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POLITICS AND WELLBEING

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Abstract

This paper sets out why perspectives from the politics discipline are important to the study of wellbeing and highlights the potential contribution of the discipline. It briefly charts the rise of wellbeing in politics and policy before outlining the nature and scale of current initiatives at both international and national levels. It then reflects on the terrain of the politics discipline, before illustrating the relevance of the discipline to understanding, defining and measuring wellbeing in contemporary politics.

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Introduction

This paper sketches out the terrain for a new collection we are editing on *The Politics of Wellbeing: Theory, Policy and Practice*. Why another book on wellbeing? In the past decade or so, numerous volumes have been published on this topic, signifying the dramatic rise of interest by academics, policymakers and civil society in the concept of wellbeing. Considering this wealth of literature one would think there was little new to say on the subject. Our book, however, addresses an important gap in wellbeing studies: it provides new perspectives from the discipline of politics. In this paper, we set out why we think this is important and highlight the potential contribution of the politics discipline.¹

¹ We are extremely grateful to Sarah Atkinson and Louise Reardon for their valuable comments on a draft of this paper.

Wellbeing² has become a focus for political debate and a goal of public policy in many countries in recent decades. This focus on wellbeing has intensified in the wake of the financial crisis as politicians and policy-makers have sought new narratives and new policy frames that challenge the dominance of GDP growth as an indicator of progress and a lodestar for policy. A number of academic disciplines, economics and psychology in particular, have been influential in both shaping and seeking to explain developments in wellbeing measurement, while the disciplines of sociology and geography have provided important critical perspectives, highlighting the differentiated understandings and lived experiences of wellbeing between and within nations. However, the politics discipline has been relatively silent on developments, whether on conceptualisations of wellbeing for public policy purposes, new measures of progress, or attempts to bring wellbeing into policy. This may be understandable to the extent that developments have only relatively recently moved from a focus on concept and measurement to the policy arena. However, their emergence is the outcome of a process that has been gestating for some time, and one that has ‘transformative potential’ in politics and policy (Kroll 2011, 1). The absence of contributions from scholars of politics has left important theoretical and empirical insights largely absent from debates: an issue that our book seeks to address. In short, the book will be the first collection in the field of wellbeing that places the concerns of the politics discipline centre stage.

As Crick (1982, p18) observed, ‘Politics arises from accepting the fact of the simultaneous existence of different groups, hence different interests and different traditions’ and is the process through which such differences might be articulated, contested and reconciled. Thus, politics is concerned with the processes through which power and resources

² In some contexts this is more accurately described as happiness or quality of life. However, we employ wellbeing here as shorthand to describe a multidimensional phenomenon that incorporates ideas of happiness and quality of life. More nuanced discussions of these concepts and how they inter-relate will be explored in the book and different authors may prefer different terms.

are distributed: ‘who gets what, when, how’ (Lasswell, 1936 np). Central to understanding political processes is the interplay of the 3 ‘I’s – ideas, interests and institutions. Ideas refer to basic values of different groups or individuals, the notion of interests identifies winners and losers from different options, and institutions are the fora through which the reconciliation of differences is sought (Weiss, 2001; Rosendorff, 2005).

According to Aristotle, oft-quoted in contemporary texts on wellbeing, political science is the ‘ruling science’ in furthering the good life, for it ‘legislates what must be done and what avoided’ and provides the legitimisation for all other knowledge (*Nicomachean Ethics*, i2). Such an attempt to impose a hierarchy of disciplines is inappropriate in a modern world that increasingly values interdisciplinary endeavours to understand complex issues. Moreover, the politics discipline draws on a range of other fields – economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, psychology and sociology among them – and has been described as ‘an eclectic discipline’ (Flinders 2013, p151). Yet it is clear to us that the relative dearth of commentary from politics scholars is detrimental to the study of wellbeing. The discipline can offer important perspectives on how the issue of wellbeing is framed according to different values, highlight who stands to win or lose from contrasting approaches and different policy options, and deepen understanding of the institutional processes through which decisions are taken. Such themes are at the intellectual core of this volume.

