Building Blocks for a New Social Architecture: The LEGO™ paradigm of an active society[1]

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ABSTRACT: Social policy communities now often focus on "new social risks." Despite a clear preference for controlling state spending, they also consider that these risks call for "social investments." Concentration on investments, activation, and the future is considered an optimal anchor for redesigning their welfare systems. Convergence around three ideas prompt us to speak of a shift towards a LEGO™: learning over the life-course; a future-orientation; and the collective benefits of an active society. Just as when Keynesianism was paradigmatic, however, we recognise that divergences exist in the ways that the paradigm is implemented.

KEY WORDS: new social risks; activation, social investment, policy convergence.

Introduction

In many jurisdictions and regardless of the welfare regime to which they belong, social policy communities now often focus on "new social risks." They also consider that these risks call for investments - in human capital, lifelong learning, early childhood services, training, and so on. As Frank Vandenbroucke, former Belgian Minister of Pensions, said (2001: 4): "… the welfare state should not only cover traditionally defined social risks (unemployment, illness, disability and old age). It should also cover new social risks (lack of skills, causing long-term unemployment or poor employment, and single parenthood)." In these policy communities, concentration on investments and the future is considered an optimal anchor for a "modernising" redesign of their welfare systems.

Many of the principles of redesign are similar across countries. Attention has shifted from the supposedly passive spending on social protection to social investments that will generate an "active society" and "active citizenship." The notion of new social risks (Pearson and Scherer, 1997: 6; Bonoli, 2002; 2005; Jenson, 2004; Taylor-Gooby, 2004) provides a framework that makes such innovations in social policy design and spending popular in policy circles, even as the programmes established in the "golden age" after 1945 are mired in controversy, both political and analytical.

In general, the new social risks can be summarised as the income and service gaps generated by the transition to post-industrial labour markets and societies, in which there is a decline of well-paid and traditionally male industrial jobs and an increase in low-paid and often precarious service jobs as well as a rise of the female employment rate overall. The challenges generated by women's labour force participation (and their concomitant lack of availability for full-time caring) as well changes in family forms (especially the rise of lone-parent families) also create new income and service gaps.

A set of shared responses has gradually emerged. In addition to efforts to increase the employment rate – that is, activation – so as to ensure the future of expensive social programmes protecting against "old" social risks, there are mechanisms for addressing income insecurity associated with low-paid work, such as supplements "to make work pay." Such instruments are often targeted towards the working poor with dependent children, in order to reduce the long-term risks associated with poverty during childhood. Spending also goes to skills acquisition and investment in human capital, especially for "vulnerable" groups, such as women heading lone-parent families, young workers, and the long-term unemployed. And, there is new public spending on services for child and elder care.

In many cases these interventions involve explicit re-mixing of public and private provision. Income supplements make the state and not only the market responsible for the earnings package. The family sector is relieved of some responsibility for caring, with public spending on early childhood education and care (ECEC) and care benefits for elderly and disabled persons. Conversely, the market and family sectors are assigned greater responsibility for programmes addressing "old" social risks, such as pensions, health care, and post-secondary education. To document these shifts, Taylor-Gooby (2004: Table 1.1, p. 16) grouped spending on the new social risks under three categories: services for the elderly and disabled; services for families; active labour market support. Between 1980 and 1999 all welfare regime types increased spending in all three categories. While the rates and amounts differ, there is no exception to the trend.

Associated with these altered patterns of spending is explicit attention to children. Poor children are by no means the only focus; so too are those whose parents are increasingly preoccupied by labour market participation, struggling to earn enough in jobs that may be poorly paid, and challenged by the stress of balancing work and family, whether the family is composed of one or two adults. The first conclusion of the final communiqué of the meeting of OECD Social Affairs Ministers in 2005, entitled *How active social policy can benefit us all* put it this way:[2]

> Social and family policies must help give children and young people the best possible start to their lives and help them to develop and achieve through their childhood into adulthood. Providing all parents with better choices about how to balance work and family life extends opportunities, especially for women, and creates economic gains. More family-friendly policies could also help raise birth rates in those countries where they are too low.

Our proposition in this article is that such responses to new social risks have prompted a future-oriented policy vision that evokes the needs of children more than the needs of male breadwinners and their families. In some liberal welfare regimes, the promise is to "invest in children" to ensure a future of well-trained, flexible and productive workers (Jenson, 2001; Lister, 2003). Experts urge Mediterranean and corporatist regimes to follow the Nordic lead, and invest in services for children, and thereby halt the downward slide in birth rates (Esping-Andersen, *et al*., 2002). Several international organisations also share this focus on investing in children, whether the IO is traditionally concerned with childhood or not (UNICEF, 2000; 2005; OECD, 2001).

Such signs of convergence around ideas for a social architecture of activation and investment to reduce the effects of new social risks, prompt us to identify a common shift towards a LEGO™ paradigm. While it does not displace the programmes that already exist to provide social protection against the familiar risks of unemployment, ageing, and so on, we argue that convergence around a LEGO™ paradigm is visible when policy communities turn to new social risks.[3] This article is organised, then, around an analysis of convergence. At the same time, however, we recognise that despite sharing common principles, divergences in implementation exist, just as they did when the Keynesian paradigm was hegemonic (Hall, 1989).

Thinking about convergence and divergence

Despite at least two decades of consensus that welfare regimes are changing, there is very little agreement about the direction of change, and therefore labels range from "the crisis of the welfare state" to the invention of the workfare (and even "wed-fare") state, social policy "retrenchment," welfare state "redesign," "recasting," "recalibration," and so on. Despite identifying liberalisation as the common trigger, there is no consensus about whether there is convergence or divergence.

