

Problems with the Living Wage Movement

Benjamin A. Sachs-Cobbe

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Problems with the Living Wage Movement¹

Abstract: The Living Wage Movement (LWM) should be evaluated on whether it enables more people, or people willing to work, to lead a decent life. But, first, to the extent that it succeeds in getting some workers up to that threshold it is likely to make it harder for other workers to do the same. Second, to the extent that it succeeds in getting some workers up to that threshold it is likely to make it harder for non-workers to do the same. The LWM is likely afflicted with these problems to a greater extent than is the Minimum Wage Movement.

Key Words: living wage, minimum wage, social movements, labelling, unemployment

1. Introduction

The idea that employers should pay their employees a living wage has recently been picking up steam in the U.K. and U.S. The U.K.-based Living Wage Foundation, founded in 2011, has gotten 8772 employers to make a living wage commitment.² There is no such influential, centralized organization in the U.S., but the various regional organizations are making a difference nonetheless: around 120 American cities have, in the last 40 years, adopted a living wage ordinance.³

Here, then, we have a case in which a social movement has gotten results. And it would be hard to argue that the results aren't morally good. Nevertheless, I believe that there are two strong reasons to not support the living wage movement, and this essay is an attempt to elucidate those reasons. The two reasons are grounded in the empirical evidence about how social movements build support and achieve results and consequently I cannot offer a strong conclusion at the end of this essay, as the evidence is suggestive but not dispositive; there is no exact science of social movements. That being said, the conclusion towards which my arguments *point* is that the option of supporting the living wage movement is morally dominated by the option of supporting the minimum wage movement.

In §2 I define my terms and defend a view as to how first-order ethics and social science should be brought together in an ethical analysis of the living wage movement. Next, in §3, I argue that the fairest basis on which to pass judgment on the living wage movement is by reference to its effectiveness in bringing about an increase in the proportion of people full stop, or people who are willing to work, who are able to live a decent life. Finally, in §4-5, I bring in the social science. I argue in §4 that the living wage movement is beset by a problem I call The Hazards of Moralized Labeling, which can be expected to impair its ability to so increase, and that the minimum wage movement does not. And in §5 I argue that the living wage movement confronts The Social Movement Disablement Problem, which can be expected to further impair its ability to so increase, whereas the minimum wage movement confronts that problem to a lesser extent. §6 concludes.

2. Methodology and Defining Terms

2.1 Methodology

In this sub-section I clarify two things about this essay's methodology.

First, I acknowledge that I will be investigating the LWM in isolation, asking what difference the LWM is likely to make. This might seem an uncharitable way to assess the LWM, since LWM supporters don't intend for the living wage to operate in isolation but rather intend it to work *in concert with the welfare state* so as to achieve certain ends.

However, this essay is building towards a moral comparison of the LWM with a parallel minimum wage movement, and given that a living wage and a minimum wage are each a kind of wage floor there is no unfairness in asking whether, holding fixed the features of the welfare state, it is morally better to support one kind of wage floor or another.

Second, this is a work in non-ideal theory in that it embodies the following two features identified by Valentini (2012:665-62) as characteristic of non-ideal theory:

- It assesses the LWM not on whether it can deliver a certain morally good outcome for everyone, but rather on how much progress it can make toward that end.
- It doesn't compare the LWM to some ideal social movement that, given human nature, could never actually get off the ground; it compares the LWM only to an already-existing social movement.

2.2 Defining terms

In this essay I define a 'living wage' as that hourly wage, whatever it is, that an individual needs to earn such that if she works full time then she earns enough money to support a certain minimum standard of living for the members of her household. And I will use the term 'Living Wage' as a name—note the capital letters—for a particular wage floor. Which particular wage floor? The wage floor that the associated Living Wage Organization is advocating and attaching the 'living wage' label to.

A Living Wage Organization (LWO), in turn, is hereby defined as a group of people whose immediate goal is an increase, whether through new legal regulations or through voluntary employer commitments, in the proportion of employers who pay their employees "a living wage". Note the quotation marks: they indicate that whether a group of people qualifies as a LWO is determined by the words it uses to advocate what it's advocating. While the words used in defence of a philosophical thesis don't matter, since we can stipulate our words to denote whatever we want them to denote, this essay isn't a critique of a philosophical thesis; it's a critique of a philosophically informed social movement, and in the context of social movements the words matter, or so I will argue in this case.

Finally, I define The Living Wage Movement (LWM) as the aggregate of the efforts of all LWOs.

I define 'Minimum Wage' as the wage floor that the associated Minimum Wage Organization is advocating. A Minimum Wage Organization (MWO), in turn, is hereby defined as a group of people whose immediate goal is to increase, whether through new legal regulations or through voluntary employer commitments, the uptake of a certain wage floor to which that MWO attaches the 'minimum wage' label. Finally, The Minimum Wage Movement (MWM) is hereby defined as the aggregate of the efforts of all MWOs.

3. On What Basis Should the Living Wage Movement be Ethically Judged?

The LWM aims to increase the proportion of employers paying a wage that is sufficient to enable a full-time worker to support a certain minimum standard of living for the members of her household.^{4,5} To turn that aim into an ethical benchmark we need to determine whether it is more charitable to the LWM to understand that aim as being derived from a consequentialist, or instead a non-consequentialist, ethical standard.