While the intellectual themes of the book are located primarily in the discipline of politics, it incorporates contributions from scholars in cognate disciplines whose concerns overlap and from those whose research and practice concerns specific policy developments. The book explores key themes and issues in a range of settings – international, national and subnational/substate. Through this combination of intellectual inquiry, empirically-grounded research, and investigation across different settings, our book aims to provide fresh insights

and develop new lenses through which to understand the rise and significance of the wellbeing agenda.

In the next section of this paper we chart the rise of wellbeing in politics and policy before outlining the nature and scale of current initiatives at both international and national levels. Following that, we reflect further on the terrain of the politics discipline, before illustrating the relevance of the discipline to understanding, defining and measuring wellbeing in contemporary politics. We conclude by outlining the contributions to this volume.

Wellbeing in politics and policy

Debates on the ‘good life’ and the role of individuals, society and the state in promoting this date back at least as far as the ancient Greeks. Similarly, attempts at measuring wellbeing ‘can be traced back as far as one likes’ (Allin and Hand 2014, p3). The focus of our book is on contemporary political interest in wellbeing: the second of two such waves of interest since the Second World War (Bache and Reardon, 2013 and 2016; see also Scott, 2012). In the 1960s there was an intensified focus on the conceptualisation of objective quality of life conditions and the creation of instruments to measure them, giving rise to the so called ‘social indicator movement.’ This was driven by growing dissatisfaction with GDP as the dominant measure of progress as post war prosperity created conditions for materialism, and also inequality, to increase (Offer, 2000). These first-wave critiques of GDP, and the legitimisation they were given by senior politicians in the US and across Europe led to the development of new social surveys in a number of advanced industrial countries (see Bache and Reardon, 2016, p41). However, the impact of these developments on politics and policy was limited for several reasons, including the difficulties of marshalling a vast array of diverse statistics to inform coherent policy goals; a now well-recognised challenge of bringing evidence into policy. These initiatives lost momentum in the 1970s in the context of recession and changes in the dominant

political ideologies and associated social welfare discourses in key nations involved (e.g. US, UK).

The second and current wave of political interest emerged in the 1990s, driven by environmental challenges, increased understanding of the drivers of wellbeing and growing acceptance of the value of measuring subjective wellbeing³ for public policy purposes (Bache and Reardon, 2016). In advanced liberal democracies, the idea that globalisation, hyper-consumerism and greater individual freedom are leading to social breakdown became popularized⁴, alongside a growing awareness of increasing social inequalities. Momentum gathered pace as the effects of the financial crisis gave rise to a new level of discontentment with neoliberal economics leading to protests in many countries and increasing concern about the impacts of economic inequalities and concentration of wealth (see for example Stiglitz, 2012 and Piketty, 2013). In this context, wellbeing emerged as a new paradigm of development alongside a range of other alternatives, including the more established notion of sustainable development, bringing with it a new industry of wellbeing measurement to challenge the dominance of GDP as an indicator of progress (Scott 2012, p4). Initiatives within international organisations such as the OECD, EU and UN, combined with the entrepreneurial activity of think tanks, academics and statisticians to accelerate the flow of ideas around wellbeing across and within national boundaries.

The Commission established by President Sarkozy of France on the *Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress* (CMEPSP) (2008-09) - which is variously referred to as the CMEPSP, Sarkozy Commission, Stiglitz Commission, Stiglitz-Sen Commission or Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission - accelerated developments in a range of places. In the context of growing economic crisis, its brief was to:

³ Subjective wellbeing refers to people's own assessment of their lives.

⁴ Helped by popularised academic works like Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000)

‘...identify the limits of GDP as an indicator of economic performance and social progress, including the problems with its measurement; to consider what additional information might be required for the production of more relevant indicators of social progress, to assess the feasibility of alternative measurement tools, and to discuss how to present the statistical information in a more appropriate way’

(CMESP 2009, Executive Summary).’