A first perspective emphasises convergence. One reading of the convergence thesis focuses on heavy tendencies (such as globalisation), sociological change (such as falling birth rates), or ideational and ideological consensus (such as neo-liberalism) and describes them as having a significant and similar impact on social protection systems. For example, Bob Jessop has identified a "Schumpeterian workfare state," while Jamie Peck documents what he calls the "roll-out" of neo-liberalism's workfare states (Jessop, 1993; Peck, 2001). Another version of this first perspective – one that is both less structuralist and less pessimistic – finds convergence around a set of general principles that organise governance and social policy, deploying concepts such as "regime change," "paradigm shift" and so on. It seeks to identify the large changes in ideas, such as the "neo-liberal turn" (Jobert, 1994), and compares their influence in a variety of policy situations. Some of the literature on "Europeanization" fits here, especially those analyses that grant explanatory weight to common ideas, discourses and networks (for example, Hay and Rosamond, 2002; Radaelli, 2003).

A second perspective sees social policy reform in terms of divergence. While some modifications in spending may be occurring, this perspective relies heavily on the image of path dependency popularised by historical institutionalists. Fundamental regime differences are sustained through time, despite new challenges (Pierson, 1998). As Kitschelt *et al*. write (1999: 444): "institutional divergence has a tendency to persist and to reconstitute itself" despite the similarities of challenges, in large part because of path dependence. Stressing path dependency, however, renders invisible the fact that many regimes are moving simultaneously towards common practices as well as a discourse of the "active society" to respond to pressures on financing and to address new risks.

A third perspective recognises the heavy tendencies accented in the first, but sees their effects *mediated* by national institutional structures and policy responses that leave space for country-specific or regime specific adaptation to new pressures. Even if welfare states across the OECD world have faced similar pressures, each has some degrees of freedom (Banting, *et al*., 1997: 390). The expectation of *perhaps* convergence *perhaps* divergence is probably the most common found in the literature today (Banting, *et al*., 1997: 5 and passim; O'Connor *et al*., 1999: 223). Colin Hay proposes a notion of *contingent convergence*, in which "differential exposure to processes of economic integration and case-specific (institutional) mediations sustain a contingent process of convergence and divergence" (2004: 260). While the notion of contingency is appealing - and seems to represent the real world - it does little to help uncover the common pattern observed across a wide range of countries moving in a similar direction.

Even this brief effort to classify ways of thinking about convergence and divergence reveals the lack of consensus that arises because of different theoretical and epistemological starting points. In historical institutionalism, for example, there is little attention to even the possibility of policy convergence, because of its goal of stressing variation (Streeck and Thelen, 2005). The historical institutionalist project took hold as a reaction against the grand theorising of behaviouralist and neo-Marxist research in the 1950s and 1960s. Where grand theories underlined similarities and convergence in trends and processes across space (and sometimes time), historical institutionalism sought to understand policy *variations* across countries and the institutional configurations that account for them (Steimo *et al*., 1992: 4; 13). This search for variation has been, if anything, reinforced by the encounter between welfare state analysis and the varieties of capitalism approach (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Kitschelt *et al.*, 1999).

In the past 20 years, analysis of variation has undoubtedly helped to illuminate differences in social policy that were previously obscured. For instance, critical of quantitative sociological studies that described a single pattern of movement toward "the" welfare state, Gøsta Esping-Andersen generated his typology of three worlds of welfare regimes (1990), and others could refine the depiction with a fourth regime (Ferrera, 1998). Subsequent research also underlined key differences in the extent of reform possible (or impossible) given the path dependent logic and institutional stickiness of each case (Pierson, 1998 for example).

Obviously, it would be difficult argue that such factors of national circumstances and tradition are not important. To focus almost exclusively on the sources of variation, however, may blind us to patterns of similarity in welfare regime redesign. Of course, there is no point going to the other extreme and suggesting that social policy is simply converging because of globalisation, Europeanisation, liberalisation, or OECDism. The criticisms made by historical institutionalists of the generalisations of grand theory remain as valid today as they were in the 1990s. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to ask whether there are certain patterns of convergence within policy communities, and to describe them, *before* focusing on differences.

This query is inspired by thinking about an earlier historical moment in which convergence occurred around a new paradigm. After 1945 principles of Keynesian macro-economics shaped the policies of most advanced industrial countries, albeit in different ways and with more or less respect for John Maynard Keynes' basic theoretical principles (Hall, 1989). We recognise in hindsight a significant paradigm shift, starting in the 1930s in a few countries and continuing through the next two decades, promoted by some international organisations but "domesticated" differently. The paradigm contained a wide consensus on a number of general principles about the role of the state, state-society relations, forms of policy intervention, rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and so on. But each jurisdiction *did Keynesianism* in its own way. To have focused exclusively on these divergences, however, without appreciating the importance of the shared principles, would have left our understanding of the post-1945 years impoverished.

The expectation of convergence used here is to a very large extent comparable to the convergence that resulted in the implantation of Keynesianism in many countries after 1945. This notion of convergence does not mean an elimination of differences among countries or that institutions and policies are mimicking those developed elsewhere (the idea of Americanisation, for instance). Rather, we use it to imply that there is movement toward a new configuration around the new social risks, comparable in generality to that of the Keynesian welfare states of the post-1945 decades.

Because our goal is to strike a better balance between the study of social policy differences and similarities, we will work with a key distinction between *convergence in policy visions* about new social risks and *divergence in implementation.* This distinction is important because our major proposition is that most advanced democracies are currently in a phase of basic redesign. It is a moment for re-thinking the blueprints for the very architecture of well-being and the respective responsibilities of families, markets, and communities as well as states.

