

Activation policies in Germany – in what terms do they re-define the normative foundations of the welfare state?

Sigrid Betzelt and Silke Bothfeld*

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Convenors: Pertti Koistinen and Ampara Serrano Pascual

The spread of the activation discourse coming along with a new orientation of employment policy strategies throughout the industrialised Western states has led to a re-definition of the *objectives* of our social security schemes: The aim to re-integrate people into work as quickly as possible has largely replaced the idea of providing social security to people at risk; paid employment – of what quality ever – is being considered as the most important mechanism of social inclusion.

At the same time, the promotion of atypical forms of work is considered as an appropriate strategy for enhancing labour market participation, which further contributes to a considerable shift of risks and responsibilities to individuals and private households. As a consequence, the constitutive principles of social security schemes – to compensate for risks and to provide social security – are undermined.

Social insurance schemes provide for full-time, continuously employed workers reliable income security over the life course on a relatively generous level and grant substantial individual entitlements that are not – like tax-financed basic allowance benefits – exposed to political and economic cycles. However, the crucial social policy objective of providing for reliable security (Franz X. Kaufmann) has been abandoned in aid of the objective of labour market participation.

Rather than enhancing the individual’s autonomy to cope with social risks, as it is politically argued in advocacy for activation strategies, they on the contrary delimit the citizen’s scope of choice and action. As such, activation strategies do not solely change the rules of the game on the individual level, but re-define the social contract in overall normative terms and the specific patterns of social citizenship in each country. We argue that this normative shift is not yet sufficiently addressed and debated in social policy research.

In our paper, we illustrate this issue by the example of the German labour market policy reforms of the past decade and argue on the basis of institutional and empirical data how reforms have modified the underlying norms of the traditional model of German social security provision which was based on the model of the (male) industrial core worker. In a broader than usual perspective, we show that this model has been questioned in the three fields of labour market regulation, income maintenance, and active labour market policies.¹

* Sigrid Betzelt is Professor at the Berlin School of Economics and Law, Silke Bothfeld is Professor at the University of Applied Sciences Bremen, Germany
Contact: sigrid.betzelt@hwr-berlin.de, silke.bothfeld@hs-bremen.de

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