This commission reported in 2009 and has since been an important reference for many national wellbeing initiatives.⁵ The report identified eight components of wellbeing: material living standards; health; education; personal activities including work; political voice and governance; social connections and relationships; environment; security - economic and physical (CMEPSP 2009). It argued that ‘All these dimensions shape people’s well-being, and yet many of them are missed by conventional income measures’ (CMEPSP 2009, p15). Of particular significance was the argument that subjective wellbeing indicators should be used alongside more established objective indicators in guiding policy

Predominantly, the second wave has manifested through the development of new frameworks for measuring wellbeing – at international, national and subnational/substate levels. At the international level, important developments include the EU’s *GDP and Beyond* initiative, the OECD’s *Better Life* global platform, and the UN’s *Sustainable Development Goals*. National initiatives are particularly prevalent in EU and OECD countries (e.g., Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Mexico, New Zealand and the UK), but also beyond (e.g., Bhutan,

⁵ The report’s authors state clearly that they were not trying to reach consensus on what quality of life means but to identify where ‘credible measures’ could be established and they also explicitly recognise that their ‘attention is limited to areas where members of the commission had specific competencies’ and where ‘available indicators allow... assessment’ (CMEPSP 2009, p143). For a discussion of national responses to the CMEPSP see Bache and Reardon 2016.

Ecuador, Morocco and The Philippines). The many diverse initiatives across the world often reflect different cultural, intellectual and political drivers and traditions: a diversity that is reflected in the contributions to our book. Subnational/substate cases include Scotland and Wales in the UK, the US states of Santa Monica and Vermont and the Chinese province of Guangdong, but there are numerous others. Indeed, in 2014 it was estimated that the number of new measurement frameworks at various levels was in excess of 160 (Allin and Hand, 2014, p258). Accompanying the introduction of new measures have been various attempts to bring wellbeing into policy (for an overview of developments in measurement and policy see Bache and Reardon, 2016).

Yet while there is increasing agreement that GDP growth is not fit for the purpose of measuring societal progress, different actors emphasise different themes in seeking to challenge its dominance: some are most concerned with promoting happiness or mental wellbeing (Layard, 2005a), for others it is social justice issues (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009) and for others it is to foreground concerns around environmental sustainability (Jackson, 2011) and so on. Indeed, the CMESP controversially argued that sustainability and wellbeing should be measured separately; an issue that is symptomatic of an ongoing struggle to ascertain whether the development of wellbeing indicators should be regarded as an integral part of, or even a precursor to, sustainability measurement or as a separate endeavour to avoid confusion (see Michalos, 2011; Scott, 2012).

In short, during the last decade in particular, many governments and other organisations have made a significant investment to conceptualise, study and measure wellbeing for public policy purposes. This is matched by the rising number of academic works on the subject and the endeavours of the public, voluntary and private sectors to use the concept to promote various messages, behaviours or products. As White (2015, p5) states ‘the diversity, volume and velocity in references to wellbeing suggest a cultural tide that sweeps together a range of

different interests and agendas.’ In terms of public policy, she categorises the complexity of the field into four main approaches to wellbeing: a macro approach to widen the scope of government beyond GDP as a marker of progress; a focus on personal behaviours; a focus on life satisfaction or subjective wellbeing to evaluate policy (which may include attribution of monetary value to aspects of wellbeing); and a fundamental challenge to current political economies. Necessarily then, these different ‘faces’ of wellbeing and their advocates are sometimes in tension and the field of wellbeing encompasses a wide range of perspectives. In this context, the idea of wellbeing is mobilised in different ways, by different groups, to support different purposes. As such, it is crucial to explore ‘what and whose values are represented, which accounts dominate, what is their impact and on whom’ (Scott 2012, p4). Such issues put the study of politics centre stage.

The terrain of the politics discipline

While it is commonplace to refer to a single discipline of Politics, this masks an array of traditions and sub-fields⁶ and contestation is at the heart of the discipline. So, while there might be broad agreement that the discipline focuses on ‘how politics works’, there are wide differences on what constitutes the terrain of politics. This includes the definition of ‘the political’ and whether that appertains to certain formal institutions and processes, or also to wider social structures and systems and to personal life, as feminist political theorists and others have argued. Similarly, while there is a common foregrounding of questions of power, this concept is understood and studied in very different ways: e.g., more or less observable ‘faces’ of power, ‘power to’ and/or ‘power over’, discursive power, power as an entity which is ‘held’, power as a relation between people, power as a complex and dynamic system and so on. Further,

⁶ Such a list would typically include comparative politics, governance and public policy (or public administration), international relations, (international) political economy and political theory.

there is a distinction between an empiricist focus on ‘what is’ and normative theorising on ‘what should be’. Moreover, while some variants of political science might focus on understanding the operation of political systems primarily to help solve problems, more critical perspectives might approach those problems by deconstructing those very systems to challenge problems manifest in established ways of thinking and doing and raise questions about the boundaries of legitimate action.

