Can individual autonomy be an appropriate normative concept to cope with present challenges of the welfare state?

Silke Bothfeld* and Sigrid Betzelt**

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*Prof. Dr. at University of Applied Sciences Bremen, silke.bothfeld@hs-bremen.de
**Prof. Dr. at Berlin School of Economics and Law, sigrid.betzelt@hwr-berlin.de
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Introduction

Although paid employment has always remained the main route to social security, social rights represent a necessary precondition for citizens’ social and political participation in Western democracies. By curtailing the detrimental effects of capitalist market processes, the public systems of social protection have—in the golden age of the Western welfare state—become the backbone of various social dynamics. However, since the 1980s the continuous expansion of the welfare state has decelerated due to increasing economic and fiscal constraints that challenge its functioning.

Most prominently, the paradigm of ‘social investment’, including the idea of ‘activating’ social policy programmes, has reinforced the emphasis on paid employment as the main mechanism of social integration for all adult citizens. This paradigm shift from ‘passive’ to ‘activating’ social security provision reflects a change in the norms and objectives of social security provision, as well as a changing work ethic (Dean, 2007). The targets of social policy have changed accordingly, with a shifting focus from poverty protection and status-security to the primary goal of labour market participation. In fact, the activation turn in labour market policy implies an incremental but continued reduction of social rights, such as increasing flexibility in terms of working time and wages, decreasing social benefits and a restructuring of the profile of active labour market policies. At the same time, activation often entails an expansion of certain social services that facilitate labour market participation of all adults, like public childcare or job placement services.

So, how can the fundamental change in the welfare state of the past two decades be adequately assessed and analysed? In the first section of this paper it is argued that a comprehensive concept of the citizen’s individual autonomy can exemplify the scope and depth of this change. This subsequently calls for a precise definition of the citizen’s autonomy and its interrelatedness with public action, which is developed in the first section. Autonomy, it is argued, offers a more complex and comprehensive concept for assessing social policy outcomes than many other normative notions such as ‘well-being’ or poverty protection as it refers to the individual’s identity, her/his role in society, as well as her/his interaction with the public sphere and the state. But how does public action impact on individual autonomy within the dimension of the individual, the social, and the political sphere? Based on findings from a cross-national study of European countries, the second section illustrates how programmes and instruments of activating labour market policies impact on the individual citizen by considering the quality of policy programmes, the conditions of access to social security schemes and status acquisition, and the mechanisms regulating the citizens’ participation in social policy decisions. The findings indicate the ambivalence of activation policies, encouraging labour market participation and, hence,
increasing the economic independence of citizens on the one hand, but constraining citizens through an abundance of regulations and mechanisms on the other. The conclusions are rather sceptical, but a focus on autonomy demonstrates why social policy-makers and scholars have to be concerned about ongoing change. The concept of autonomy allows, however, the search for an alternative social policy design, even in times of tight budgets in the wake of the economic and financial crisis.

**Individual autonomy as a normative reference for assessing social policy reforms**

Activation reforms have fundamentally changed the citizens’ and the state’s respective roles and the political recognition of social needs (Serrano Pascual 2007; van Berkel and Hornemann Moeller, 2002; Bothfeld and Betzelt, 2011a). Assessing the impact of these reforms on the individual citizen’s life with reference to autonomy as a guiding principle allows us to integrate the concerns of the population as a whole—the poor as well as the middle classes—which each offer different but equally relevant perspectives on social policy reforms.

Moreover, individual autonomy constitutes a philosophical core concept, so we can for our purpose rely on many arguments from philosophical research. For example, in Kantian moral philosophy, autonomy is defined as the citizen’s fundamental capacity for self-determination; several authors deliberate autonomy within the relationship between citizens—including the tension between the individual and the common welfare; and in democratic theory, autonomy addresses the procedural and political dimension of the state-citizen relationship. Provided a broad perspective is adopted, autonomy offers an excellent analytical concept for assessing welfare provision and welfare-state change. In this section we explain in what terms labour market reforms – more precisely changes to the regulation of labour markets, active labour market policies or income maintenance schemes for the unemployed – affect the citizen’s autonomy. In order to grasp more adequately the impact of policies on the citizen’s life situation it is suggested to distinguish analytically its individual, social and political dimension which will be discussed separately in the following sections (for an earlier discussion of the concept see Bothfeld and Betzelt, 2011b).

