

An Exploration of Changes in British Welfare Social Policy in the First Half of the Twentieth Century through Bourdieu's Theory of Field and Habitus

Zeming Zhao*

University of York, York, UK

* Corresponding Author Email: 1336233618@qq.com

Abstract. The question of how to transcend the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity is a central one in contemporary sociological theory. Bourdieu advocates habitus as a cognitive framework that embodies an individual's practical understanding of society. Such practices consist of structures and habits, and social behaviour is not directly determined by structures, but is indirectly influenced by habitus as an 'embodied mode'. Habits, as 'opportunities for the subject', act as constraints on the formation of structures and contribute to their reproduction. The welfare policy of Britain has experienced the transformation from solving the problem of the poor with a single welfare policy of relief law to the establishment of national economic law, which is continuously amended according to the native welfare policy habitus, thus affecting the welfare policy field and realising the two-way constraints of the field and habitus.

Keywords: British Welfare; Social Policy; Bourdieu's Theory; Field and Habitus.

1. Introduction

Giddens argues that in modern sociological theory, subjectivism makes people as theories that transcend the dichotomy of their own domains, sociology breaks down the boundaries between the individual and the society, the micro and the macro dichotomous analyses, so as to transcend the dichotomous discussion of their own domains and thus explore and reflect on them in depth, and objectivism is a theory of society due to the fact that it puts the "society" in the primary position, so the society has to be "social", so that it is not a social society. Objectivism, on the other hand, because it puts "society" in the first place, the social system becomes the central theme of its analysis of society. However, since both subjectivity and objectivity are in a relatively independent state, it is difficult to use them to understand the relationship between society and individual behaviour (Zhu, 2005). As a famous empirical researcher, Bourdieu's generative structural theory is not like the choice of structuralism and the energetic-orientated view. He argues that objectivism refers to theories and concepts that do not rely on human foundations as the basic structure, and subjectivism tries to capture people's ability to act. Due to the lack of real-world realism and thus the complexity of distorting grounded theories is present in each view (Baert, 2010). Thus breaking through the subjective-objective dichotomy became a major issue in Bourdieu's sociology. Bourdieu himself used habitus as an important concept to transcend this opposition.

This shows that habitus understands the concepts of subject and structure simultaneously. Giddens and Bourdieu attempted to expand the field of sociology beyond the subject-object dichotomy. For a sociology that focuses on the relationship between the individual and society, the challenge is to overcome subjectivism so that the study of the 'individual' perspective can include 'social' considerations. Similarly, escaping the limitations of objectivism so that research from a "social" point of view can take into account the relationship between society and the individual is a challenge that needs to be addressed urgently. The relationalist stance of Bourdieu and Giddens offers a unique perspective on this dilemma, which contributed to an eventual change in the sociological paradigm.

Within the history of change and development of the welfare society and social security system in the UK, the changes between the early 1900s and the 1970s were more dramatic. As an old welfare state,

the UK is a very worthwhile reference for research. Therefore, this paper reviews the change of welfare social policy in the UK from the Poor Law to the Keynesian welfare state through the perspective of habitus and field theory, and analyses it from a sociological perspective, to find the theoretical and practical support for China's welfare policy reform in the future.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Dilemmas and contradictions arising from early British welfare policy

Early British welfare policy (18th to early 20th centuries), due to the increased industrialisation and urbanisation in Britain, was marked by cyclical changes in the British economic environment, and in the face of the risk of unemployment and poverty, the British government chose to eradicate poverty as its priority, even though the capricious changes in the Poor Laws of the time always undermined the poor people's right to receive relief. The poor were also being made conscious of their rights. In this way, the poor could communicate with the officials at a later stage to fight for more rights (Lees, 1998). As a result of the public campaign for rights, the UK has introduced the Rule of Relief Act and the Poor Law Institutions Regulations to improve and regulate the organisations (Croll, 2013). However, the reform of the Poor Law in the UK was more focused on the treatment of the poor in the poorhouses and the conditions of access, but not on the reform of the system in depth. This led to an increase in financial expenditure on the poor in the UK from £11,568,000 in 1900 to £14,850,000 in 1910, but the problems of the Poor Law system continued to have no significant social utility or positive impact, increasing rather than reducing the disparity of poverty. The poor law system could not adapt to the needs of the development of Britain and began to appear as dilemmas and contradictions.