A number of themes and contributions that are central to disciplinary debates in politics have clear relevance for current debates on wellbeing and raise important questions. These include:

- *The political theory underpinnings of different approaches to wellbeing.* How might these provide insights into the coherence and consistency of definitions of wellbeing and the related approaches to measurement and policy? And how, therefore, might such insights be of benefit to policy-makers and civil society in taking forward the agenda?
- *Power relations in wellbeing theory, policy and practice.* How might we understand the different capabilities of various actors to access and affect developments and thus recognise how and why some interests dominate while others are marginalised?
- *Dilemmas relating to legitimacy and accountability in defining, measuring and bringing wellbeing into public policy.* How might insights on this inform debates on the appropriate role of the state, society, market and individual?
- *The nature of governance, public policy and policy change.* How might analysis help identify the barriers to policy change, the most effective policy instruments, the most relevant and appropriate mechanisms, and the challenges of implementation? How might they inform debate around the most effective governance arrangements and the potential trade-offs between accountability and effectiveness? How might they help identify the most relevant and appropriate participants in governance arrangements?

- *Systemic variables that shape the prospects for wellbeing in different contexts.* How might we understand cultural and ideological differences in the way that wellbeing is conceived, measured and brought into policy in different settings?
- *The processes by which ideas and norms relating to wellbeing flow from one place to another.* Why are some states keen to advance this agenda while others are not? What are the dynamics of international organisations, processes or networks in which the agenda is being shaped and reshaped?
- *The different framings of wellbeing that may be used to support particular regimes, groups or narratives.* How might a study of these help understand the potential for wellbeing to bring about political change?
- *The relationship between wellbeing developments and current and alternative frameworks of political economy.* How might understanding this shed light on the extent to which the wellbeing agenda can be advanced within different political economy approaches and the prospects for shifts in approaches to accommodate wellbeing more effectively?

These different foci, and their associated different methodologies, indicate the rich and diverse potential contribution of the discipline to academic research and policy debates on wellbeing and also provide the context for the chapters of the book. We cannot do justice here to the many and varied theories, questions, approaches, and methodologies that comprise the discipline – or indeed in the book as a whole. Rather, in order to illustrate our general argument, in the remainder of this paper we illustrate how contributions from politics connect with contemporary debates on how wellbeing should be understood, defined and measured for public policy purposes: issues central to the field.

Political Theory and Wellbeing

In contemporary debates on wellbeing in advanced western liberal societies, traditional western philosophy has unsurprisingly dominated. Ideas tend to be divided broadly into ‘hedonic’ and ‘eudaimonic’ accounts of the good life, which we discuss below. We then review briefly some critiques regarding the limitations of these ideas and offer some comments on how political theory can contribute further insights. While theoretical scholarship in general might draw attention to different conceptions of wellbeing, *political* theory specifically relates ideas about wellbeing (or the good life) to the nature and role of the state. Central to this is an examination of the relations between the state, society and the self. How does a theory of an individual good life, for instance, connect with political ideologies and state imaginaries, political structures and institutions, political processes and decisions?

Current discussions about wellbeing in public policy draw heavily on certain accounts of the good life that find their roots in ancient ethical theory, which focussed particularly on the relationship of virtue (*arête*) and happiness (*eudaimonia*) (Annas, 2002). For the ancients, *arête* did not hold quite the same meaning as contemporary ideas of virtue. It is often translated as ‘excellence’ and used to describe skills, good habits and the development of practical wisdom, although this does not preclude morality from being a central component. The term *eudaimonia* is strictly translated as ‘blessed with a good spirit’ but more commonly translated by classicists as ‘happiness’ or ‘the good life’ (for a discussion of the meanings of these terms see Rabbås *et al.*, 2015; Annas, 1998 and 1993). Across different classical schools of thought *eudaimonia* was seen as the highest good or ultimate goal in life, but theories of how to attain this differed: for Aristotelians, *eudaimonia* was enacted (partly) through the development of character and intellectual virtues, which were constitutive of living a good life; for Epicureans *eudaimonia* was achieved through cultivating skills and knowledge to pursue pleasure and avoid pain, and so these virtues were instrumental to a good life; for the Stoics, *eudaimonia*

was underpinned by the development of resilience to life's vicissitudes, and so vital was this virtue that it could be seen as being sufficient for happiness (Rabbås *et al.*, 2015; Annas, 2002 and 1998).

