



European Social Services in Transition – an Introduction

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In view of the fundamental changes in social policy witnessed in all types of welfare states *Social Work and Society* launches a series of papers that examines the effects of those changes on key “welfare regimes”. The series will test the hypothesis that globalization and the corresponding advance of neo-liberal social policy trends have brought about a convergence of the distinct welfare traditions which Esping-Anderson characterized as “welfare regimes”. Convergence would mean that the ability of national governments to steer particular policy courses according to political values has become severely restricted and that supra-national factors leave national governments little choice but to conform to economic “necessities”. This is indeed often being put forward as a means of justifying the dismantling of established social service structures and the introduction of market principles in their delivery.

However, there is now evidence after nearly a decade of experience with social service transformation processes that the combined impact of economic necessities and neo-liberal ideologies has not obliterated cherished traditions of social solidarity which nation states had fostered as a means of integrating divergent modern societies. It will be of paradigmatic interest therefore to examine in some detail how different countries have fared in recent years in adjusting to the new global economic order in terms of their welfare priorities. The countries to be examined in this series each represent a distinct position in the classifications of Esping-Andersen and Leibfried in as much as they can be regarded as archetypical for one of the key values and the associated institutions that are called upon primarily to guarantee social solidarity. In the case of Sweden, which will be the first example in the series, the key value is equality and in this social-democratic tradition the state is given a privileged position in the provision of welfare and social services. By way of contrast the liberal political tradition of the United Kingdom always prioritized the value of liberty thereby expecting individuals to be responsible for securing their welfare, which they are at liberty to do by choosing private or market institutions for their social security, leaving the state only a residual role to care for (and control) those unable to make private arrangements. The corporatist tradition, associated with the conservatism of Bismarck as the chief architect of private welfare insurance systems under state tutelage, is best illustrated by Germany where the balance of power between civil society and the state in welfare matters centres on the principle of subsidiarity.

To anticipate the key finding of this series, the elements of convergence, which can indeed be observed, are counter-acted by a surprising degree of resistance against drastic changes that manifests itself in considerable modifications and new compromises which the various actors involved managed to negotiate. Political arguments, direct action by elements of civil society, institutional lethargy and cultural pride all play a role in preserving a recognizable identity of welfare traditions, and it will be of great interest to social policy planners and social activists alike to study those factors in detail and to take courage for the negotiation of regionally and

nationally valid positions as social scientists gain a much more differentiated picture of the complex workings of globalization.

All this is not to advocate a return to splendid national isolation or indeed nationalism in social policies. On the contrary, studying social policy developments in the context of globalization reveals a dimension long overdue in social policy studies which is that there has always been an intricate dynamic exchange between different traditions, internationally and intra-nationally. Each position represented by different welfare states is a complex arrangement of different influences and is above all a dynamic phenomenon which can never be claimed as self-evident and simply given.

This series is therefore an attempt at introducing more leeway into the predictions of future developments in social service arrangements nationally and internationally. Learning from the example of other countries does not mean copying those systems selectively or wholesale. It means, however, being able to penetrate in the analysis of concrete national and local scenarios to the actual underlying dynamic factors and to develop the strategic tools for a more participatory process of transformation and solidarity-building.

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