If we were operating within a consequentialist framework, we would need to identify a plausibly good outcome at which the LWM can be seen as aiming by trying to increase the proportion of employers paying a wage that is sufficient to enable a full-time worker to support a certain minimum standard of living for the members of her household. And the obvious outcome would be people realising a certain minimum standard of living.

If we were operating within a non-consequentialist framework, we would need to identify some non-outcome-related moral consideration in favour of increasing the proportion of employers paying a wage that is sufficient to enable a full-time worker to support a certain minimum standard of living for the members of her household. The immediate difficulty for

such a project is that the act that we're trying to find a non-consequentialist argument for is an act *defined in terms of its outcome*—i.e., the outcome in which a full-time worker is able to support a certain minimum standard of living for the members of her household. Granted, it can sometimes be plausible to propose that there is a non-consequentialist case for an act that is defined in terms of an outcome. One immediate example is the idea that parents are duty-bound to give their children sufficient nutrition, shelter, etc. Notice, however, that it is the parents who are responsible for the child having whatever nutrition and shelter needs s/he has, which means there is a special connection between the parents and the outcome at which they are (purportedly) duty-bound to aim. By contrast, employers bear no special connection with their employees needing certain things in order to lead a decent life. If instead of living wages we were talking about, say, *non-exploitative* wages, it would be a different story. For one can define 'non-exploitation' in terms of fair remuneration for work done, and employers are indeed specially connected to the work their employees do (obviously!). But The Living Wage is always calculated in a way that's blind to considerations of exploitation, so we can set this aside.

We should return, then, to the consequentialist standard, under which the LWM is seen as aiming at an outcome in which more people are able to support a certain minimum standard of living for the members of their household. Before moving forward, the standard needs to be precisified in two ways.

First, we need to know what the 'minimum standard' is. A "decent" life is an oft-used standard by parties to the LWM (Ryan 1920; D'Arcy and Finch 2018:9; WageIndicator⁶; The Global Living Wage Coalition⁷; The European Commission⁸),⁹ so in the interest of judging them on their own terms I will use that expression from here forward.¹⁰ Now a more difficult question: Which people? Since wages are for workers only, perhaps the idea at the heart of the LWM is that it is morally good for *workers* to be able to lead a decent

life. This is the most reasonable way to understand Ryan's (1920:Chs. II, IV; 1942:Ch. XX) argument that there is an entitlement or a right to a living wage; Ryan seems to believe that the entitlement/right is grounded in doing work.¹¹ But this argument doesn't apply specifically to workers in the sense that's relevant to a living wage—i.e., wage earners—as they apply just as well to, e.g., people doing childrearing work. It's true that considerations of exploitation apply in a special way to wage earners, but, again, The Living Wage is not the same thing as The Non-Exploitative Wage.

To fix this problem we could understand the LWM as being based on the idea that people who are *willing* to work should be able to secure a decent life. At one point Ryan (1942:270-4) expresses his entitlement/right argument this way. Alternatively, we could understand the LWM as being based on the idea that people, full stop, should be able to secure a decent life.

I conclude from all this that it is fair, and in fact charitable, to impute to the LWM the goal of increasing the proportion of people, or of people who are willing to work, who are able to lead a decent life.

4. The Hazards of Moralized Labeling

This section highlights a labeling problem for the LWM. I begin, in §4.1, by arguing that the LWM could never bring about a situation in which all workers are paid enough to be able to lead a decent life. Of course this, on its own, is no objection to the LWM; we're doing non-ideal theory here, after all. But I will argue in §4.2 that there is indeed a problem for the LWM, namely that that the more workers for whom it makes the difference between them being able to lead a decent life and not being able to lead a decent life, likely the harder things will be on those for whom it does *not* make that difference. This is because the LWM

is likely to render those remaining people—the workers who remain unable to lead a decent life—to some extent invisible. I argue in §4.3 that there is no such problem for the MWM, which means that there is likely one problem for the LWM that does not apply to the MWM.

4.1 *The Personalization Challenge*

As I said just now, my first contention about the LWM is that it will be unable to ensure that all workers are able to lead a decent life. And the reason for *that*, I will argue, is that there is no unproblematic way for an LWO to choose an amount of money per hour of work to stand as The Living Wage.

4.1.1 *How to Set a Living Wage*

The obvious way for an LWO to set a living wage is by reference to a decent standard of life. This means identifying the amount of money per hour of work that, assuming one works full time, one would need to support a decent life for the members of one's household and then designating The Living Wage as that amount of money.

As to how to identify that amount of money there is, again, an obvious answer: by reference to the cost one would incur in securing the goods essential to attaining a decent life for the members of one's household. As it happens, this is how nearly every living wage-supporting theorist advocates doing it and how nearly every LWO actually *does* it.

4.1.2 *The Personalization Challenge*

Now the challenge: In order to calculate that cost, one has to pick a reference household type, as do Living Wage Ireland¹² and the Global Living Wage Coalition¹³, or calculate a weighted average across types, as does the Living Wage Foundation.¹⁴ But that means that the only workers for whom earning the living wage will make the difference

between being able and not being able to provide a decent life for themselves and their families are families that are of the reference type or correspond to the weighted average of types (Linneker and Wills 2016; Werner and Lim 2016:439,440; Bennett 2014:49-55; Weldon and Targ 2004:87; Healy, Pekarek, and Fells 2021).

