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### Citation

Clarke, John (2023). Global Social Policy: An unsettling encounter. *Global Social Policy*, 23(3) pp. 523–525.

### URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/93018/>

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# Global Social Policy: An unsettling encounter

Global Social Policy

2023, Vol. 23(3) 523–525

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DOI: 10.1177/14680181231201944

[journals.sagepub.com/home/gsp](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/gsp)**John Clarke**

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I have always experienced the phrase ‘global social policy’ as a provocation, inducing the question: *what does this mean?* Each of the words – global, social and policy – demands an accounting. I suspect that this reaction emerges in part from my peculiar location at the conjunction of two very different intellectual formations. Academically, I grew up in the strange field of Cultural Studies – more of an anti-discipline than a discipline and one that left me with several deeply ingrained orientations. These include a strong commitment to transdisciplinary approaches, an enthusiasm for collaborative working and, above all, that deeply irritating preoccupation with meaning. Meanwhile, my working life has been mostly spent in a series of academic posts that include the claim that I am in Social Policy.

Inhabiting these two formations has been both uncomfortable and productive. I have found the normative inheritances and assumptions of Social Policy as a field of study to be a source of strain and confinement (and I do not think those constraining impulses are accidental). But inhabiting this field with a cultural studies inheritance has been enabling – allowing me to pose rather different questions (what exactly is a welfare state?); to find interesting sources of collaboration (at one point the Open University Social Policy group included historians, geographers, urban studies scholars and more); and to find ways of opening and crossing boundaries. Here, though, I am going to focus on the question of meaning: what does it mean to utter or, as here, write the phrase global social policy?

This is not the entry point to a well-established academic practice: the careful refinement of the one true meaning and the creation of conceptual clarity. On the contrary, Cultural Studies opens a route to thinking about meanings as always contingent, constructed and contested. In his remarkable study *Keywords*, the British scholar Raymond Williams (1976) talks about the search for meaning as an exercise in ‘historical semantics’ where ‘we are quite beyond the range of “proper meaning”’. [Rather] we find a history and complexity of meanings’ (p. 17). These semantics track the shifting entanglements

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of power, politics and meaning – as they are struggled over and at times solidified and naturalised as though this version was the only meaning possible.

So, “global social policy”? Well, “global” tends to announce a particular imaginary of space and scale in which domains of policy are flattened and homogenised – alongside globalised economies, cultures, politics and more. Such dominant conceptions of the global were, of course, criticised and challenged in multiple ways – from alter-globalisation to networks of resistant “locals” or critiques of “development” as a necessary path to a uniform future. At the same time, the discovery of the global tended to obscure previous forms of global inter-connectedness (such as colonialism and imperialism) in the juxtaposition of the new global and an imagined older world of nations and nation-states. And yet, the word lingers – used to celebrate (or indeed condemn) the expanded scales of capitalism or to raise alarms about shared destinies in the climate catastrophe (although they are neither wholly nor universally shared).

Then there is the problematic little adjective ‘social’. Within policy studies, this tends to mark out policies devoted to the management of populations (their regulation, control, improvement) in distinction from other domains of policy – foreign, economic or public, for instance. Social policy often feels like a secondary and subordinate field – the feminised diminutive of those grand and rather more masculine fields of policy. French sociologists (e.g. Bourdieu and Wacquant) have talked of welfare as the left or feminine hand of the state, as if a state only had two hands . . . In more material terms, the European Union’s (EU) self-conception as a ‘social market’ has increasingly seen the ‘needs’ of the market part of that imaginary taking precedence over the social, whose needs are regularly ‘postponed’.

But this strange field of the social has itself been a contingent object. Originally constructed around a crudely material demarcation of socio-economic inequalities that required both redress and containment, it has been remade (under pressure) to address gendered divisions and inequalities and, more haltingly, inequalities structured by racism – the still potent imaginaries of race and ethnicity, most recently deployed in relation to migrants as ‘people out of place’.

And then there’s ‘policy’ – the easy bit, surely? Not so much, these days. When I first encountered policy studies, there seemed to be a degree of confidence that we could agree on both what a policy was (written down, its meaning more or less accessible to all) and, indeed, how to study it – tracing its development, implementation and results. If there were a few ‘implementation gaps’, that was only to be expected in the complex systems through which policy passed before manifesting itself in the world. Changes in both the world and our approaches to studying it have undermined that confidence (which does not stop some scholars proceeding as though nothing has changed).

The apparent solidity of policy has given way to uncertainty about both the object and how to study it. *What* is policy? Do we find it in texts, actions, institutions, results? *When* is policy? Does policy happen in the moment of legislation, in the translations between law and practice, or in the fraught encounters between texts and the real? Finally, *where* is policy? Should we look for it in the body of the state, in the interactions between dispersed policy agents and the recipients of their interventions, in the transnational flows of people, discourses and resources? Perhaps most elusively, what are we to make of policies-as-text? Are they statements of intent, whose effects can be traced and compared with the intentions? Are they merely rhetorical – the statements that political actors feel

obliged to produce for selected audiences? Are they necessary fictions – woven into the delicately crafted fabric of governing? Are they always in translation, with their meanings shifting between places, levels and sites?

This long list of questions hints at the unsettled landscapes of policy studies. So, I am not alone when I begin with a question about what global social policy means – or, more precisely, what is it supposed to mean in this form, in this context? Questions like this underpin one form of critical scholarship – one that is always both exploratory and ambivalent. Interrogations about meaning and the contexts in which meanings are made up and entangled with politics and power demand a willingness to stop and deconstruct what is at stake. Such critical challenges are often heard as intellectual arrogance but Cultural Studies typically combines this with a sense of provisionality – this is what I think is going on, what is being made up, what the desired effects might be . . . But that ‘I think’ (whether explicit or implicit) always points to the uncomfortable tensions involved in claiming anything in such analytical terms. In that sense, analyses are always provisional – the best we can do at this moment. Writing always fixes and formalises analyses and arguments, sometimes in uncomfortable ways that come back to haunt us. Writing as a form of communication crystallises matters that might – more conversationally – be more fluid, being revised, reworked or even reassembled in the dialogic process.

That understanding of analytic provisionality also means that there is no ‘safe place’ from which to speak or write, since both our objects of study and the analytical resources that we deploy are always ‘made up’ (in its multiple meanings). Knowledge, like policy, is always contingent, constructed and contested. Thinking, speaking and writing provisionally also implies questions of positionality. If we are not the god-like oversight committee – all-seeing and all-knowing – that used to be the assumed place of the Scholars, then from where do we think and speak (and with what implications)? Positionality is, as feminists once taught us, both personal and political, although without assuming that either biology or geography is destiny.

For me, this set of dispositions and desires underpins my encounter with the idea of global social policy – as an object of study, as an approach to studying policy and even as a place to write for. And addressing myself to it in this form still feels unsettling: why am I writing about global social policy for a journal called *Global Social Policy*?

## Acknowledgements

The author thanks Janet Newman and the editors for comments on earlier drafts.

## Reference

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## Author biography

John Clarke is an Emeritus Professor of Social Policy at the Open University, UK. His work has explored shifting formations of nation, state and welfare. His publications include *Making Policy Move: Towards a Politics of Translation and Assemblage* (with David Bainton, Noemi Lendvai and Paul Stubbs, Policy Press, 2016) and *The Battle for Britain: Crises, Conflicts and the Conjunction*, Bristol University Press, 2022.