



Philipp Sandermann (ed.)

# The End of Welfare as We Know It?

Continuity and Change  
in Western Welfare State  
Settings and Practices

Barbara Budrich Publishers



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# I. What Is a Welfare State, and What Is Welfare? Opening Reflections





*Philipp Sandermann*

## Change and Continuity in Western Welfare Practices: Some Introductory Comments

The title of this book refers to a phrase brought to public attention by the then U.S. presidential candidate Bill Clinton in 1992, when he announced his plan to “end welfare as we know it” (Clinton, 2006). In television advertisements and stump speeches across the country, Clinton popularized the phrase to emphasize his will to change the U.S. welfare system dramatically. Clinton’s phraseology and campaign proved successful: In 1996 he was eventually able to sign the U.S. welfare reform into law, and the slogan materialized as the concrete social policy of a new era.

Compared with the phrase that Bill Clinton took out into the world, the intention of this book is a rather modest one. The studies it assembles hope to contribute to a clearer understanding of how, where, and to what extent welfare has changed since the rise of the discursive patterns that Clinton could draw on for his project of putting an end to the “old” way of thinking and conducting welfare.

Much contemporary research in the social sciences insists that there have been fundamental changes in the structures of Western welfare states since the 1970s or 1980s, and that we can accurately describe this development as an “end” not only of welfare, but of the welfare state and every welfare state setting in general. The central goal of this volume is to offer a more nuanced and careful analysis of the phenomena associated with that stark thesis.

This is not to deny the fundamental programmatic changes that have emerged over the last thirty to forty years of Western welfare state development. However, the volume’s objective is to either support or challenge the thesis—but not simply take it for granted. Instead, we should carefully deal with it as what it is: a hypothesis. Whereas the academic debate usually accepts that the welfare state as it was known in the second half of the twentieth century has come to a definitive end, taking any further discussion of welfare state development from this starting point of seemingly assured knowledge and using such terms as “post-welfarism” and “post-welfare state” to underline the assumption, the authors of this book set out to examine the crucial question of change and continuity throughout their contributions as they ex-

plore various Western welfare state settings in more detail. They do so with a special focus on what we could heuristically call “welfare practices.”

Before going any further, the present volume’s understanding of the terms “welfare,” “welfare state,” and “welfare practices” must be introduced. Transparency in the use of these terms is evidently of great importance to any scholarly discussion on the issue, yet they are anything but well defined, and there is substantial variation in the ways they are generally used. What do we mean by each of these terms, and why does this volume prefer “welfare practices” as its broader framework? Why not simply use the term “welfare state,” or even just “welfare,” in line with the title quotation from Clinton?

A minimal consensus among all of the volume’s contributors may be formulated as follows:

1. The volume seeks to avoid reproducing an error that has often been made in recent decades of the transatlantic debate on Western welfare practices. This error is one that—interestingly enough—probably arose primarily out of translation processes, or at least from insufficient information on the different use of language on the two sides of the Atlantic Ocean, as Wacquant (2009) argues. When Bill Clinton promised to end U.S. welfare he was not literally speaking of putting an end to his era’s welfare state in general, but to a very specific part of it, using the phrase “welfare” to refer to particular welfare state benefits. The specific welfare state benefits under attack were not the benefits directed at the upper- and middle-class majority of the U.S. population, namely those provided by the social insurance system. Instead, the narrow goal of the U.S. welfare reform of 1996 was to reduce the costs entailed by public assistance programs that offered direct cash or noncash benefits to the country’s very poor. One could therefore say that Clinton’s welfare reform was not a welfare *state* reform at all (see Wacquant, 2009: 78) but, rather, radicalized the American welfare state by cementing the system’s “administrative and ideological split between ‘welfare’ and ‘social insurance’” (Wacquant, 2009: 49). Wacquant’s argument may also be applicable to the European welfare reforms witnessed during the 1990s and 2000s. Just as it seems that not the American welfare state as such but only its “welfare” component was reformed by the 1996 welfare reform act, there may have been similar developments in Europe at that time (see Palier and Thelen, 2010). These parallels can easily be identified, for example by looking more closely at the German reform labeled “Hartz IV.” This focused narrowly on reducing costs in insurance-based benefit for the long-term unemployed and means-tested “social assistance,” while implementing a more disciplinary treatment of its recipients (see Herz, 2012). It thus, strictly speaking,

aimed to produce a more distinct segmentation between public assistance benefits and those provided by the social insurance system.