In this article, we do not focus on where consensus comes from. Doing that would entail analysing the spread of ideas via a variety of networks. It would involve understanding how ideas about new social risks developed in international agencies, including the European Union and the OECD, were debated by policy intellectuals, and intersected with each jurisdiction's diagnosis of its own social protection gaps. This is another analytic task than the one we undertake in this article. Here we seek to describe the convergence in policy visions, and render visible the *patterns of choice and change*, patterns that can not be completely apprehended with an approach that searches for variation, via such conceptual tools as the identification of the worlds of welfare capitalism or the consequences of path dependency. Such analyses of variation are perfectly legitimate but they are not our goal. Our proposition is more general. It is to demonstrate that as they undertake to redesign their social protection systems, many jurisdictions are converging around a policy vision that is captured by the image of LEGO™.

We appropriate the name in two ways. One is as a metaphor, to describe convergence around some basic *building blocks* of a possible emerging social architecture. The other is as an ideal-type to capture the key features of the future-oriented, investment-centred activation strategy currently advocated in policy circles as a blueprint for welfare state redesign.

This process of identifying the building blocks for a new social architecture is comparable to the search for the virtuous circle in theoretical Keynesianism, when counter-cyclical social spending becomes a necessary support for a growing economy. During the decades of neo-liberalism another notion became hegemonic; this was that social spending was actually hindering economic well-being and that economic policy trumped social policy. With the emergence of a certain consensus around a congeries of ideas - those that we label the LEGO™ paradigm - we see again the identification of social policy as a helpful support for a healthy economy, albeit with forms of spending and types of programmes very different from the stimulus model of Keynes.

Before moving through the next sections, several clarifications are worth stressing. First, to say that the three key ideas of the LEGO™ paradigm are circulating widely does not mean either that they have become hegemonic or that they will. There is no inevitability to this process; political action will determine the future. Second, the fact that we describe this tendency does not mean that we embrace it. This is not necessarily our view of an ideal or normatively preferable social order. It is a description of an ideal only for the proponents of the LEGO™ paradigm; *they* speak in the next pages.[4] Third, to say that policy communities use a language of investment or of active citizenship in general does not mean that they actually do much to *ensure that they occur.* When the architects of post-1945 welfare regimes embraced an equality discourse, they did not all provide equality. Similarly not all LEGOists provide adequate protection against new social risks.[5] Nonetheless, when these policy communities think about *what* to do, they often phrase their prescriptions in terms of the LEGO™ paradigm. It is worth paying attention to the words, frameworks and paradigm of LEGO™, then, because it opens some possibilities for actors and policy action and closes down others.[6]

The LEGO™ Paradigm

> Children are our role models. Children are curious, creative and imaginative. … Lifelong creativity, imagination and learning are stimulated by playful activities that encourage "hands-on and minds-on" creation, fun, togetherness and the sharing of ideas. People who are curious, creative and imaginative, i.e. people who have a childlike urge to explore and learn, are best equipped to thrive in a challenging world and be the builders of our common future.[7]

This quote from the company's web site illustrates at least three key features of what we term the LEGO™ paradigm. First, it clearly focuses on learning over the life course. Play is educational, and such play is invaluable for the future; it fosters individuals' capacity for continuous learning, flexibility and adaptability as an adult. This *metaphor* of constant learning, knowledge acquisition, involvement and engagement as well as the notion of open-ended results and variety is particularly appealing in the "knowledge-based" economy. Second, this philosophy is future-oriented. Children now are already creating the future.[8] And finally, it suggests how activities in the present are ultimately beneficial not only for individuals themselves, but for the community as a whole. For LEGO™, successful play in childhood enriches the good of the community as well as preparing children for their working years.

In the next three sections we describe the ways in which three very similar notions underpin current policy discussions about redesigning welfare regimes to face new social risks. In this analytic exercise we do not pretend to provide a systemic comparison of all policies; that has been done elsewhere (for example, Taylor-Gooby, 2004). Rather, by an accumulation of examples from a wide range of countries and institutions we seek to document the presence of convergence in principle around a vision of social policy, despite divergence in implementation. In each section we pay attention to countries and also the European Union. The EU may have more scope for leading the response to new social risks than in the traditional domains of protection against "old" risks, where well-entrenched interests at the national level make efforts to co-ordinate across Europe difficult.[9]

Learning as the route to security

In policy circles sensitive to the challenge of new social risks, individuals' security no longer means having some protection from the market, what Esping-Andersen (1990) termed a social citizenship right to decommodification. Security now means having capacity to confront challenges and adapt, via life-long learning to acquire new or up-date old skills as well as via early childhood learning. Adequate "human capital" is proposed as the best response to de-industrialisation, demand for services and the emergence of a knowledge-based economy. It is touted as the way to ensure a continued connection to a rapidly changing labour market.

In post-1945 decades apprenticeships could prepare workers for their whole working life and almost half the population (that is, women) was not expected to be in the labour force at all. Now, in the knowledge and service-based post-industrial economy and confronted with new social risks, policy communities fear entrenchment of new patterns of exclusion, following from inadequate access to knowledge as well as the deterioration of skills due to withdrawal or exclusion from the labour force, especially but not only among women. The solution proposed is learning throughout the life course. Responses range from promoting a "sure start" in very early childhood to retaining the skills of the most experienced older workers who postpone retirement. Day care has become early childhood education and care (ECEC); older workers have become repositories of learning and knowledge.