2.2. Social factors and inherent institutional problem

At the heart of the conflict are social factors and inherent institutional problems. As far as social factors are concerned, the poverty factor in the UK is affected by diversified social problems, and the proportion of people who are not involved in the workforce has increased, which also leads to an increase in the number of people living in poverty, and the pressure on the poverty law has increased. At the same time, the health and wellness situation in the UK has been declining and health has become a serious social issue. As health care required a great deal of manpower and material resources, the Poor Law was inadequate in the construction of hospitals, the provision of medicines, and the protection of medical personnel. In addition, the problems of old-age insurance, employment subsidies for special occupations, as well as unemployment and worklessness subsidies could not be solved by the Poor Law, which led to several strikes in the period of 1890-1920, for example, the incident of the Merthyr Miners' Union. In terms of intrinsic institutional factors, the system of poverty alleviation law, by including all poverty issues in the scope of relief without analysing in detail the different causes of poverty, made it difficult to respond effectively to the different causes of poverty. It is broad fails to deal effectively with poverty caused by unemployment, old age and health. Its fundamental problem lies in its lack of foresight and preventive approach, focusing only on relief after poverty occurs rather than preventing and avoiding the risk of poverty (Boyer, 2018). As a result, this system struggled to effectively deal with the complexities of poverty brought about by high levels of industrialization, with limitations becoming increasingly apparent, failing to address poverty and provide comprehensive relief.

Over time, the social development of the UK has made the Relief of Poverty Act completely detached from the actual social problems in the UK. As a result, the British government was in dire need of a new system of relief. With the enactment of the Ministry of Health Act of 1919 and the Local Government Act of 1929, the system of Poor Law in Britain came to an end. In 1948, the National Assistance Act formally abolished the Poor Law system.

3. Welfare policy reforms in the early 20th century (1910-1930)

3.1. The Poor Law and the Pension Act

With the gradual rise of the elderly population in Britain in the early 20th century, the Poor Law was unable to cope with old age poverty, and the traditional old age pension measures were unable to solve the problem of old age, therefore, in 1908, the British government formally approved the Pension Act, which created the British pension system. In the Pension Act, the British government stipulated the principle of free pensions, i.e. any person who meets the terms can obtain a pension. Pensions are paid from parliamentary appropriations (Ding, 2002) and there are no personal costs. Although the pension law provides protection and support for the elderly poor, the principle of free entitlement puts the UK government under great financial pressure. To alleviate the financial pressure, the British government implemented a strict censorship system, which led to the restriction of the scope of pension payments and the reduction of old-age allowances. Between 1909 and 1920, the rate of rejection of pensioners rose from 12.19 per cent to 24.66 per cent, which was contrary to the pension policy that had once been in place. As a result, the pension contribution rate, the pension age, and the contribution age were repaired in 1925 and 1937, respectively. Free contributions were abolished in favour of a contributory and free model.

3.2. The Unemployment Insurance Act

Another reform was the Unemployment Insurance Act, which was passed by Parliament in 1911 as part of the National Insurance Act. It aimed to provide basic financial support for the unemployed and afferent benefit policies for different types of jobs. For example, in London, the Printers' Union was entitled to 20 weeks of coverage year (Beveridge, 1932). During the First World War and after 1920, unemployment insurance laws were extended to cover all blue-collar workers, bringing these workers (Whiteside, 2015), as well as those earning less than £250 a year or non-manual labourers, into the new insurance scheme. The law again extended compulsory insurance to support the unemployed who were not covered by unemployment insurance or whose unemployment insurance period had expired, distinguishing unemployment benefit allowances from unemployment subsidies and introducing differentiated administration. Such reforms realised the separation of the unemployment insurance system from the unemployment benefit system and gradually integrated the unemployment benefit system with the relief system of the Relief of Poverty Act.