Aristotle's particular idea of how to achieve *eudaimonia* has been the one to define the term in contemporary discussions and is often linked to the idea of 'flourishing'. His writings in *Nicomachean Ethics* argue for a perfectionist conception of what constitutes *eudaimonia* that is, put simply, the fulfilment of a person's highest human potential through the cultivation of a number of virtues, which include: courage, justice, moderation, honesty, greatness of soul, hospitality, cultivation of knowledge and perceptiveness, proper judgement and practical wisdom (Nussbaum 1993, p245-6). These virtues would help ensure 'appropriate functioning' in each sphere of life (Ibid, p250). As mentioned above, this fully flourishing account of a human life as the highest good is described in contemporary wellbeing discussions as eudaimonism and set in contrast to hedonism.

Classical hedonistic accounts date back to Aristippus and later to Epicurus, who developed the Epicurean school of philosophy. These theories place emphasis on the maximisation of pleasure and the freedom from pain (*aponia*). These are not, as oft misunderstood, unbridled attempts to satiate bodily desires, but based on an ethical theory that pleasure is the highest good and the proper aim of human life. This is achieved through the cultivation of knowledge about what makes life pleasurable for each individual and the freedom to pursue activities accordingly.

Hedonism arguably had its fullest and most influential expression in the ideas of the 18th Century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1996 (1823)):

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. (Bentham 1.1)

Bentham identified pleasure as the ultimate goal, and often synonymised this with ‘happiness’ (good feeling) or ‘utility’. Central to his Utilitarian ideas was the belief that individuals are the experts of what makes them happy, and so they should be free to exercise their own preferences in order to maximise this. He believed that ‘The business of government is to promote the happiness of the society, by punishing and rewarding’ (VII, i) and the state could help wayward individuals to develop better habits (which reduced pain to themselves or others), but the state had no business instructing people what their pleasures should be. John Stuart Mill⁷, whose text ‘On Liberty’ is considered the founding document for liberalism, took Utilitarianism and, influenced by the Romantic period, extended it, ‘giving richness of life and complexity of activity a place they do not have in Bentham, and giving pleasure and the absence of pain and of depression a role that Aristotle never sufficiently mapped out’ (Nussbaum 2004, p62). He distinguished between two ideas of happiness: a feeling or state of pleasure (the Benthamite version) and a more complex one around notions of growth and development in which there was a role for learning from suffering. He is often accused of elitism, as he was keen to help the unschooled masses to appreciate higher pleasures: he wanted everyone to develop their full potential, although he believed in the freedom not to.

Utilitarianism and Liberalism underpinned 18th /19th century classical economics that was based on the notion that humans are rational, self-interested beings who will seek to maximise their own happiness given enough freedom and resources. Equalising opportunities to partake

⁷ Mill was Bentham’s Goodson. For an introduction to Mill’s key works see *Mill* (Eds. Mark Philp and Frederick Rosen) (2015)

in a free market would provide the best mechanism to allow people to maximise their income, using that to satisfy their preferences. This concept of *homo economicus* dominated ideas of welfare, putting a high emphasis on income and therefore national economic growth and later the measurement of GNP/GDP. This idea has been the touchstone of liberal economic theory for the last century (Dolan et al., 2006) whether underpinning the ‘embedded liberalism’ of Keynesianism between 1945 and 1975 or the ‘revolution’ of neoliberalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Harvey, 2005, pp11/1). The hedonic tradition is reflected in current wellbeing debates, with high profile advocates such as the ‘new Utilitarian’ economist (and member of the UK House of Lords) Richard Layard (2005a, 147) suggesting that ‘happiness should become the goal of policy’.

As the limitations and impacts of Utilitarianism and associated economic theories came under increasing scrutiny in the latter part of the 20th Century (see Seaford, forthcoming), Aristotle’s work received renewed attention. His perfectionist view of wellbeing resonates in the contemporary work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, among others, whose ‘capabilities approach’ developed in the 1980s and 1990s sets out a theory of what is necessary to enable everyone to live a good life, should they so choose it (see Austin, forthcoming).