Education has long been is acknowledged as one of the foundations of a successful modern economy. As an "old" social risk the public-private mix in formal schooling is being recalibrated, with families and individuals being assigned responsibility for a greater share of the costs.[10] As fees are raised and privatisation rolled out, families are given more responsibility for their children's school success and especially for their human capital acquisition at the post-secondary level. The Irish Minister of Education recently said: "The never-ending search for competitive advantage in the global knowledge economy has led all public policy-makers to focus on education as a key factor in strengthening competitiveness, employment and social cohesion."[11]

Because the LEGO™ paradigm's focus on education is broader than formal schooling, it is prompting attention to many other institutions in which human capital is acquired and learning occurs. These settings are targeted for funding, in part because the effects of successful investments in learning over the life course are considered to go well beyond the labour market. The 2001 Communication of the European Commission on *Life Long Learning* [COM (2001) 678 final], for example, sees such learning as contributing to the goal of having "active, tolerant and committed citizens." The European Trade Union Congress echoes this vision when it insists: "There are two equally important aims for lifelong learning: promoting active citizenship and promoting employability" (ETUC, 2001).

In addition to the European Union, the OECD has been an important actor here. For example, by the mid-1990s senior policy analysts, reflecting on a high-level conference entitled *Beyond 2000: The New Social Policy Agenda*, called for a social architecture to face up to what they termed new social risks (Pearson and Scherer, 1997: 6; 8): "A new approach to social protection will have a stronger emphasis on interventions earlier in life and more preventive (and less remedial) measures. The goal would be to re-define equity and security in terms of barriers towards life-course flexibility …." At the 1997 Employment Summit the European Union also agreed to four pillars for its Employment Guidelines, two of which were "employability" and "adaptability." This emphasis on "activity rather than passivity" was embraced in, among others, the 1998 Swedish National Action Plan (NAP) for employment, because it was seen as reflecting long-standing Swedish approaches to active labour market policy (eiro, 1998).[12] The attention to the need for activation has also led some social democrats to call for "transitional labour markets" that will provide meaningful choices and supports to people as they move from full-time to part-time or vice versa, from unemployment to employment, into leaves for training or parenting, from paid work to voluntary work and so on (Schmid and Gazier, 2002).

The LEGO™ paradigm incorporates a view of the knowledge economy as one in which certain categories are "at-risk." For example, the book assembling documents and policy papers developed during the Portuguese Presidency of the European Union in the first half of 2000 (a presidency during which the European social model was given new direction) puts it this way (Rodrigues, 2002: 5-6):

> Knowledge is becoming the main source of wealth and power, but also of difference, between nations, regions, companies and people. … new risks of social exclusion, of a digital divide, emerge involving all the workers who can not keep up with this pace of change. Labour markets tend to new forms of segmentation between workers with voluntary mobility based on up-dated skills and workers who run the risk of involuntary mobility due to out-dated skills.

Canada's "innovation strategy," as described by Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, made a similar point (Canada, 2002: Foreword):

> In the new, global knowledge economy of the 21st century prosperity depends on innovation, which, in turn, depends on the investments that we make in the creativity and talents of our people. We must invest not only in technology and innovation but also, in the Canadian way, to create an environment of inclusion, in which all Canadians can take advantage of their talents, their skills and their ideas; in which imagination, skills and innovative capacity combine for maximum effect.

There is convergence, then, around the notions of human capital and learning over the life course, as part of an adjustment to the new economy *and* to promote social inclusion. Most countries include training and programmes for displaced workers as part of their tool box of active labour market policies. But the LEGO™ paradigm's emphasis on learning shapes more than the familiar programmes for workers in transition from school to work or displaced by economic restructuring. The paradigm involves that, but it involves more than that.

Across a wide range of countries attention to early childhood education and care (ECEC) as part of any learning strategy is also escalating, based on a growing body of scientific data, especially from cross-time panel studies, of the long-term effects of early educational experiences. As the French CERC (Conseil de l'emploi, des revenus et de la cohésion sociale) chaired by Jacques Delors puts it: “More than anyone else, children are poor not only when they lack resources in the present but also when they do not have access to resources for their life in the future, in particular what is called human capital” (CERC, 2004: 25). Writing of risks of social exclusion, the European Council said (2001: 72):

> There is a considerable body of international research which demonstrates that subsequent performance in education is strongly influenced by early developmental experiences and that well targeted investment at an early stage is one of the most effective ways of countering educational disadvantage and literacy problems. Children from poor backgrounds and vulnerable groups are often particularly at risk of missing out in this regard.

Pre-school education has multiple goals: ensuring early remedial interventions to limit developmental delays; providing foundational skills to make all children life-long learners; ensuring stimulation and care to lower the long-term costs of childhood poverty.[13] Such commitments to universal provision mean that goals for early childhood education go well *beyond* the notion that childcare is necessary so that mothers can seek employment, or to allow the reconciliation of work and family life.

The OECD has emerged as a flagship organisation in the transformation of day care into early childhood education and care. It has undertaken an ambitious series of studies, launched after the 1996 Ministerial meeting on *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality for All*. Its studies report a clear pattern: “The trend in all countries is toward full coverage of the 3- to 6-year old age group, aiming to give all children at least two years of free publicly-funded provision before beginning compulsory schooling” (OECD, 2001: 48 and *passim*). The international organisation lauds this trend, in addition to recommending that parental leaves be long enough to provide care for newborns but not so long as to allow mothers’ own human capital to stagnate. Recently it has begun to address prohibitively high costs (Immervoll and Barber, 2005).

Countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada, that have been major laggards in the provision of even custodial day care, have launched efforts to improve their ECEC services. After its 1997 victory, for example, New Labour immediately announced a National Childcare Strategy and the creation of new spaces in nursery schools. In the run-up to the 2005 election, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown promoted his 10-year Strategy for Childcare as a key electoral plank as well as a way to "give every child the best start in life" (HM Treasury *et al*., 2004). But it is not only the laggards that are extending ECEC availability. In both Sweden and Finland municipalities are now legally bound to provide a childcare space to any pre-school child whose parents, whether they are employed or not, ask for one.