3.3. The Maternity and Child Welfare Act

In addition, due to the deteriorating health of the British nation at the beginning of the 20th century, and as a result of the growing problems of poverty and unemployment, as well as the effects of the economic cycle and the colonial wars, the medical services of the Poor Law could not continue to be effectively implemented. To solve the problem of high mortality rates among labourers, children and infants, the British government led by Lloyd George as Chancellor of the Exchequer introduced the Health Insurance Act in the National Insurance Act 1911 in the medical-related aspects. The health insurance law addressed a wide range of common problems of mass healthcare such as medical treatment, convalescence, injury, illness and maternity (Thane, 2011). After the First World War, there was an increase in the number of people applying for health insurance in the UK and an increase in the female population, which led to a change in the age structure. As a result, the Maternity and Child Welfare Act was enacted in 1918 to establish a national system of maternal and child health care, followed by the Ministry of Health Act in 1919 and the Local Government Act in 1929. The specialised management of health and medical care was also established, as were the duties of the Ministry of Health. The relatively rapid progress of health care in Britain during this period led to a marked improvement in the life expectancy and health of the British nation.

Apart from these three major welfare reforms, the Meal Supply Act of 1906, the Education Act of 1907, the Housing Act of 1909, the Town Planning Act and the Labour Exchange Act enriched the

British social welfare system to a large extent. They also laid the foundation for the birth of the welfare state.

4. The birth of the welfare state

Before the 1940s, social welfare policy in Britain was in its infancy. During this period Britain suffered from serious social problems such as poverty, old age and health. After the First World War, Britain's economy was greatly challenged. Although the social security system in Britain has been gradually standardised, it still has shortcomings and deficiencies as it is still in the process of development. The demand for welfare benefits far exceeded the burden on the government. This has led to an increase in poverty, and the public wants the government to take up its social responsibility through reforms. As a result, Beveridge was appointed as the Chairman of the Interdepartmental Co-ordinating Committee on Social Security and Related Services. It was responsible for investigating the social security programmes and services of the time and for shaping the future reconstruction of social security after the Second World War. The following year, Beveridge's report was published to build a post-war social security programme for Britain.

In articles 8, 12, 13 and 14 of the Beveridge report, published in 1942, it was argued that the elimination of deprivation would require investigation in the issues of national insurance, the adjustment of family incomes, children's allowances, and the standard of living in the social surveys of the period between the two world wars. And an optimum match in the rate of subsistence allowances, the rate of contributions, the formation of uniformity in administrative responsibilities, the adequacy and comprehensiveness of the allowances, and thus the elimination of poverty and class antagonism in accordance with the present habitus of the British people (Beveridge, 1942). At the same time, Beveridge elaborated in his report the basic principles for the development of social welfare policy in Britain, namely, the three principles that proposals concerning the future reform and development of the British social security system should not be confined to considerations of local interest, that social insurance as the main element of social welfare policy should be developed in an integrated and co-ordinated manner with other social policies, and that social welfare policy must be realised through co-operation between the state and the individual. On the basis of Beveridge's report, social insurance and welfare reforms were implemented in Britain, from the 1940s to 1970 and Keynesianism brought Britain into the era of the welfare state, and also initiated the welfare state. It is also known as the Keynesian Welfare State (KWNS). k is Keynesianism, Keynesianism focuses on a relatively closed welfare state, so its theory focuses more on the domestic economic development, the main performance lies in the closed economic environment, the management of the public's needs and the focus on the domestic infrastructure. w is Welfare, based on the combination of Keynesianism and the Beveridge Report. Welfare is a form of welfare based on a combination of Keynesianism and the Beveridge Report, which is characterised by a general specification of mass welfare, combined with demand management to promote mass production and collective consumption (Jessop, 2003).

Therefore, the economic and social policies of the KWNS are more attached to the economy and society of the country (Jessop, 2000). The desirability of the KWNS lies in the fact that it provides benefits as a matter of course to all the people who pay taxes for the state social insurance, by linking social support after redistribution of tax revenue to the benefits of the flat rate. Thereby removing the principle of deterrence that underpins the Jezebel law (Whiteside, 2014). Similarly, the report also emphasises the fact that every citizen of the country should enjoy security against all types of risks from birth to death in a holistic manner. According to the development of the country's economic level, i.e. Keynesianism, thus continuously expands the scope of the state's responsibility and increases the level of national welfare (Qian, 2005).