**The Individual dimension: Self-determination, and the capacity to pursue individual aims and projects**

The provision of social rights can be considered to support or even increase the individual autonomy of citizens, endowing them with material resources and social status; but an increase of individual autonomy does not result from generous benefits or strict employment protection rules alone. If autonomy is defined as the capacity for self-determination according to ‘deeper’ or authentic wants and reflections (Rössler, 2002; Friedman, 2003: 8; Christman, 2009), there are two important implications.

First, autonomy is not necessarily incompatible with (economic) dependence, nor does it exclude the idea that people respond to external requirements which are not borne from their immediate needs or wishes. For example, social security provision mostly presupposes a certain contribution by citizens such as working or paying taxes (Marshall, 1963). Both the
activation paradigm and the notion of social investment have reinforced the social expectation that all adult citizens should work—irrespective of their personal circumstances (e.g. care obligations). Third-way-theorists and economists consider this as unproblematic as they use autonomy synonymously with economic independence (see e.g. Esping-Andersen et al., 2002). But this narrow interpretation neglects some more complex aspects of social integration and dependence. Philosophical and sociological reasoning provides further consideration of individuals in terms of their individual identity with contingent biographic and historical experiences. The main criterion for autonomous decision making, philosophers claim, is that individuals are capable of pursuing aims and projects, reflecting their own preferences and refraining from their immediate needs, feelings and spontaneous ideas (Rößler, 2002; see also Darwall, 2006). It is the capacity of individuals to reflect on who they want to be and what they like to do, their capacity to figure out the ‘authentic’ motives for their decisions, which is the major condition for autonomy (Rößler, 2002). In other words, self-determination is not necessarily equal to ‘self-authorship of our lives’ but denominates our capability to ‘read and write’ our lives, ‘a constant search for coherence balanced against a realism borne out of efforts to understand ourselves and others better’, as Pamela Sue Anderson underlines (Anderson, 2003: 158). This means that autonomy may be compatible with (economic) dependence and even the enforcement of duties (e.g. work obligations). The precondition is that citizens can understand, share and accept the rules according to which duties are imposed (Forst, 1996). The second implication is that people are neither fully autonomous nor heteronomous. Rather, autonomy is a relational concept which implies that people are more or less autonomous in relation to their social environment. All individuals are principally vulnerable; but the degree of vulnerability differs between social groups according to individual characteristics, psychological strengths and weaknesses, the present life situation or the exposure to particular social risks (Anderson, 2003: 153ff).

The policy implications are that public intervention, even if standardised, can have very different effects on different social groups (e.g. men and women) or individuals. Consequently, a particular measure (e.g. a training course) may be empowering for some unemployed persons while others may perceive it as constraining. Addressing predefined needs, social policy intervention is never neutral or ‘impartial’ (Young, 1990) but privileges some specific needs at the expense of others, and thereby decreases or increases individual autonomy. As a criterion to assess how constraining or enabling social policies are, analysis the quality of implemented policies is suggested: Favourable policies in terms of autonomy would increase the leeway for the individual, not prescribing any specific behaviour but recognising diverse needs and expectations. Consequently, autonomy-fostering policies would loosen rather than strengthen the tie between labour market participation and social provision.

The societal dimension: Mutual relationships and the concept of status

Welfare states are mechanisms of redistribution as well as of recognition of different social needs (Nullmeier, 2000). By redistributing wealth through taxes and social security schemes, and by allocating social benefits to certain statuses (e.g., socially insured workers, married couples), welfare states impact on the social structure of society in a specific way (Esping-Andersen, 1990). At the same time, social policies establish a culturally anchored and
symbolic order by attributing unequal normative values (and material compensation) to different activities. For example, obligations towards job-search activities reflect a normative assessment of the duties of unemployed people. Such institutionalised expectations do not only impact on the unemployed alone but also shape social values as well as the expectations between co-citizens, the employed and the unemployed. Mutual recognition is conditioned by citizens’ capacity to mutually recognize different needs as equally legitimate, which again is influenced by policies and institutions (Nullmeier, 2000). At the very least, recognition represents a precondition for the institutionalization of specific needs and expectations. The matter of recognition has two important consequences for the assessment of individual autonomy of citizens.

First, ‘equal recognition’ is not the same as social equality; rather, individual autonomy and social inequality between citizens can co-exist—if the differences in social statuses are perceived as legitimate. Although citizens are formally equally endowed with the same rights—entitlements, benefits and services—these rights do not eliminate all social differences but allow access to, or maintain a certain socio-economic status. Social statuses determine the allocation of material goods and level of social recognition, resulting in a hierarchical social order. But social statuses—representing a bundle of rules, rights and norms (Offe, 2003)—also provide a social role within a given society. A decent social status therefore may represent a kind of ‘protected area’ or ‘corridor of action’ for an individuals’ autonomous life, establishing a certain level of expected social security. Ideally, having a decent (though not necessarily high), reliable social status represents a source of security and identity for people in modern industrial societies. In employment-centred regimes, labour market policies (as well as education and training) are therefore crucial as they shape the conditions for upward mobility and the protection of a once-attained social status against the pitfalls of life.