If there is convergence about the advantages of ECEC for pre-school children, there is no consensus about how to deliver services.[14] It is, for example, ironic that over the last two decades France – a country often lionised from afar for its excellent facilities for universal pre-school education by age 3 – has steadily expanded public funding for informal care for infants and toddlers (Jenson and Sineau, 2001: chapter 4). The *crèche*, a high quality type of child care, has lost ground to babysitters and family day care providers, two kinds of care widely acknowledged as being of less certain quality.[15] But France is not alone in backing off an emphasis on high quality and universal public services. Even within one regime type, there are significant divergences. Denmark guarantees childcare only to working parents. Although in 1996 Finland guaranteed places in childcare centres to all parents who wanted them, the next year it *also* made an allowance available to parents who wished to provide parental childcare, thereby undermining incentives both to use quality public services and for women to seek jobs.[16] In 1998 the Norwegian government introduced an allowance for parents who cared for their own children and did not use public childcare services, in the name of "quality child-rearing" (OECD, 1999: 26). Canada's Conservative government, elected in January 2006, is instituting a transfer to parents that it calls a childcare allowance, although it would be more correctly termed a child allowance.

There is also significant divergence in ideas about who is responsible for the costs of childcare. Several central governments have off-loaded costs to municipal and regional authorities, for example in Sweden and Ontario. There has also been an increase in expectations about the parental and employer shares. For example, 2001 Dutch childcare legislation was described by the Minister responsible as a “milestone” in addressing the new social risks associated with high rates of women’s employment, changing families and integration of immigrants (Geus, 2004). It is based on an expectation that collective agreements will push employers into covering one-third of the costs of childcare. Income-tested subsidies to parents are available only when the employer fails to meet this expectation.

Choices about how much attention to pay to quality, to universality and to parental provision in ECEC as well as to its costs represent divergence in implementation of the LEGO™ paradigm, despite the convergence around the notion that the knowledge economy creates new social risks for women and for children. The range of choices reflects a degree of uncertainty about where to put the human capital emphasis. As the French case illustrates, activation goals for their mothers may trump the benefits for toddlers of high quality childcare. The 2002 Barcelona EU Council set targets for childcare: “Member States should remove disincentives to female labour force participation and strive, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age” (quoted in Plantenga, 2004: 3), but there is no attention to quality in these targets (Moss, 2004).

French policy design as well as the EU’s Barcelona targets reflect two concerns about human capital that is at the core of the LEGO™ paradigm’s attention to new social risks. One is that human capital investments are “wasted” when well-educated women do not participate in the labour force because social policy encourages familialist arrangements. Therefore, many jurisdictions that initially designed policies with incentives for parental childcare are now discouraging full withdrawal from the labour force. For example, Germany's 2002 *Job-Aqtiv* law allows parents caring for children for three years to accumulate eligibility for future unemployment insurance claims (*International Reform Monitor*, 2005: 68). While parents are still doing the caring, they are also receiving a signal that the task is temporary and they are still in the labour force, in much the same way that Swedish parents on extended parental leave are still counted in the active labour force. A second version of the human capital theme arises from the notion that women are particularly at-risk of succumbing to exclusion from the knowledge-based economy. For example, when the European Commission (2000: 14-15) considered its *Social Policy Agenda* for the period 2000-05 it said "the structure of the labour market – in particular gender segregation and low skill and low wage employment – needs to be addressed."

As these examples demonstrate, a shared understanding of the importance of learning across the life course and investments in human capital to protect against new social risk can lead in different directions. Sometimes the focus is on children's pre-school *education*, while in others the key concern is *activation* of women. In the latter case, babysitting and unregulated care may be considered a suitable substitute for quality care. Some jurisdictions are refusing this either/or choice, however, and they are being pushed to do so by experts in child development who stress the need for "holistic services" (for example, Moss, 2004: 9) in a way true to the LEGO™ paradigm.

Investing in future life-chances

Thus far we have observed that the emphasis in the LEGO™ paradigm on individuals and their human capital, as both life-long learning and ECEC, owes a good deal to practices initiated some time ago in the Nordic countries that pursued active labour market policies well before the OECD and the EU embraced them.[17] Their contribution to the first dimension of the paradigm has been significant. In this section we now observe the framing ideas and initiatives that owe somewhat more to liberal and continental welfare regimes and international organisations.

In the LEGO™ paradigm, social policy is future-oriented because it is investment-oriented and stresses human capital (Saint-Martin, 2000). Investments imply a particular notion of time, because they generate dividends in the future, whereas consumption (labelled an expense by accountants) occurs in the present (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2003). This time perspective discourages "passive expenditures" whose effects are only realised in the present: "societies have to spend now to support those in need, but they also have to invest now, to reduce social breakdown in the future" (Martin and Pearson, 2005; see also CERC, 2004: 22).

This notion of reducing future risk is justification for many OECD countries choosing to supplement low incomes of the working poor, albeit with a variety of different design practices (OECD, 2005, 6-7). While some provide in-work benefits to poor adults, it is common to target spending on income supplements to families with children, such as Canada does so within the National Child Benefit, or to provide substantially more generous benefits to families, as the United States does with its Earned Income Tax Credit (Jenson, 2004). The announced objective is to ensure that children will not be subjected to a childhood of poverty, with its negative long-term consequences.