The Beveridge Report laid the foundation for the establishment of the welfare state in Britain in the post-war period, and the Labour government enacted the National Health Act and the National Insurance Act in 1945 and 1946 respectively, and passed the National Assistance Act in 1948, although some provisions in some of the Acts varied considerably from Beveridge's recommendations

(Chin, 1992), it is undeniable that the Beveridge Report succeeded in transforming the UK from a unitary social assistance to a comprehensive welfare state.

5. Analysing native habitus in the development of social welfare policy through Bourdieu's theory of field and habitus

The development, reform and change of the British social welfare policy in the first half of the 20th century were changes in a specific historical and social environment. The driving forces of its development and change were diversified. Government reforms, policy changes, class conflicts, progress in social thinking, political factors and wars are all internal and external factors that have led to the continuous improvement and development of British welfare policy. From a sociological point of view, the interpretation of a particular social phenomenon, problem and social situation must be answered through sociological theories.

As the basic theory of Bourdieu's practical sociology, Bourdieu believed that every big social world is composed of different and diverse small social worlds. These small social worlds are spaces in which there exists an objective, inevitable and existential logic of their own, and these different logics inevitably interfere in other small social worlds (Bourdieu, 1992). Thus, the field itself is a structure that objectively exists as a link between different locations. Habitus, on the other hand, as a generative system resulting from the elaboration of the concepts of practice and belief, is itself meant to be a subjective disposition. A dispositional generative system that is unconsciously and persistently mastered in early human childhood. Thus habitus, as a stable and subjective being, is necessarily connected to the field in a mutually constraining way. The image of the field forms the habitus, which in turn shapes a fixed embodied bodily product in the field (Li, 2015). Thus field and habitus are capable of integrating and influencing each other, i.e. the field is the habitus and the habitus is the field. As a study of social policy, by integrating habitus into practical activities or thinking in the field, we can make the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity gradually merge and transcend its oppositional thinking, thus making connections within it and shifting from entity to relational theory.

5.1. Social welfare characteristics

Analysing the reasons for the changes in British social welfare policy from 1900-1950 through Bourdieu's generative structure theory, it is first necessary to look at overall social welfare as a field. This field of social welfare has the following properties:

- (1) Has multiple small fields, all of which are welfare policy and public service related (e.g. social assistance, welfare services) and play different roles in different locations
- (2) Different welfare domains have different logics, each with its inevitability. For example, the needs of the nation, the risks of poverty, health issues, social justice, national rights, etc.

5.2. Different social actors

Different social actors in the different niches are dynamic, self-determining and participatory.

- (1) Different welfare domains have different habitus, which are largely shaped by the different domains, but which in turn generate their presence in that domain.
- (2) The administrative habits that governments and policymakers follow in the design and implementation of welfare systems are gradually reformed and reconstructed through their habitus.
- (3) Welfare policy habitus plays a significant role in shaping and improving the welfare field.

6. The essence of welfare policy change

Based on the above field characteristics, the essence of our analysis of welfare policy change in the first fifty years of the twentieth century lies in the influence of the habitus of governments and policymakers in policy formulation and implementation on the overall change in welfare policy. In

turn, this influence feeds back in the form of people's behaviour, which shapes the habitus of new policymakers in the improvement of the field.

It is therefore not difficult to see that early welfare policy, due to the amended Poor Laws in England in the mid-19th century, although aimed at the relief of the poor, was not effective in helping the poor in the early days due to its overly harsh nature. After 1900, the social problems in Britain were frequent, and the change of the poor law was produced under the influence of several fields and social trends. The welfare policy in the UK was not established at this stage and therefore the creation of policies or adjustments to policies in the early years came from influences within the whole welfare field. This has led to the habitus within the UK welfare field that the UK government and policymakers have responded to the demands of the public in a largely moderate way in terms of the content, form and values of the policies. This is even though there have been occasions when people have felt that government legislation has been of little or no substantive help to them, such as the apparent disinterest of working-class organisations in many of the early measures taken under the auspices of the Liberal Party to establish the welfare state (Coronin, 1991).