4.1.3 *Two Potential Answers to the Challenge*

There are three ways to respond to The Personalization Challenge—two that are possible only in ideal circumstances, and one that is possible in the actual world. Because this is an essay in non-ideal theory, in principle only the third of the three responses is relevant here. But exploring the first two will be instructive anyway, and I do so now.

First, since the problem is that there are a variety of household types, each with its own set of expenses, an obvious response to the Personalization Challenge for any given LWO is to make its Living Wage variable, with different Living Wages indexed to different household types.¹⁵ Of course, the only version of this solution that holds out the promise of solving, as opposed to merely mitigating the problem, is for each worker to be paid the wage that, given her particular expenses, would be sufficient to enable her to achieve a certain standard of living for her household.

This is a perfectly good solution in theory, I admit; but for this essay the important question is: How would this solution play out in the actual world? If the idea is that each employer-employee pair sits down together to work out a wage that is most appropriate to the employee's expenses, then we know the answer to this question: it would mean a return to the workplace of the era before minimum wage laws, unions, and civil rights reforms. In those days the price paid for giving employers enough liberty to tailor wages to needs was enabling them inadvertently to engage in invidious wage discrimination. In such a system, the labourer lacks the prerogative to keep confidential from her employer the details of her

personal life, such as whether she is married and whether she has children. And there is no room for collective bargaining, because even the most fine-grained agreement that could be struck in collective bargaining would be one that provided for wage adjustments based on common demographic variables.¹⁶ (Consequently, we should not be surprised to hear—as we often do¹⁷—that the relationship between trade unions and LWOs is somewhat fraught.)

Second, an LWO can respond to the Personalization Challenge, in an ideal world, by setting its Living Wage so high as to ensure that no one who earns it remains short of the amount of money necessary to lead a decent life. But the price of setting a Living Wage so high, surely, is seeing it not taken up. In fact, according to Luce (2015:77), most of the LWOs that have been successful in effecting an increase in the proportion of employers paying the Living Wage have set the Living Wage at such a low rate that a person earning it would, if her family were of the reference household type (or weighted average of types), *fail to be pulled above the poverty line*.

This brings us to the question of how to deal with the Personalization Challenge in our world. Given what was said above, LWOs must rest content knowing that if they manage to increase the proportion of employers who pay the Living Wage, they achieve an important good even for those workers that are not thereby enabled to lead a decent life—the good of enabling them to lead a better version of a sub-decent life. There is nothing more that can be asked of them.

4.2 The Hazards of Moralized Labeling

In 4.1 I argued that the LWM faces The Personalization Challenge. But one could reply on behalf of the LWM that a personalization challenge is nearly inevitable for any movement trying to better the lot of the people or of some subset thereof. I admit the truth of this. However, what the LWM does, in contrast to other social movements that confront a

personalization challenge, is promise the public that it faces no personalization challenge. It makes this promise in virtue of its labeling regime, and therefore its labeling regime and the Personalization Challenge constitute a particularly toxic combination. Here I explain in virtue of what the LWM makes this promise and what makes for its toxic combination with the Personalization Challenge.

To begin, it's worth making the obvious point that whatever amount of money per hour of work The Living Wage is—which, of course, varies with which LWO is using the expression—it is a wage with a name; a labeled wage: 'The Living Wage'. I begin (§4.2.1) by discussing another labeling regime—the labeling of food as “organic”/“non-GMO”/“natural”. As we will see, there are serious problems with such labeling, which I call the 'Hazards of Moralized Labeling', and I argue in §4.2.2 that we should expect those same problems to result from the use of the 'living wage' label because of the Personalization Challenge.

4.2.1 *Problems with “Organic”/“Non-GMO”/“Natural” Food Labeling*

In this sub-section I review the published literature on consumer and business attitudes to three common labels that appear on food: “organic”, “non-GMO”, and “natural”. Regarding consumer attitudes, the literature reveals three troubling phenomena. As to business attitudes, the literature reveals one troubling phenomenon. I discuss each of these four phenomena in turn below.

1. Poor Understanding. The best documented of the four phenomena is the consuming public's poor understanding of the meaning of these labels. A mountain of empirical studies, including a literature review (Schleenbecker and Hamm 2013) and a recent meta-analysis (Massey, O'Cass and Otahal 2018), confirm that there are widespread basic

misunderstandings about food that has either the “natural” or “organic” label.¹⁸ Among the most interesting mistaken beliefs:

- “natural” entails more healthful¹⁹
- “organic” entails more healthful²⁰
- “organic” entails better tasting²¹
- “organic” entails more environmentally friendly²²

* * *

I am now about to present two further features of consumer attitudes to “organic”/“non-GMO”/“natural” food labeling. However, in order to understand them, one has to realize that consumers respond to these labels in a moralized way. Differences in people’s professed values and beliefs about right and wrong predict differences in their attitudes to foods that have a “non-GMO” label (Saher, Lindeman and Hursti 2006) or an “organic” label (Arvola et al 2008; Saher, Lindeman and Hursti 2006; see also the studies cited at Hoogland, de Boer and Boersema 2007:49). I am not aware of any studies examining the same question vis à vis the “natural” label, though one would expect that the results would be similar given how frequently the naturalistic fallacy is committed in everyday moral discourse.