Capabilities theory was first proposed by Sen as a critique, on the one hand, of the traditional utilitarian approach to welfare economics and, on the other, in response to a Rawlsian theory of justice based on equitable distribution of goods (a bundle of rights and resources) important for wellbeing (Rawls, 1971). As Sen and others have pointed out, a Utilitarian focus on happiness (often measured as individual life satisfaction or subjective wellbeing) alone is problematic, because people have ‘adaptive preferences’, meaning their expectations of life are linked to their experience of life. Consequently, a poor person may be satisfied with less (Elster, 1983). Sen also argued that social justice frameworks such as Rawls’ should be focussed on the freedoms people have to achieve quality of life, rather than on the

technical possession of rights or resources (Sen 1980): he often gives the example of a disabled person needing more resources than an able bodied person to achieve the same quality of life and therefore equal distribution of resources may miss important social justice issues. Sen proposed instead that we should take account of the freedoms people have to 'lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value' (Sen 1999, p87). Through its focus on freedoms and opportunities the capabilities approach takes into account the different ways that individuals can be constrained in their choices by economic, social, political and cultural factors (Robyens, 2005). Sen's approach has influenced development policy and its related measurement frameworks in particular, not least the development of the Human Development Index, which combines measures of GDP, life expectancy and education to compare countries across the world (see Bache and Reardon 2016, pp56-7). Sen was also one of the key authors of the CMEPSP report (see above).

Although seen as the two distinct camps of wellbeing theory, eudaimonic and hedonistic beliefs on the good life are just two strands of philosophy deriving from earlier Socratic teachings that attempted to bring ancient philosophy away from a focus on the cosmos and down into the realms of politics, combining both a theoretical and practical philosophy of life. Less well cited in contemporary wellbeing literature are the other schools of thought such as stoicism, although this too has had an impact on contemporary debates. Founded by Zeno (333-261 BC) and later developed by Epictetus, Stoicism (as developed by Epictetus) was to live dutifully in accordance with nature and to seek freedom by training oneself to control one's reactions to life rather than trying to control life (Irvine, 2009). Stoicism can be seen reflected in developments in psychology leading to the emergence of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which has become such a feature of the debate and response on mental wellbeing in the UK (Evans, forthcoming). The positive psychology movement has been influential on initiatives aimed at educating citizens to improve their wellbeing through a series of personal

behaviours and ways of thinking and the teaching of personal resilience skills in schools (see Ecclestone, forthcoming).

These philosophies echo in contemporary debates on wellbeing, particularly in relation to the conceptualisations of the good life, the appropriate role for government and on how far citizens should be responsible for their own wellbeing. The resurgence of interest in these ancient theories in late modernity may be symptomatic of a profound questioning in an increasingly precarious context of neoliberalism. However, these debates are in danger of missing two vital aspects central to a politics of wellbeing: firstly, and most obviously, a focus on the political implications of these conceptualisations of the good life and what the rise of different approaches to wellbeing in policy means to relations between the individual, society and state; and secondly, the inclusion of ideas from the many and diverse traditions of thought that may have something additional or alternative to offer, for example, from the Islamic ‘golden age’ or from feminist political thought.

On the first aspect, the explicit inclusion of contemporary political theorists can bring abstract theoretical explorations of wellbeing into dialogue with key concepts in politics, such as the state, power, liberty, and democracy. Wellbeing debates could benefit from considering contemporary political theory that, for example, investigates the effect of neoliberalism on everyday life (for instance see Brown, 2015). Without considering the relationship of wellbeing to the wider economic and political context, the use of abstract wellbeing theories in policy discussions, however well meaning, risk speaking past everyday experiences and struggles. Moreover, they do not provide guidance on how to effect political change to advance wellbeing

On the second aspect, there is an ongoing questioning of the ‘canon’ of western philosophy by feminist and postcolonial theorists (among others) that, as Stuurman (2000, p148) argues, is reflective of an ‘ongoing debate about the broader question of the history, identity, and political future of that elusive, pseudo-geographical concept we are in the habit of calling “the