Social knowledge about the relationship between childhood poverty and future life chances are an important spur here. As UNICEF's experts at the Innocenti Centre put it, echoing a broad consensus in academic research (UNICEF, 2000: 3): "Whether measured by physical and mental development, health and survival rates, educational achievement or job prospects, incomes or life expectancies, those who spend their childhood in poverty of income and expectation are at a marked and measurable disadvantage." French policy communities, grouped in the CERC are only among the most recent to use a child poverty frame and to insist on the long-term consequences of childhood disadvantage for poor educational results

(CERC, 2004: chapter V). Since 1997 British policy-makers have relied on reports of think tanks, foundations and academics documenting that even a few years of poverty could be reflected in lower levels of educational achievement and earnings as well as greater involvement with the police. These findings are incorporated into the idea set of policy-makers and government documents began presenting the science.[18]

The World Bank – no proponent liberal state expenditures – uses the investment frame too. Indeed, it is worth quoting its position at length because it captures the investment perspective so clearly:[19]

> The under-25 age group is unique from an economic perspective, and crucial for human development and economic growth. It represents the highest leverage point for investments to build human capital. These investments also maximize social mobility and are the principal means by which to reduce intergenerational poverty. There three main reasons for this:
>
> 1. The benefits to investment are maximal because they have the longest possible period to accrue;
> 2. The opportunity costs of a child's time – particularly at very young ages – are lower than at any other time in the life cycle;
> 3. There are a wide variety of externalities, including intergenerational effects, that are lost in the absence of these investments.
>
> Moreover, there are extremely high costs associated with the irreversibility of a child's development. Consequently, children and youth are a clear target for public sector intervention to ensure socially optimal investments,…

Such future-oriented calculations imply a conception of equality different from the one that informed the post-1945 welfare state when social policy focused on redistribution and on fostering greater equality in the here-and-now (whether or not those goals were ever achieved). In contrast, the LEGO™ paradigm emphasises equality of life chances.

There is a social inclusion dimension to this notion of equality. Measuring more than income, broad definitions of poverty provide an indication of whether people can actually and actively participate in their community. The "child poverty agenda" in France, for example, measures poverty so as render visible the effects of social exclusion on children's capacity to participate fully in society (CERC, 2004). Such measures follow directly from, among other things, the concepts underpinning the UN's Human Development Index and the European Union's statistical work to develop indicators of social exclusion, and thereby to measure non-monetary disadvantage.

The investment theme also leads to policies to promote saving and accumulation of assets. Beginning in 2000, several European governments (Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the Basque region, the UK, for example) began experimenting with individual learning accounts, to accompany their life-long learning and training initiatives (OECD, 2003 provides an overview). In addition to setting up the ambitious *Learn$ave* experiment, the Canadian government has enriched the *Canada Education Savings Grant* with a *Canada Learning Bond*. Both provide incentives to parents to save for their children's post-secondary education, either as tax savings in the case of the former or via matching contributions from public funds in the case of the CLB. Other instruments focus on family assets, with governments sharing responsibility for accumulation. New Labour introduced Britain's *Savings Gateway*, offering matching public funds to savers and Ireland followed in 2001. Others spend public money to provide all children with an initial endowment that will grow in value and be a "stake" as they near adulthood, such as Britain's *Child Trust Fund*.

The investment and savings theme in the LEGO™ has taken another form, encouraging individuals to take responsibility for their key life transitions, by "saving time." For example, explicitly addressing the new social risks theme, the Netherlands recently introduced an individual life-cycle savings scheme, described this way by the Dutch Minister of Social Affairs (OECD Observer, #248, 2005):

> The money in the savings account can be used for various forms of unpaid leave, such as caring for children or ill parents, schooling, a sabbatical or, indeed, early retirement. This reduces the risk of unwanted withdrawals from the labour market, particularly by working mothers, and unnecessary absenteeism because of illness or disability. … This new life-cycle

> approach to social policymaking has great potential to create a welfare state that supports efficiency and equity, now and in the future.

The notion that time must be "saved" before it can be "spent" is quite different from the "decommodification" rights to protection from "old" risks, such as childbirth.[20] These were granted according to need rather than on the basis of good planning.

Activity enriches the collective good

That everyone benefits from social policy redesign has become a commonplace. Finland's vision document for social protection in 2010, for example, states (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2001: 9): "The wellbeing of our society will be rooted in the maintenance of working capacity and general functional capacity allied to individual initiative." These mean people will work two or three years longer, maintain their health so as not to burden their families and the social protection system, and take responsibility for themselves. These goals appear higher on the list of the "Vision for 2010" than do the familiar ones of limiting poverty, ensuring quality services and redistributing income. In Italy, the 2002 agreement to reform labour market and employment benefits was titled the "Pact for Italy" to indicate the extent of the general interest involved in, among other things, improving life-long learning and education.[21]

There are several versions to the idea that combating new social risks benefits everyone. One is a simple notion of prevention. For example, a report to the Government of Ontario, that has profoundly influenced Canadian policy discourse, puts the issues together this way (McCain and Mustard, 1999: 15):

> Over time, increased community-based initiatives and investment (public and private) in early child development and parenting, will pay off through a population with better competence and coping abilities for the new global economy…. This investment will be much more cost-effective than paying for remediation later in life, such as treatment programs and support services for problems that are rooted in poor early development.

An even larger idea is expressed in a recent article entitled *Time to change. Towards an active social policy agenda* (Martin and Pearson, 2005):

> "The evidence is there to show that active social policies can make a real difference to people's lives. And we must not forget that in doing so, active social policies not only help the poorest and most disadvantaged in society. More and more productive workers mean healthier economies, and everyone gains from that. Active social policies can benefit us all."