Related to this argument is, secondly, the idea that mutual recognition and the definition and attribution of status along specific criteria comes along with mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion (Lister, 2007). An inclusive version of citizenship would be based on values like justice, recognition, self-determination and solidarity. Arguing against a merely economic view of citizenship, Lister emphasizes recognition and identity as essential elements, embracing the right to be ‘different’ as well as cultural respect. Referring to the issue of women’s unpaid caring work and the gendered division of domestic labour, feminist contributions strongly underline the need for recognizing diversity, claiming ‘an ethos of pluralisation’ (Young, 1990). As gender inequality challenges the universalist idea of citizenship, Lister proposed the idea of a ‘differentiated universalism in which the achievement of the universal is contingent upon attention to difference’ (Lister, 2007, p. 52). Of course, the lines of social division are also drawn along other social characteristics and an individual’s feeling of affiliation is not solely determined by formally regulated rules of membership, but also by the symbolic order. Both are inherent in many institutions that shape our everyday lives and foster our respective roles within the social sphere.

Concerning citizens’ autonomy, the recognition of diversity and upward mobility that allow all members of society to achieve a decent and recognised status are crucial policy issues. Thus autonomy requires sensitivity to diversity, which may be realised by a high degree of
permeability of boundaries between different statuses, support for upward mobility, equal opportunity policies or affirmative action. In the domain of labour market policy, the rules of access to benefits and services would be widened rather than restricted, and social statuses would be protected against downward mobility.

The political dimension: Realising participation and commitment

The necessity of protecting the autonomy of citizens is arguably most obvious within the political sphere, as autonomy is often understood as ‘self-government’, representing the precondition for democracy and political freedom (Forst, 1996; Christman, 2009). Political freedom and individual autonomy are closely interconnected as the maintenance and development of individual autonomy is a prerequisite of political freedom (Forst, 1996: 215). It is helpful to distinguish political, from moral, ethical, social, and legal perspectives on individual autonomy, as Forst suggests (Forst, 1996), in order to complement T.H. Marshall’s belief that the guarantee of social rights would complete the set of preconditions for citizens to participate in political life (Marshall, 1963). Of course, the interrelationship between public intervention and citizens is highly relevant for individual autonomy, and policy makers and representatives of public authorities tread a fine line when formulating, deciding upon or implementing public social policies. Preserving respect for citizens’ (ethical and moral) autonomy has the consequence that citizens have to be vested with rights and entitlements which allow them to interact with public authorities on equal terms.

From the autonomy perspective, social protection does not only mean helping people to make ends meet, but also protecting and supporting their capacity for self-determination and—in the sense of legal and ethical autonomy—conceding them the right to understand, co-determine, object to or accept public interventions. Political autonomy, understood as the right to equal participation and the ‘right to justification’ helps to redefine the responsibility issue: Activation policies have typically caused a shift of responsibility and a redefinition of reciprocity (Bothfeld and Betzelt, 2011a). This is not per se problematic, as long as the individual’s capacity to be self-responsible is respected. However, new requirements may conflict with the consensually shared concept of reciprocity if they unilaterally impose constraints and obligations on the unemployed. Individual (political and social) autonomy would be damaged if the individuals’ commitment to commonly shared obligations and duties were disrespected. As long as gainful employment remains the primary mechanism for social integration, the provision of benefits will be conditional upon certain behaviours of the beneficiaries, and always implies an aspect of social control (Ben-Ishai, 2012). But tensions may arise when the formal or implicit agreement between the state and its citizens is changed. The rise of legal claims against administrative decisions would indicate an incompatibility of existing and new legal norms.

New demands on citizens, if excessively increased, could overstrain the individual’s agency. Although this is not an explicit policy aim but an outcome of the current liberal argument that benefits are necessarily a disincentive to active participation, increasing the pressure on individuals to shape their lives appears detrimental to the individual’s commitment rather than supporting it. On the one hand, an own-earned income represents a source of self-esteem, self-reliance and social recognition and constitutes a major source of social identity for citizens in an industrial society and on the other hand, people may feel morally
committed to their duty to contribute to society by working. Relying on benefits has undoubtedly a decommodifying effect but this does not respond to the individual’s need to feel recognised and to contribute actively to the common objectives of a society.