2. That said, it would be even more unsatisfactory to reduce the academic debate on welfare states to such specific objects as spending programs, patterns of social expenditure, or (especially) social insurance benefits. Many traditional social policy approaches do just that when they discuss specific welfare states as individual cases or various welfare states in a comparative perspective (for example Esping-Andersen, 1990; Seeleib-Kaiser, 2008; Starke et al., 2008; Kaufmann, 2012), thereby establishing a worthwhile, yet very limited view on welfare states and especially on welfare state development. Spending programs, patterns of social expenditure, and social insurance benefits are certainly deeply embedded in the general model of Western welfare state settings, and perhaps even stand for specific ideas of welfare practices in certain national frameworks. However, they cannot stand for the entirety of what the approaches focusing on them are actually trying to describe. This applies to more than only questions of continuity and change, but those questions make it particularly problematic: If Wacquant's thesis, quoted above, is correct even in part, the mainstream academic debate on welfare state development is far from possessing satisfactory tools and concepts to adequately observe and measure Western welfare state development, since it focuses on data that is only incoherently connected to the changes still under way. On the other hand, it seems unjustified to ignore the facts delivered by traditional social policy research. That is to say, it is quite as unfounded to take the current rise in social expenditure in most Western welfare states as a sign of unbroken welfare state expansion as it is to diagnose a general end of the Western welfare states merely because of major changes in significant, but nevertheless specific, programs of welfare provision for the poorest, usually called "relief programs" in the tradition of the term "poor relief."<sup>1</sup> Additionally, contemporary welfare state research currently knows far too little about the empirical reality of public assistance and relief programs (among the useful exceptions is Leisering and Leibfried, 2001). Whereas we have quite substantial information about

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1 While the English phrase "poor relief," commonly used in the past, still seems adequate to describe this field of interest in academic terms, it is problematic to simply internationalize it and to transfer it to other national contexts. For example, the German term *Armenfürsorge* is a rather literal translation of "poor relief" and holds great historical significance for the expansion of the German welfare state—but today the term is almost meaningless as an item of welfare vocabulary, because the German welfare state has undergone a stepwise process of differentiation in its benefits (see Sachße, 1996), nowadays programmatically differentiating "the poor" into "young people," "disabled people," "elderly people," "people in special life situations," and so on.

the policy details and political contexts of recent Western welfare reforms, we know very little about what has actually changed in the lives of welfare professionals, institutions, and recipients due to these reforms. For example, even regarding U.S. welfare reform, the data looks quite different when we move beyond the narrow focus on the declining number of families on welfare since 1996 and the evolution of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program (see Daguerre, 2008), to take into account the growing number of poor people in the United States who benefit from disability programs (see Joffe-Walt, 2013). It is not far-fetched to assume that there could be a correlation between these data sets. Ultimately, there are reasons to believe that welfare reform may have changed little in the everyday life of poor people in the United States, apart from making them even more socio-economically disconnected from “normal life” because they must be labeled as disabled in order to receive at least some sort of basic income—bringing us back to Wacquant’s portrayal of the “ideological split” in the American welfare state. To clarify all this, much empirical research inevitably remains to be done. That research will need to focus on the general question of how far welfare provision and reception actually change on the concrete level when relief programs are redesigned, replaced by new programs, or even completely abolished. This question is methodologically ambitious, and it becomes even more complex when we factor in those programs that are based not only on direct cash benefits (which are relatively easy to measure) but on noncash services such as counseling or educational intervention.

3. In order to initiate a more differentiated academic discussion about the continuities and changes of Western welfare states, a first step will therefore be to broaden the scope of our investigation. Not only should the focus of social policy research move beyond those realms of welfare state provision that are relatively easy to research, namely spending programs, patterns of social expenditure, and social insurance expenditures; we also need to think carefully about the interrelations, commonalities, and differences between those Western welfare practices generally marked as “relief” on the one hand and the social insurance system on the other. Although the fields of relief prove quite diverse in their detail, and may thus be harder to explore, investigate, and compare, a scholarly discussion on Western welfare states cannot simply ignore these fields if it is concerned with the question of welfare state transformation. Once again, this is all the more true because there is good reason to believe that the area of relief is exactly where the greatest changes in Western welfare state set-