There are two ideas embedded in this position: that work is the route to maximising individuals' well-being; and that the well-being of society and social cohesion depend on such activity. These two ideas lie at the heart of strategies for spending to confront new social risks, and have resulted in activation strategies being adopted widely.[22]

This complex of ideas marks a clear renunciation of any commitment to the traditional gender division of labour with a male breadwinner model that dominated earlier social policy regimes. Gone is any distinction (except for the small minority that might afford it) between those who should be active in the labour market "bringing home the bacon" and those who should care for hearth and home, kith and kin. At the Stockholm European Council in spring 2001, the EU committed to raising the female participation rate to 60% by 2010, an 8% increase in a decade. In Bismarkian welfare regimes, the reason behind this commitment is to increase the number of contributors to social insurance programmes, strengthening their actuarial footing. Mothers living in couples as well as lone parents are targeted. In liberal welfare regimes the goal is to reduce the rates of social assistance among lone parents, by removing the anchor of the original programme, which allowed lone mothers caring for children to substitute parental childcare for labour force participation. In social democratic regimes, the goal is provide families with greater resiliency in the face of labour markets that are more flexible, contingent, precarious and so on.

We have seen that the LEGO™ paradigm recognises the challenge of raising rates of women's employment and pays attention to services for the non-parental care of children.

These publicly funded services have a societal dimension as well as an individual one. They are intended to help individual families reconcile work and family obligations and individual children to prepare for school. But they are also meant to reap the long-term advantage for the whole society that subscribers to the LEGO™ paradigm believe (based on the research results of experts in child development) will come from spending to ensure school readiness. As Chancellor Gordon Brown is fond of saying: "Our children are our future and the most important investment we can make as a nation is in developing the potential of all our country's children" (HM Treasury, 2001: iv). Or, as put by another Minister, also from a country that has relatively recently discovered the need for more investment in childcare services: "… together we are working on the future of the European Union. A future which will benefit from good childcare!" (Geuz, 2004).

Another area where the LEGO™ paradigm makes the claim that activity enriches the collective good is with respect to older workers. Numerous countries are reducing the availability of early retirement, part-time pensions, and disability pensions. The discourse of active ageing (as we see in the Finnish quote just above, calling for functional capacity) underpins these moves, alongside the straightforward financial motive of making pension systems sustainable. Almost everywhere there is a growing emphasis on promotion of good life-style choices. Individuals are assigned responsibility for maintaining their own health, in the interests of us all.

An ageing society creates numerous challenges for the LEGO™ paradigm, however. If we use the criteria laid out by the World Bank quoted above, the elderly are *not* a good investment. Not everyone can be active in the labour force. Disabilities and vulnerabilities are real at all ages, but certainly they touch the elderly frequently. Moreover, their vulnerabilities may hinder the capacity of others, whether a spouse or child, to remain active in the labour market and even, in some cases, in their own social networks (Jenson, forthcoming). This contradiction is rarely confronted head on within the LEGO™ paradigm and is more often left to those struggling with the “old” social risks, such as pensions and health care. When population ageing *is* raised as a new social risk and in social investment terms, however, it can lead to conclusions such as (Martin and Pearson, 2005):

> The final dimension in the active social agenda is to reorient policies away from an excessive emphasis on pensions. That people are living longer is a fantastic achievement of modern society, but we have to make sure that the benefits are shared fairly across the generations. Financial transfers for pensions and other age-related benefits are rising with ageing societies, but they are now so high that social investments in the needs of younger generations risk being crowded out.

As the authors of this recommendation themselves recognise, this will be no easy task.

Conclusion

In this article we have sought to accomplish several things. The first is to *identify* and classify the social architecture that is emerging from the various efforts to “recast,” “redesign” or “recalibrate” the welfare mix in response to new social risks. Our proposition is that recognition that such new social risks exist has prompted convergence toward a LEGO™ paradigm, which is a general policy *vision* that stands on three key principles.

One involves convergence around the idea that there is a need to protect against the new social risks emerging in post-industrial and knowledge-based economy. Promoters of the LEGO™ paradigm anticipate the threat of new inequalities and “divides” being created by unequal access to technology and skills. Beyond formal schooling, then, acquiring human capital and skills via learning over the whole life course and early childhood education are identified as routes to security. Learning is important because it will help foster social inclusion into an “active society.” Key policy levers are active labour market policies and ECEC, imported and adapted from the long experience of Nordic countries. There are major divergences in the incorporation of these levers into each national setting, however. Some jurisdictions have gone quite far in developing educational pre-school settings that prepare youngsters for school, provide early intervention for developmental delays and allow children to catch up on language, developmental or socialisation skills. They understand all children benefit from ECEC, not only those who are disadvantaged or whose parents need day care because they are employed. Other jurisdictions, however, still target childcare to working parents or seek to retain aspects of familialism – such as encouraging parents to provide their own childcare – even as they proclaim the need to activate the female labour force. Another divergence exists around active labour market policies. In some jurisdictions these remain close to the original Nordic vision, while in others they are little more than a programme to force people into the labour force and off what are viewed as unnecessary and costly support programmes, such as disability pensions or social assistance.

A second principle of the LEGO™ paradigm shifts the definition of equality, anchoring it firmly in the liberal notion of equality of opportunity and thereby focussing on future life chances. This is an "investment" more than a "consumption" paradigm associated with "social portection." Its first and most comprehensive manifestation was in the liberal welfare regimes but it is spreading. The most threatening social risk identified is poverty, especially "child poverty." With its long-term effects on educational attainment as well as social exclusion and even criminality child poverty supposedly mortgages the future. Key policy instruments to enact this investment principle are income supplements and other new forms of public spending (often taking the form of tax expenditures) intended to narrow the gap between earnings and the needs of the household. Here too there are divergences. In countries that did not provide significant family allowances and other child benefits after 1945, income supplements to the working poor loom large in the social architecture. In other cases they are a minor part of the policy mix. In addition, in a wider range of countries, policy communities are pushing the investment metaphor by creating incentives to accumulate assets and saving, training individuals and families to themselves as planners and investors.