In the early twentieth century, in the face of sudden social deprivation of all kinds, the British government and policymakers developed a path dependence on the use of the Poor Law. This path dependence is due to the habitus in the early days. With the diversification and complexity of social problems in Britain, the original social assistance model can not meet the needs of the people, a variety of welfare needs of the people and the government's contradictions, and the habitus caused by the early relief field, the people's habitus to fight for their rights, which affects the generation of welfare field, but also makes the British government for the use of welfare policy habitus has changed, from the original monolithic to a diversity of benefits dominated by the National Insurance Act. This led to a significant change in the welfare field, with the generation of multiple small welfare fields and the UK government's logic of a gentle incremental push to make indigenous welfare policy reforms effective in the UK. The economic depression caused by the two world wars also increased the demand for a stable and secure state, where every citizen should enjoy social protection from the state and the government. This also implies that in terms of the welfare policy field - habitus, policymakers have more to do with the local habitus factor in setting up policies, which also shapes the welfare field, thus transcending the class issue and removing the dichotomy. It also reinforces the fact that no welfare field can exist without local welfare habitus.

7. Conclusion

This paper adopts Bourdieu's generative structural theory of field-habitus theory approach to analyse the welfare policy reforms from 1900-1950, and finds that in the welfare policy field, the native popular consciousness generates habitus that has a great influence on the welfare policy reforms. The evolution of its system proves to a certain extent that class differences do not affect the revision and establishment of welfare policies to a large extent, and also has important research value and significance for the welfare policy formulation of other countries.

At present, China is in a period of social transition, and the reform of the social welfare policy system can not only promote social harmony, but also stabilise the social order, and play a great role in the survival and life protection of Chinese nationals. Referring to the social welfare policy reforms in the first half of the 20th century can be an effective reference for the transformation of China's social welfare policy system. Improvement of the policy according to China's local social habitus and welfare habitus will make China's welfare policy better.

References

- [1] Baert, P., & Da Silva, F. C. (2010). *Social theory in the twentieth century and beyond*. Polity.
- [2] Beveridge, W. (1942). *Social insurance and allied services* (Vol. 942). HMSO: London.
- [3] Bourdieu, & Nice, Richard translator. (1992). *The logic of practice / Pierre Bourdieu; translated by Richard Nice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- [4] Boyer, G. R. (2018). *The winding road to the welfare state: Economic insecurity and social welfare policy in Britain*. Princeton University Press.
- [5] Brundage, A. (2002). *The English poor laws, 1700-1930* (p. 151). Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- [6] Chin, T. (1992). The Beveridge Report and the Development of British Social Security. *Journal of Social Science and Philosophy*, 81(11), 321-382.
- [7] Croll, A. (2013). Strikers and the Right to Poor Relief in Late Victorian Britain: The Making of the Merthyr Tydfil Judgment of 1900. *Journal of British Studies*, 52(1), 128-152. doi:10.1017/jbr.2012.61
- [8] Cronin, J. E., & Weiler, P. (1991). Working-Class Interests and the Politics of Social Democratic Reform in Britain, 1900–1940. *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 40, 47-66.
- [9] Ding, J. D. (2002). The British State Pension System and its Implications. *Journal of Huazhong University of Science and Technology (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)* (03),.
- [10] Lees, L. H. (1998). *The solidarities of strangers: The English poor laws and the people, 1700-1948*. Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Li, Hong Yang. (2015). *From Social Assistance to National Welfare* Master's Thesis, Heilongjiang University
- [12] Qian, N. (2005). *History of Modern Social Welfare Thought* (2nd ed., Vol. 169).
- [13] Thane, P. (2011). The making of National Insurance, 1911. *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 19(3), 211-219. Retrieved Nov 20, 2023, from <https://doi.org/10.1332/096278911X582651>.
- [14] Whiteside, N. (2014). The Beveridge Report and its implementation: a revolutionary project?. *Histoire@ Politique*, (24), 24-37.
- [15] Whiteside, N. (2015). Who were the unemployed? Conventions, classifications and social security law in Britain (1911-1934). *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 150-169.
- [16] Zhu, Weijue. (2005). Beyond the subject-object dichotomy - Bourdieu's sociological epistemology and his concept of "habitus". *Zhejiang Journal* (03).