things are occurring. Moreover, it is both politically and epistemologically alarming when, through their research designs, researchers reproduce what Wacquant calls the split of Western welfare practices into “welfare” and “social insurance.” If they fail to reflect on that split, such research designs will replicate the ideas proposed by Western welfare states regarding “normal” and “abnormal” needs or social risks, along with the stigmatization that accompanies this distinction. And since the institutionalized gap between social insurance and public assistance benefits may be a feature not only of U.S. welfarism but of Western welfare state settings in general (see, for example, Letwin and Metzler, 2010: 75), research designs that re-institutionalize the gap in this way will fail to identify a very important contextual factor of their objective.

On the basis of these reflections, this volume adopts “welfare practices” as a heuristic term that represents a broader idea of Western welfare state reality, covering public assistance and social insurance alike. The contributors take different views on the development of Western welfare practices, depending on their particular focus and individual perspective. Nevertheless, every chapter in its own way reflects on both changes and continuities in the welfare practices it investigates, aiming thereby to sketch out a broader conceptual notion of Western welfare state settings more generally.

As a starting point, in the first chapter *John Clarke* raises the question of what a welfare state is (or perhaps was). He observes that, in the face of evidence to the contrary suggesting an unshakable growth in most Western welfare states, in recent decades some major studies have proclaimed the end of the Western welfare state model as such. Clarke regards this contradiction as the result of an argument that is consistently made in the academic discussion of Western welfare state settings: the studies identifying an end of the Western welfare state tend to construct the existence of the modern welfare state themselves, above all because they implicitly or explicitly place the concept of the Western welfare state on the same level as spending programs or patterns of social expenditure when they design their empirical research. They thus not only exclude significant parts of welfare provision, but also reduce to a minimum the diversity of meaning contained in the phrase “welfare state.” Rather than trying to resolve that diversity by means of a more prescriptive and “correct” definition, Clarke treats the concept’s instability, flexibility, and mobility as significant features worthy of our attention. He breaks it down into its two terms—welfare and state—in order to reflect on the problems of their meaning and the ways they have been potentially combined with a third term: nation. This is no mere academic exercise, aiming to define and understand national welfare states as a theoretical entity. To exemplify points

of national welfare state transformation, Clarke distinguishes between familization and privatization, which enables him to show how—on a discursive level—both the private in general and welfare practices in particular are currently being familialized. He concludes that this tendency normalizes a transfer of responsibility from the public sector to private settings, ideologically naturalizing bonds of affection, obligation, and future-oriented investment (for example in children), and can therefore be regarded as a dominant change in Western welfare practices that accompanies the patterns of continuity and growth highlighted early in his chapter.

Tendencies of familialization, responsabilization, and future-oriented investment are also the focus of *Sigrid Leitner's* contribution. However, she chooses a different perspective to reflect on continuity and changes in Western welfare state settings, and opens Part II of the volume with an explicitly comparative approach. Her chapter addresses the national contexts of child care and elder care in Austria, Belgium, France, and Germany—four examples of “conservative” welfare capitalist regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 38–41). Leitner asks how far the four cases differ in terms of their elder care and child care policies and their institutionalization of those policies. Introducing categories of familializing and de-familializing child care and elder care policies, she investigates how these four national welfare states have continuously institutionalized such policies as path-dependent, and describes how and why each country's programmatic and institutional reality has changed over time.

*Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore* provide the book's second comparative perspective. The two authors depict the rise (and fall) of the conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs that have spread to every continent of the world since the late 1990s, whereby they try to establish a more transnational approach to identifying continuity and change in Western welfare practices. But this very spread raises the question of whether Peck and Theodore's chapter is really about only “Western” welfare state settings. That question goes to the heart of their study. They pursue it by underlining the role of the World Bank and other multilateral development agencies that refer to utilitarian and responsabilizing ideologies in public assistance policy. These can certainly be defined in historical terms as “Western,” suggesting that the practices considered by Peck and Theodore are “Western” even when they do not occur entirely within Western welfare state settings. At the same time, the authors' discussion of CCT programs illustrates that even a powerful implementation of a programmatic design and its support through evaluation science does not in the end guarantee a particular way of conducting welfare practices. As the case of Brazil impressively shows, there is a difference between researching programmatic turns and researching their transfer into practice.