The third principle of the paradigm asserts that activity and investments enrich the collective good. In particular, the LEGO™ paradigm conceptualises an active society as benefiting everyone, both directly and indirectly. For the working poor, whose job does not generate sufficient earnings, income supplements help bridge the gap. Indirectly, everyone benefits from sustainable pension and health systems as well as lower social assistance costs. Even those without young children benefit from preparing them for school. Everyone benefits from seniors engaging in active ageing as well as staying longer in the labour force.

The paradigm described in this way is fully congruent with the policies of activation that so many countries have put into place. It also can accommodate new fears of declining birth rates, of low employment rates, and so on. Our claim is not, then, that the new social risks and the LEGO™ paradigm have gone unobserved. Our claims are much more modest. One is that there is a shape to what is happening, a new blueprint emerging, and that it is shifting the welfare mix. Therefore, it is a moment when new hybrids may take shape that cross the welfare regime types or path-shifting may occur.[23] Our second claim is that if there is convergence around a LEGO™ paradigm it is only around a framing *vision;* implementation varies widely. Our third claim is that LEGO™ is a *good name* for this vision because of its emphasis on the future, on human capital investments and life-long learning, and on the benefits to everyone of making work of play.

Notes

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[2] www.oecd.org/socialmin2005 - page consulted on 5 April 2006.

[3] Of course, such policy and spending decision may also have spill-over effects when choices are made about how to reform existing programmes in a situation of limited financial resources.

[4] In order not to confuse the words of policy communities with those of academic analysis, we have deliberately excluded the latter from the next section of this article, *unless* they are speaking as advocates of a particular policy position.

[5] Two of the countries where LEGO™ talk is most prevalent are still not doing as much for children as other places. Tony Blair made ending child poverty a key theme for New Labour. Despite declining child poverty rates, the UK still ranked 20th of 26 countries in the "League Tables" of child poverty (UNICEF, 2005: 7, 6). Recently, the OECD shamed Canada for its serious lag in developing ECEC services, despite all the talk about investing in children (OECD, 2004a).

[6] For an example, that demonstrates the way that attention to gender equality has been closed down by the discourse on "investing in children" and the implementation of the new paradigm in Canada, see Dobrowolsky and Jenson (2004).

[7] This quotation is from the webpage entitled fundamental beliefs, consulted 26 July 2005. www.lego.com/eng/info/default.asp?page=beliefs

[8] This may seem little more than a banal statement, but controversy over addressing children "in the here and now" or treating them as "adults in becoming" is a lively one. See, for example, Lister (2003) and OECD (2001: 8).

[9] Of the role of the European Union, Trine P. Larsen and Peter Taylor-Gooby write: "The area of new social risks, compared with old social risks, offers particular opportunities in this context. … Since national governments in most European countries are less concerned with new than old social risks and spend less on them, and the interests of social partners and other organisations are typically less heavily involved, the opportunities to develop new policies are more open" (in Taylor-Gooby, 2004: 183). Similar arguments can be made about the reasons Canada's Social Union agenda began its re-haul of income security programmes via the National Child Benefit. Policies for "children" were not part of the post-1945 social protection regime (Jenson, 2001).

[10] States in post-1945 liberal welfare regimes, with the exception of the UK, consistently spent a lower proportion of GDP on post-secondary education, because of the contribution demanded from students and/or their families. In 2004 the Blair government pushed the UK toward this model, with the controversial reform of higher education. Canada has seen a significant increase in tuition costs. Germany, France and Italy are also actively considering such reforms (Lundsgaard and Turner, 2004).

[11] In *OECD Observer*, #242, March 2004.

[12] On the complementarities between the post-Luxembourg EU Guidelines and the Swedish tradition, see the interview with Lars Magnusson in *Working Life. Research and Development News*, #3, 2001.

[13] Quebec, for example, instituted a universal system in 1997 with multiple goals, ranging from reducing poverty to fighting black market employment, encouraging parents into employment, and combating the effects of poverty among young children.

[14] For current coverage rates see Immervoll and Barber (2005: 54-58).

[15] The OECD's report on France flagged the problem: "the review team questions the policy preference accorded to expanding individual care arrangements in national and often local policy (for both financial and ideological reasons). Given the difference in staff qualifications and the known benefits of quality childcare centres to children's early development and learning" it is important for public support to be devoted to the more expensive centres (where the staff has higher qualifications, and therefore, is better paid) (OECD, 2004b: 47).

[16] This allowance is available after parental leave and can be claimed until the youngest child reaches age 3 or enters a childcare programme.

[17]"This type of policy orientation, which also includes 'in-work' benefits or work subsidies, is sometimes seen as 'neo-liberal' and coercive, but actually has a long and honourable history as part of Swedish social democratic active labour market policy" (Ferrera and Rhodes, 2000: 5).

[18] Cross-sectional and panel studies are cited, documenting both long-term effects of childhood poverty for outcomes such as truancy and greater intergenerational inequality (for example, HM Treasury, 2001: 2).

[19] This is from the website of the World Bank group: web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTCY/0,,contentMDK:20243901~menuPK:565261~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:396445,00.html, page consulted on 15 March 2005.

[20] In the case of maternity – and in contrast to "parenting time" – all countries in the EU of the 15 (except the UK) provide generous paid maternity leaves. This has been the case for decades, since childbirth has always been treated as a health – and therefore "old" – risk.

[21] Since the Pact was not signed by the largest union confederation, its relevance may be more symbolic than real.

[22] *The International Reform Monitor*, #9, 2004: 8 (available on http://www.reformmonitor.org/index.html) reports that activation strategies have been adopted in virtually all the 15 countries it monitors.

[23] Anton Hemerijck (2002) describes hybridisation, with respect to the Open Method of Coordination. Palier and Bonoli (1999) describe path-shifting.

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