Once we understand that consumers process these labels in a morally loaded way, the following two aspects of consumer attitudes to those labels become much less surprising:

2. Polarized Evaluative Thinking. Eden shows that consumers have a natural affinity for polarized evaluative frameworks when it comes to food, which results in them sorting foods, without prompting, into the categories of “good” and “bad”. When prompted to think about food labels, specifically, consumers adopt a slightly more sophisticated binary—“natural/raw/unprocessed food” vs. “science/technology/processed food” (Eden 2011:184)—which is then made compatible with the original binary by thinking of

“natural/raw/unprocessed food” as good and “science/technology/processed food” as bad. Bray and Ankeny (2015:196) reach a similar conclusion.

3. Absolution of Responsibility. Not only do consumers, as already noted, often have little idea what “organic” food labels denote, they’re also often aware of their own lack of understanding (Abrams, Meyers and Irani 2010:370; Janssen and Hamm 2011:37-8). Furthermore, there is evidence that consumers who are aware of their own non-understanding of labels that they take to be signalling something ethically important, such as the three labels under discussion here, simply give up (Hjelmar 2011:341; Bray and Ankeny 2015:195). That is, they absolve themselves of the moral responsibility to make an *informed* ethically laden choice based on the complexities of the situation and manage to find ethical contentment in having made a decision based on inadequate information and a simplified, binary ethical framework (see above re: “polarized moral thinking”) (Bray and Ankeny 2015:196).

* * *

Thus far I have discussed three aspects of the consumer attitude to “organic”/“non-GMO”/“natural” food labeling; I move on now to presenting a feature of the commercial attitude.

4. Co-optation. It’s well-documented that foods labeled “organic” attract ‘price premia’—i.e., are marked up by comparison with their conventional counterparts (see the studies cited at Golan et al 2001:160-1). This provides an incentive for co-optation, whereby large firms use their size and influence to water down the standard that determines what foods can be given which label until their own food, little changed from its previous form, becomes entitled to the label. This has already happened with regard to “organic” labelling in the U.S. according to Jaffee and Howard (2010). Crucially, they report that it has happened with respect to “Fairtrade” labelling as well, and in fact there are a wealth of studies indicating that the Fairtrade system doesn’t improve the wages of coffee growers.²³

This is significant if consumers associate the “Fairtrade” label with a certain wage standard—something that Fairtrade International claims is demonstrated by its own research.²⁴

4.2.2 *The Relevance of Food Labeling to LWOs*

The lesson of §4.2.1 is that “organic”/“non-GMO”/“natural” food labeling in its current form is a perfect storm of (1) poor understanding, (2) moral intentions, and (3) commercial opportunism. People are confused as to how to act on their intention to buy foods that are more healthful, more natural and whose production causes less environmental damage, and meanwhile commercial interests are exploiting this confusion for their own unrelated ends. This is a case of (what I deem) *The Hazards of Moralized Labeling*—i.e. how things can go wrong when an uninformative labeling regime intentionally or unintentionally puts people in a mind to approach a decision as ethically laden.

In what follows I argue that each of these three elements of the perfect storm is likely to be present in the case of the labelling of a certain wage as a ‘living wage’.

1. Misunderstanding. I would venture to guess—and, admittedly, this is only a guess—that most consumers, when thinking about The Living Wage, will not realize that The Personalization Challenge applies to it. In other words, they will adopt the belief, about any certified Living Wage employer, that everyone working for that employer is earning a living.

2. Moral intentions. “The Living Wage” wears its supposed moral relevance on its sleeve. From the moment one reads or hears the label one knows exactly what the moral selling point of any employer to whom it applies is supposed to be: she pays her employees enough for them to earn a living. This, I suspect, has the effect, whether intended or unintended, of encouraging people to allow a particular moral commitment of theirs to influence their decisions as consumers—specifically, their commitment to support employers who pay their employees such a wage and/or to not support employers who do not.

3. Co-optation. As noted in §4.2.1, co-optation is already a well-documented phenomenon in the case of “Fairtrade” labeling, which is significant for our purposes if, as seems likely, consumers associated that label with a certain wage standard. This suggests that “Living Wage” labelling is ripe for co-optation. Crucially, it needs to be the case that employers who pay The Living Wage will be able to impose price premia for their goods and services.²⁵ Of course, this would require consumers to know which employers pay The Living Wage. That, however, is no challenge. There simply needs to be some sort of high-visibility emblem by which such employers can set themselves apart from the rest. And, in the U.K. at least, there is. The Living Wage Foundation has a well-known logo that it allows its accredited employers to make use of; this logo is a frequent sight in store windows.

This situation is ripe for opportunistic exploitation. The average consumer, when he or she learns that an employer has been accredited by or pledged to uphold some Living Wage regime, is not going to bother to find out what that wage is. Consequently, there is nothing preventing a group of employers from picking a wage they’re willing to use as their wage floor for their employees and calling it the ‘Living Wage’, creating an associated marketing apparatus (website, logo, stickers) and using it as the basis for new price premia for their goods and services without worrying whether their wage floor is related in any way to the principle of the living wage—i.e., without worrying whether that wage floor is set at a level that corresponds to the ability to attain a decent life. In fact, Living Wage labeling is *more* ripe for co-optation than is “organic”/“non-GMO”/“natural”/“Fairtrade” labeling. This is because the latitude for co-optation is proportional to the laxness of legal regulation,²⁶ and one would expect that Living Wage labeling will remain (as it currently is) totally unregulated. By contrast, there is already *some* regulation, in some jurisdictions, of “organic”/“non-GMO”/“natural” labeling. Such regulation falls under the broad ambit of

mandatory food labeling, which has been commonplace for decades and is totally uncontroversial.