West.” In an increasingly globalised world where political, cultural and social norms are shifting rapidly, it is right to ask if these long-standing philosophical traditions offer the inclusivity and methodological robustness to understand increasingly complex and diverse politics of wellbeing. Aristotle is often cited as the first philosopher who theorised extensively on the ‘good life’ in relation to political systems and advocated an involved citizenry. However, his functionalist account - that each person has a natural role in life and must fulfil that to the best of their ability in order to flourish - worked very well for the citizenry, namely the male political elite, but not so well for women, slaves and immigrants who were politically disenfranchised. This has led some political theorists to question whether this philosophy of wellbeing can sustain the inclusion of marginalised groups, or if it is inherently connected to discriminatory ways of seeing the world (for example see Okin, 1979) and as such should be viewed as a theory of how to maintain the political status quo. Ahmed critiques the contemporary focus on happiness in the West for not recognising the ways in which the goal of happiness has perpetuated social norms that disadvantage women, gay and black people (Ahmed, 2010). This challenge is rarely tackled in detail in contemporary policy documents on wellbeing (at least in most EU/OECD countries), which often do not engage with power relations and which tend to promote wellbeing as an unproblematic gender and culture neutral idea.⁸

In addition to the above concerns, some argue that contemporary discourses of wellbeing promote a reductionist view of wellbeing and focus attention away from the social and political basis of wellbeing onto an individual model where people are responsible for their own wellbeing (Edwards and Imrie, 2008; Scott, 2015). For example, in their critique of the new agendas of wellbeing in the context of disability in the UK, Edwards and Imrie argue for

⁸ However, countries such as Ecuador and New Zealand have made attempts, prompted by the political demands and protests of indigenous people, to reflect plurinationalism and biculturalism respectively in their accounts of national wellbeing.

a wellbeing agenda that does not ‘propagate the idealist ways in which we see the world but, rather, addresses the way that it is’ (2008, p339). They give an example of why this is important, suggesting that by promoting a self-actualization view of wellbeing these discourses signal a ‘retrograde step’ from the concerted attempts of disability rights lobby groups that have tried to ‘shift interpretations of disability from individualised, biological, conceptions based on internal limitations, to ones situated in the socio-structural relations of an ablist society’ (2008, p338). They are among a number of critics who claim that in current wellbeing measurement discourses and practice ‘far too little attention has been devoted to theorizing about how socio-political conditions determine quality of life’ (Flavin et al., 2011, p265).

Thus, individual versus social or collective notions of wellbeing in current debates can be located within long-established and contemporary political debates. They are shaped by metatheoretical dispositions that not only direct attention to the issue of who has responsibility for wellbeing, but also ‘what matters’ for wellbeing (individual or social) and – the topic of our next section - how this should be measured.

Measuring ‘what matters’?

How wellbeing is understood in different traditions of political theory necessarily shapes approaches to measurement. To illustrate, a simple distinction between wellbeing as happiness (hedonic tradition) and wellbeing as flourishing (eudaimonic tradition) leads to the search for different indicators. In current developments, those in the hedonic tradition tend towards emphasising subjective wellbeing indicators focusing on individuals’ perception of their levels of happiness, anxiety, or life satisfaction (e.g., O’Donnell et al., 2014; Layard, 2005). By contrast, those in the eudaimonic tradition tend towards a broader range of both objective and subjective indicators (e.g. Anand et al., 2009). Beyond this stylised distinction are more nuanced critiques of current approaches to measurement.

A growing body of work critiquing contemporary wellbeing measurement highlights the tensions between different ontological and epistemological assumptions about wellbeing in different academic and policy research communities. For example, while the authors of the CMEPSP (2009) report outlined a set of domains of wellbeing that must be fulfilled for human flourishing, critical perspectives on this approach to wellbeing, which Atkinson (2012) calls the ‘components approach’, argue for more awareness of the context-based, relational and dynamic nature of wellbeing (for example Atkinson, 2012; Scott, 2012; White, 2015). Therefore, many critics resist these fixed views of wellbeing as applied to atomistic individuals because they fall short of understanding the detailed everyday relations in which wellbeing is negotiated by people in relations with each other. Scott (2012) critiques the dominance of certain types of evidence (experimental and quantitative studies where randomised controlled trials are seen as the ‘gold standard’) in the generation of wellbeing data and calls for deeper thinking at policy level for how in-depth qualitative, participatory and context-dependent research on wellbeing can also be included to inform policy. In addition, the UK wellbeing agenda, for example, has been critiqued for its focus on individual responsibility for, rather than structural determinants of, wellbeing relative to other EU countries (Tomlinson and Kelly, 2012) and the way that individual wellbeing is used instrumentally to promote other policy agendas (Scott 2013). Much of this critique points to ideas of participatory democracy and the public policy challenge of incorporating many ideas about wellbeing, from different groups, in different contexts, to inform one set of national measures.

