview see Busch and Jörgens (2005), in which diffusion is one of three possible processes leading to convergence.

[15] Published for the first time in 1999, this 1984 paper was written to allow UNICEF to engage with the IMF. For the details see Helleiner *et al*. (1999: 1823).

[16] On Latin America, for the neoliberal period Yashar (1999: 86) and Schild (2000). For the continuation of this decentralisation see Marques-Pereira (2007). On Europe see Geddes (2000).

[17] Reddy (1998: 9) describes the ways social funds, including social investment funds, could bypass ministries or "put them on notice" of the need for improvement in service delivery.

[18] See the long quote provided by Deacon (1997: 69) from the 1994 book, *Safety Nets, Politics, and the Poor*, written by Carole Graham, a former Vice-President of the World Bank: "Rather than focus their efforts on organized interest groups – such as public sector unions – which have a great deal to lose in the process of reform, governments might better concentrate their efforts on poor groups that have rarely, if ever, received benefits from the state." For a critical assessment see Schild (2000).

[19] The particular role of economists in shaping ideas and influencing their transfer has been studies for decades. See the literature cited in Dobbin *et al*. (2007: 452-53) and St Clair (2006).

[20] As one of the three SSN policy instruments, social investment funds (more than emergency social funds) had a long-term orientation and therefore "a greater concern for the development of 'social infrastructure' including human capabilities" (Reddy, 1998: 20).

[21] This initiative by the IDB was exactly simultaneous with the OECD's move into the early childhood field, launched by the Education Committee in 1996. See http://www.oecd.org/document/3/0,3343,en_2649_39263231_27000067_1_1_1_1,00.html. Consulted 10 April 2009.

[22] The IDB materials are at http://www.iadb.org/sds/soc/eccd/1START.html, consulted 10 April 2009. On the European, particularly British arguments, about investing in children also being deployed at the time see Dobrowolsky and Saint-Martin (2005).

[23] For example, in her overview of childcare programmes, Akimushkina (nd: 17) describes Chile's programmes as focusing more on children than on parents. She recommends a rebalancing so that parents will be able to balance employment and childcare responsibilities.

[24] For the documents of the World Summit for Social Development see: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/wssd/, consulted 10 April 2009.

[25] For reports of the 2008 Summit, hosted by Gordon Brown, and at which Brazil's president participated by video, see: http://www.policy-network.net/events/events.aspx?id=2114, consulted 10 April 2009. For the 2009 meeting, hosted by Michelle Bachelet in Chile see http://pgc09.wordpress.com/, consulted 10 April 2009.

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