4.2.3 *Why it Matters that the Hazards of Moralized Labeling Apply to the LWM*

One might ask, of course, whether there is any harm in the fact, assuming it is a fact, that Living Wage labeling regimes are poorly understood and ripe for co-optation. I think there is, but to see why we need to return to one of the highlighted consequences of “organic”/“non-GMO”/“natural” food labeling, namely absolution of responsibility. The rapid proliferation and success of LWOs idea in recent years (see §1) suggests that the moral ideal behind a living wage—that workers should earn enough to lead a decent life—strikes a chord with many people. That, in turn, makes it somewhat likely, though certainly far from guaranteed, that those people had been feeling a variety of reactive attitudes, such as resentment and guilt, about the fact that so many people were working full-time and were nevertheless unable to attain that style of life. Unpleasant though they may be for the person experiencing them, such reactive attitudes can be productive, in that they can spur people to take action targeted at the people and institutions responsible for the situation. But when labeling regimes encourage people to absolve themselves of responsibility for taking action on some problem—as I argued “organic”/“non-GMO”/“natural” food labeling regimes do—those otherwise useful emotions are eliminated. Whereas one can speculate that if those emotions *hadn't* been eliminated they would have been channelled into productive political activism on the issue, at least in some cases.

Oversimplifying a bit, to the extent that any LWO succeeds in bringing about a situation in which a higher proportion of employers pay their workers The Living Wage, that LWO, in virtue of its labeling regime, runs a risk of harming those left behind—the remaining working poor—by rendering them to some extent invisible.

4.3 *Comparison with the MWM*

I've argued thus far in §4 that the LWM cannot achieve its goal of a situation in which all workers are able to lead a decent life (§4.1) and that in virtue of its labeling regime it will encourage people to absolve themselves of responsibility for aiding the cause of those workers who still do not earn a high enough wage to support a decent life (§4.2). In virtue of this problem, the LWM comes off badly in a comparison with the MWM. The MWM has no moralized labeling regime. To call some wage floor 'the minimum wage' is not to propose that any moral problem will be solved in virtue of its universal uptake; in fact it is well known that being paid The Minimum Wage is no guarantee of being able to lead a decent life. Therefore, we should not expect people to be lulled into a false sense of moral security by knowing that everyone earns The Minimum Wage.

5. The Social Movement Disablement Problem

I turn now to identifying a second respect in which the MWM is morally superior to the LWM. I begin by offering case studies that illustrate how social movements can be disabled (§5.1) before moving on to explaining why we shouldn't be surprised if the LWM contributes to the disabling of social movements that work toward improving the lot of the non-working poor (§5.2). I then argue (§5.3) that this worry about the LWM applies to the MWM in only an attenuated way.

5.1 *Two Case Studies*

I begin by reviewing three historical cases in which social movements have arguably been disabled.

The Unemployed Workers' Movement in the Great Depression

In their classic 1977 book, *Poor People's Movements*, Piven and Cloward tell the story of the unemployed workers' movement in the U.S. during the Great Depression. The story begins in 1930-32, at the start of the Great Depression, when the U.S. was rocked by violent social upheaval in the form of grassroots protests by unemployed workers' groups. In that period the federal government refused to offer relief, and therefore it fell to state and local aid agencies to alleviate the suffering. They did the best they could, to the point at which they risked falling into insolvency. When Franklin D. Roosevelt took over the Presidency the federal government's approach changed radically. Notably, it immediately began to provide direct aid to the unemployed. When Roosevelt's New Deal finally got off the ground, in 1935, the Works Progress Act (WPA) provided jobs for masses of unemployed workers and the Social Security Act provided pensions for the elderly. It was just at this point, however, that the federal government decided to end its program of direct relief for the unemployed.

Moreover, at its peak, in 1936, the WPA employed only 2.5 million of the estimated 10 million unemployed. For the duration of The Great Depression mass destitution was the norm, with large numbers of people dying due to starvation and cold. And yet the unemployed workers' movement was largely muted during those years, which at first blush is quite surprising, given that their misery was only growing. Piven and Cloward offer this explanation: "The unemployed themselves were less of a threat, and so less had to be done for them. They were less of a threat partly because their numbers had been divided. Many of the most competent and able had been absorbed into the new work projects; some had been hired to work in the relief centres. Many others had been shunted to the residual state and local direct relief programs. The remainder were left with nowhere to turn, but their numbers were reduced and their sense of indignation blunted by New Deal reforms" (1977: 85).

The Movement for Racial Justice in Education in the U.S.

Blum (2016) recounts how the conversation around racial justice in education in the U.S. has gotten sidetracked since the U.S. Supreme Court upheld race-based admissions in its 1978 *Bakke* decision. Although it was the judgment of the *Bakke* court that increasing the diversity of the student body is the only constitutionally permissible rationale for race-based affirmative action in college and university admissions, Blum points out that in the mind of the broader public rectificatory justice has always been the main rationale for affirmative action in admissions, the idea being that such policies compensate for prejudicial underestimating of the intellectual abilities of minority applicants and for the injustices that cause minority applicants to be, on average, under-qualified relative to white applicants (2016:350-1). Blum goes on to argue that, as far as these issues of rectificatory justice are concerned, affirmative action in admissions is little more than a distraction. If we were really concerned to dismantle the racist system that ensures that white people are more likely to receive a college education than are blacks and Latinos, we would focus on two things: (1) reducing the cost, to the student, of attending college—a cost that has skyrocketed since the 1980s and now makes attending college financially unfeasible for masses of poorer people, among whom blacks and Latinos are disproportionately represented (2016:352-4); and (2) evening out primary and secondary educational funding such that blacks and Latinos become as likely as whites to emerge from their secondary education with strong qualifications for college and university admission (2016:354-5). Blum (2016:354) summarizes his point thus: "I worry that affirmative action is using up some of the energy and commitment available for

a concern about racial justice in higher education. I worry that the concerned community in question has been lulled by affirmative action, and perhaps by the public drama around it, into thinking that affirmative action is where the racial justice action is...”