In addition to the critiques on the conceptualisation and construction of measures there are also considerable difficulties for statisticians and policy makers who want to promote wellbeing within government and who argue for the legitimacy of wellbeing measures to be used in policy discussions or policy evaluations. Many debates remain over the technicalities of measuring wellbeing relating to: using objective or subjective indicators; the reliability and

validity of data;; creating multidimensional frameworks or a single indicator; how much weight should be given to the different domains of wellbeing. As well as the bigger philosophical debates, these technical debates have political and policy implications, particularly regarding the legitimacy and validity of using measures. The decision by governments to give attention to indicators creates a set of ‘evidence’; but how this evidence is legitimised and taken up in policy is complex. This is a well-researched area as is the difficulty of finding a clear impact of different forms of evidence on policy (see for example Weiss 1999). Ethnographic studies of policymaking create a picture of the complex and contingent nature of the evidence/policy interface (Wilkinson, 2012; Stevens, 2011; Rhodes, 2011). Wilkinson’s (2012) study of UK government, for example, describes the way that information flows connect with policy as ‘organised chaos’. Stevens (2007) argues for an ‘ecological model’ to understand the use of evidence in policy, and in his view it is not the survival of the fittest piece of evidence but the fittest carrier of that evidence which counts, arguing that powerful groups both ‘trawl’ for and ‘farm’ evidence. Such work by political scientists can contribute to understanding how wellbeing evidence can influence policy through theoretically-informed approaches of the practical policy-making.

The drive in policy interest to ‘measure what matters’ - and to legitimise this activity - has meant that several governments have carried out consultation with the public about what matters to them⁹. This is viewed as a crucial part of the process, acknowledging that statistical indicators are not neutral either in the way they are constructed or how they are used and so stakeholder consultation offers the potential for political legitimacy, either national or locally.

⁹ For example, on the UK see: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160105160709/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/get-involved/consultations/archived-consultations/2012/measuring-national-well-being-domains/consultation-on-proposed-domains-and-measures-of-national-well-being--responses-received.pdf>. On Canada, see: <https://uwaterloo.ca/canadian-index-wellbeing/>

Although there seems to be contradictory evidence regarding whether participatory or direct democracy may actually be constitutive of wellbeing (Dorn *et al.*, 2007 and 2008), a substantial body of evidence finds that participation in the development of measures and indicators increases commitment to them. What is clear is that including stakeholders in wellbeing measurement has implications for the skills and resources of governments to consult transparently, systematically analyse responses and effectively build the responses into decision making around measurement. In the case of the UK Measuring National Wellbeing public consultation, recent work suggests this remains a challenge (Oman, 2015; Jenkins, forthcoming).

Measurements of wellbeing reflect not wellbeing per se but rather they reflect standard (and dominant) practices of academic inquiry, statistical production and policymaking processes. They reflect how knowledge is created and accessed by and for whom, when and where and how it is 'smoothed' into evidence for decision-makers (Stevens, 2011). It is important to acknowledge the considerable constraints on policy actors and analysts working within government, as well as the considerable difficulties inherent in the project of measuring wellbeing for public policy, but a range of different views exist in society not only about what matters for wellbeing, what it constitutes, but also what sort of entity it is.

Such issues remain central to real-world debates on how to address wellbeing in public policy. On the one hand, there is the search for legitimacy and effective ways of promoting wellbeing through policy; on the other are intractable controversies about the selection of indicators and the efficacy and cost effectiveness of different policy options. Added to this are ontological disputes about the appropriate role of the state. Thus, wellbeing is an agenda that can excite, frustrate and antagonise in equal measure. Yet the scale and pace of activity suggests this is an issue that is likely to be on political agenda for some time, and - because contestation is at its heart - one in which politics will be central to its destiny.

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