The Peaceful Post-Communist Economic Transition

In his 2006 book, *Divide and Pacify*, Pieter Vanhuysse tells the story of the transition to capitalism in Poland and Hungary after their respective communist governments fell. During communism there was very little unemployment in these countries; this rapidly changed after 1989. The numbers here are staggering. In Hungary, for instance, the number of unemployed increased from 34,000 in March 1990 to 700,000 in February 1993. Naturally, experts predicted a mass wave of strikes and protests in response to the plight of this class. However, the anticipated social unrest failed to materialize in either country. Why? Both governments managed the problem by dividing non-workers into three groups. First, the elderly, who were entitled to an old-age pension. Second, “abnormal pensioners”—abled-bodied people who were essentially paid to exit the labor force. Third, the unemployed, who also received a pension, though a less generous one than the second group. According to Vanhuysse, this strategy blocked the formation of an effective workers’ rights movement by setting different groups of non-working people in competition with each other, with each group lobbying the government to give greater support to its own pension system (hence “Divide and Pacify”). Vanhuysse also points to the difficulty of getting non-workers organized: “Being employed structures life, creates a sense of individual and collective purpose, and enhances and widens social ties. It instills a sense of personal agency and of doing something externally valued. Importantly, the collective action capacity of people without formal jobs is reduced also by well-established social network changes” (2006: 55).

With these three case studies in hand, I move on now to extracting from them a set of generalizable lessons regarding how social movements can be disabled.

1. Beware the allure of social movements proposing non-disruptive solutions to fundamental, systemic problems. This is a point Piven and Cloward (1977:33) emphasize. Arguably, to alleviate the plight of the masses of people thrown into poverty by the Great Depression nothing less than a restructuring of society was going to do. The U.S.’s entry into World War II, with the requisite astronomical increase in public spending, finally did the trick. The New Deal, by contrast, was wildly popular²⁷ despite not delivering anything close to the fundamental changes that the unemployed workers’ rights movement, with its strong communist influence, was pushing; and yet, at the same time, it sapped that movement of its support. Similarly, according to Blum affirmative action in admissions amounts to nothing more than tinkering at the margins when it comes to the problem of racial justice in

education. And yet it seems to absorb energy that might otherwise be directed at the basic issues of educational funding that are the real problem. Addressing *those* problems, however, would require dramatic changes. Affordable access to higher education would have to be reconceived as something close to an entitlement (Blum 2016:353) and there would have to be an overhaul of the funding of primary and secondary schools, which are currently funded by local property taxes (hence the gulf in quality between the better and worse ones).

2. Likewise, beware the effects of well publicized policy. The New Deal was a triumph of government salesmanship. Americans knew what was meant by a “New Deal”: it meant the federal government was finally taking action to alleviate the effects of the Great Depression. Piven and Cloward propose that the widespread public awareness of the New Deal undermined support for other measures targeted at addressing those effects, because they now seemed superfluous. Meanwhile, affirmative action in admissions absorbs an outsize proportion of the American public’s attention as compared to its actual importance. Some of the credit for this must go to the colleges and universities themselves, many of which go out of their way to trumpet their affirmative action policies. All this attention to affirmative action might, as Blum proposes, inhibit progress on the less sexy issue of funding for primary, secondary, and tertiary education.

3. The least sympathetic are unlikely to be able to effectively sustain social movements composed of just themselves. Part of what crippled the unemployed workers’ movement in the 1930s, according to Piven and Cloward, is that the WPA extracted the most sympathetic people from the ranks of the unemployed by giving them jobs. The people who then remained unemployed were the least skilled and were thus seen as having the least to offer to society, and consequently the public had much less compassion for them.

4. The poor are unlikely to be able to create effective social movements when they are divided against each other. The New Deal dealt with different unemployed poor

people in different ways. For the elderly among them, it provided a pension through the Social Security system. For the most able-bodied among them, it employed them through the WPA. The rest were left to rely on direct federal aid and, when that was withdrawn, on the remaining state and local relief programs. This put different classes of poor people in the position of needing to focus their attention on different things: for the elderly, the generosity of their Social Security pensions; for the employed, the generosity of their wages; for the rest, the generosity of relief programs. Thus, the unemployed workers' movement was splintered and thereby rendered less effective. The same thing happened in post-communist Poland and Hungary, when non-workers were sorted into an old-age pension system, an abnormal pension system, and an unemployment pension system.

5.2 How the LWM Might Contribute to Disabling Important Social Movements

Each of these four lessons is relevant to the LWM, as I will now explain for each lesson respectively.

As to the first lesson, from the perspective of most well-off people the LWM is asking something only of other people—namely, employers. Any downstream effects on the well-off themselves are indirect and distant enough to remain out of mind. The LWM, thus, offers the well-off an irresistible deal: give us a piece of your heart (i.e. your voice, your political clout), but not a piece of your wealth, and we'll solve the problem of in-work poverty for you.

As to the second lesson, I argued already, in §4, that the idea of a living wage, with its clear moral overtones, is likely to have a widespread and powerful appeal to those concerned with the plight of the poor or specifically the working poor.

As to the third lesson, we need to take a close look at who is least likely to benefit from the LWM. The LWM (obviously) offers nothing to the non-working poor, leaving them

in the position of having to fight for their cause with less help from the more-sympathetic working poor as that latter class will have dwindled in number to the extent that the LWM achieves its purpose.

Finally, as to the fourth lesson, it needs to be pointed out that whatever the evils of the ever-more-widespread phenomenon of in-work poverty, it (to a certain extent) simplifies the task for progressive social movements, because it guarantees a situation in which a wide swathe of the population must rely for its livelihood on social programs, such as pensions, social insurance, and in-kind benefits. By contrast, once a large proportion of employers commit themselves to paying a given Living Wage, and thus, by implication, commit themselves to the idea that workers should earn enough to be able to attain a certain minimum standard of life for their household, the obvious strategy for workers looking to improve their lot in life will be to press for the Living Wage rate to be increased. Non-workers, meanwhile, will still be forced to adopt the strategy of pressuring the government to increase (or at least not decrease) the generosity of the various social programs. In this way, what might otherwise be a unified social movement, composed of all households in a precarious economic situation, is fractured into multiple groups that must then compete to dominate the agenda. This is a bad outcome because social advocacy is not zero-sum. All else being equal, agitators can accomplish more when united than otherwise.

These applications of the four lessons of the Great Depression and Economic Transition examples to the case of the LWM constitute, collectively, a defect in the LWM, the defect being that the LWM is likely to inhibit any social movement aimed, at least in part, at alleviating the plight of the non-working poor.²⁸ I label this The Social Movement Disablement Problem.

5.3 Comparison with the MWM

This brings us to the final question about the Social Movement Disablement Problem: Does it crop up in the case of the MWM just as it does in the case of the LWM? Yes, but only to a lesser extent, as I'll now explain.

Whether and to what extent any social movement or combination of social movements manages to ameliorate poverty depends in part on to what extent the public can be persuaded that poverty is a moral problem, since success at this persuasive effort would mean being able to harness motivationally powerful reactive attitudes, such as indignation and resentment, in the service of the poor. Supposing the public can be so persuaded, it then becomes important where the public locates the problem. Because 'The Living Wage' is, as I explained in §4, a moralized label, the LWM by its very nature encourages people to see the moral problem as located in the fact that some people are working full time and yet are unable to lead a decent life. In so doing the LWM displaces an alternate moral narrative, on which the problem is poverty full stop.

Both the LWM and the MWM, to the extent that they succeed in recruiting more members, are likely to displace some of the time and energy that might otherwise go into social movements aimed at alleviating poverty full stop. But only the LWM is likely to displace some of the moral outrage that might otherwise be targeted at poverty full stop.

On a final note, the fact that both the LWM and the MWM can be expected to damage the prospects of non-workers serves, hopefully, as a reminder, for those of us who do decide to support one or the other of these two movements, that we cannot outsource the role of government welfare, social insurance, and in-kind benefit systems—i.e. matching benefits with needs—to the wage system.²⁹

6. Conclusion

The problem of people not having enough income to lead a decent life can be divided into two parts: one part concerning the employed and another part concerning the unemployed. I have argued here that the LWM can be expected to damage the prospects of ameliorating both parts. As to working people who are unable to lead a decent life, the LWM if successful will thin their ranks but at the same time potentially render the remaining members of that class less visible and thus diminish whatever support there might otherwise be for alleviating their plight. This is the lesson of *The Hazards of Moralized Labelling*. As to non-working people who are unable to lead a decent life, because the LWM is subject to *The Social Movement Disablement Problem* it can be expected to make it more difficult for them to organize an effective social movement on their own behalf. The MWM, by contrast, does not have the first flaw and has the second flaw only to a lesser extent. Therefore, there is a case to be made that the option of supporting the MWM morally dominates the option of supporting the LWM.

The Hazards of Moralized Labelling apply in the case of the LWM, but not in the case of the MWM, on account of the fact that the ‘Living Wage’ label is moralized, while the ‘Minimum Wage’ label is not. This difference between the two social movements is also at the heart of why the *Social Movement Disablement Problem* applies with more force to the former than it does to the latter. Consequently, this essay serves to highlight the importance of word choice in the construction of social movements. The words that social movements choose to use when engaged in advocacy are critical; they determine how the movement’s message is received and how it succeeds in (or fails at) motivating those who have not yet joined the movement. Perhaps most importantly, they affect the stories the rest of us tell ourselves. Just about all of us, in liberal western countries, tell ourselves some story or other about why the phenomenon of in-work poverty persists. If you have a conscience, you can’t help it. Spreading the narrative, as does the LWM, that the problem persists because there is

some morally privileged wage floor that governments refuse to mandate and individual firms refuse to voluntarily take up, is a well-intentioned but potentially damaging strategy for alleviating the plight of those it is intended to help.

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² This is as of 27 October 2021, according to the Living Wage Foundation’s own tally, found at <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/accredited-living-wage-employers>.

³ This is according to a 2017 report by the Living Wage Foundation that can be found at https://www.livingwage.org.uk/sites/default/files/pi-living-wage-global-overview%20final%20draft_0.pdf.

⁴ Assuming everything else falls into place; the LWM is not under the illusion that the only thing that has to go right in one’s life in order to be able to attain a certain minimum standard of living for one’s household is earning at least a certain wage.

⁵ This, anyway, is the *headline* aim of the LWM. There is a widespread belief that the act of agitating for the living wage often delivers indirect benefits, and some LWOs have said that they prize these benefits as well.

Such benefits include increased pride and solidarity among workers and the creation of new coalitions that are then able to successfully agitate for other agendas aside from the living wage (Luce 2004, 2011:133, 2017:865-6, 868, 872; Devinatz 2013:131-33). Nevertheless, I will focus my attention solely on the LWM’s headline aim. This is because I am angling toward a comparison of the LWM and the MWM, and the MWM can deliver all the same indirect benefits as can the LWM, and just as effectively. Remember, *by definition* the LWM and the MWM differ only in the wording they use to express what they’re fighting for.

⁶ <https://wageindicator.org/salary/living-wage/faq-living-wage>. Last accessed 2 August 2018.

⁷ <https://globallivingwage.org/about/anker-methodology/>. Last accessed 4 March 2022.

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en. Last accessed 4 March 2022.

⁹ Another popular standard is a life in which one’s “basic needs” are met (Glasmeier/M.I.T. (<http://livingwage.mit.edu/pages/about> (last accessed 2 August 2018)); Pollin 2005:5-7; Ethical Trading Initiative (<https://www.ethicaltrade.org/eti-base-code/5-living-wages-are-paid> (last accessed 2 August 2018))).

¹⁰ From here forward I will use the expression “lead a decent life”, for brevity, in place of the cumbersome “support a decent life for the members of one’s household”.

¹¹ Ryan (1920:68; 1942:274-5) is sometimes explicit about this. For another living wage argument targeted narrowly at workers, see Harcourt (1997:194).

¹² https://www.livingwage.ie/download/pdf/living_wage_technical_document_-_2021.pdf. Last accessed 8 March 2022.

¹³ <https://www.globallivingwage.org/about/anker-methodology/>. Last accessed 8 March 2022.

¹⁴ D’Arcy and Finch 2018.

¹⁵ The Living Wage Foundation, for instance, sets one Living Wage for London and another for the rest of the U.K. (D’Arcy and Finch 2018). Hurley (2021) offers examples of regional variation in minimum wage policies in other European countries.

¹⁶ A fact that should be of concern to the Ethical Trading Initiative, which, in addition to being an LWO, also says on its website that “[f]ree and fair collective bargaining should be the basis for establishing living wage levels.” To suggest that the Living Wage for a set of workers could be the output of a process of negotiation—a view endorsed in Miller and Williams 2009—is to propose that we can get to the key ethical fact (which wage is sufficient for enabling those workers to lead a decent life) by employing the right procedure. In other words, it’s to propose, highly implausibly, that the living wage is a case of perfect procedural justice.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Luce 2005, Holgate 2009, and Prowse and Fells 2016. (I thank Calum Carson for pointing me to this literature.)

¹⁸ Hoogland, de Boer and Boersema 2007; Abrams, Meyers and Irani 2010; Eden 2011; Hjelmar 2011; Janssen and Hamm 2011, 2012; Zagata 2012; Bray and Ankeny 2015:195; Bryla 2016; Prada, Rodrigues and Garrido 2016, 2017; Hasimu, Marchesini and Canavari 2017.

¹⁹ Abrams, Meyers and Irani 2010;

²⁰ Abrams, Meyers and Irani 2010; Zagata 2012; Hjelmar 2011; Schleenbecker and Hamm 2013; Bryla 2016; Prada, Rodrigues and Garrido 2016, 2017; Hasimu, Marchesini and Canavari 2017; Massey 2018.

²¹ Massey 2018

²² Massey 2018.

²³ See Johannessen and Wilhite 2010 and the studies they cite at p. 539. It’s worth noting here that the “Fairtrade” label, like the “organic” label, attracts a price premium (Park 2018).

²⁴ <https://globescan.com/2021/06/23/social-environmental-values-increasingly-drive-consumers-choices/>. Last accessed 7 March 2022.

²⁵ This wouldn’t hold in cases in which the Living Wage is mandated for most or all employers through a government ordinance. Since my definition of ‘LWM’ is broad enough to encompass LWOs that target the adoption of such ordinances, I have to admit that the co-optation part of the Hazards of Moralized Labeling objection applies only to some LWOs.

²⁶ Though there is, of course, the phenomenon of regulatory capture, which is a major exception to this rule.

²⁷ <http://www.pewresearch.org/2010/12/14/how-a-different-america-responded-to-the-great-depression/>. Last accessed 8 August 2018.

²⁸ This is a worry only insofar as the policy changes needed to address poverty among non-workers are unlikely to occur in the absence of an effective anti-poverty social movement composed of the non-working poor themselves. Yet, as [name removed for purposes of blind review] has pointed out to me, grass-roots activism is not the only (and perhaps not even the ideal) potential pathway to significant action on the problem of poverty. I accept that this limits the power of my criticisms.

²⁹ I thank [name removed for purposes of blind review] for offering me the helpful ‘outsourcing’ language used here and thereby helping me to see the larger point made here.