Collective and individual needs are compatible only for as long as individuals feel committed to the collectively shared norms and values. Accordingly, political protest, strikes and demonstrations, individual attitudes of refusal and defection indicate that people perceive implicit normative agreements to be undermined. Hence, autonomy-fostering social policies would be shaped in a way that citizens are encouraged and supported—and not forced—to achieve their potential. Policy making processes would provide time and space for the citizens to understand, co-determine and accept new policies.

Considering all three spheres together: a concept of social citizenship which would grasp ongoing political change as well as social policy adjustments to social transformation processes such as demographic change or new gender roles needs to include more than social rights as they have been traditionally understood. A revised concept would rather draw attention to the question of how social policies help develop and protect citizens’ capacity for autonomy (Ben-Ishai, 2012). And it would not be restricted to the individual sphere, but take account of the societal and the political spheres as well. All these dimensions of individual autonomy translate into three policy criteria which will be used in the following empirical section as an analytical grid: It is argued that, whether social policies encroach upon or enhance individual autonomy depends, first, on the quality of social provision, and whether policies take account of the individual’s specific needs and allow leeway for individuality (individual dimension). Secondly, considering how status and membership are constructed, it is important to see how the access to benefits or services is regulated, what lines are drawn between different statuses and whether status protection is guaranteed and upward mobility is supported (social dimension). Thirdly, the question is how citizens are encouraged to participate in decisions which are relevant to their everyday lives, and whether there are sufficient individual entitlements and procedures for co-determination implemented (political dimension). These three concepts, quality, status and participation represent the analytical thread for our analysis of activation policies, more precisely labour market regulation, active labour market policy and unemployment security schemes, which we present in the following section.

**How do activation policies affect individual autonomy? – An empirical illustration**

Of course, citizens’ individual autonomy is influenced by a multitude of legal regulations as well as explicit and implicit norms and values, of which social policy and, more precisely, activation policies represent just a small fraction. Nonetheless, over the past two decades labour market policy reforms represent a crucial domain of change. As argued above, the individual, social, and political dimensions of individual autonomy translate into three policy criteria: quality, status and participation. This section will give an overview of the general trends and governance instruments of activating labour market policy reforms and concentrate on the three major policy fields – labour market regulation, active labour market policies (labour promotion), and income maintenance systems for the unemployed.
and economically ‘inactive’ population. The three policy criteria will help to assess the findings and to draw conclusions about the impact of activation on individual autonomy. We draw on evidence from European country case studies detailed in Betzelt and Bothfeld (2011a).

**Labour market (de-)regulation**

A core idea of the EU employment strategy, launched at the Lisbon Conference in 1998, was to make labour markets more flexible in order to reduce long-term unemployment (Weishaupt and Lack, 2011). In Germany, the expansion of the low-wage sector was justified as a stepping-stone into regular employment. In many countries, governments supported the expansion of atypical employment such as fixed-term work (especially Spain, see Pérez and Laparra, 2011), marginal work exempted from social security contributions (especially Germany; see Betzelt and Bothfeld, 2011b) or temporary and temporary agency work (especially Italy, see Graziano, 2011; and Spain, see Pérez and Laparra, 2011). In contrast to Spain, protection against dismissal has not been an issue in other countries.

Employment conditions are also indirectly affected by the standards for ‘acceptable’ employment or behavioural requirements placed on the unemployed. In most countries, unemployed people—after a certain period of time—have to accept working conditions below the previously attained level of pay, educational attainment or commuting times (Hasselpflug, 2005), and occupational protection—permitting benefit recipients to refuse a job if it required much lower skills—has often been abolished, even in the originally status-preserving ‘conservative’ states like Germany and France. In terms of job quality, one very obvious outcome of deregulation is, of course, the levelling of employment standards for atypical workers in terms of low pay and low employment security and stability. In most countries, we see increasing shares of working poor among this group (Table 1; see also Goerne, 2011), and cumulated risks such as discontinuous employment, limited career prospects and diminished access to social security coverage, as well as an increase of subjective economic insecurity (Burgoon and Dekker, 2010). The levelling of job quality standards for atypical workers implies, of course, an inferior employment status and, as transitions into ‘regular’ employment are rare in some countries (for Germany see Giesecke 2009), the chance to attain a higher social status is very limited.
Table 1: Activation in the field of labour market regulation and impact on autonomy along policy criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labour market regulation</th>
<th>QUALITY</th>
<th>STATUS</th>
<th>PARTICIPATION</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General trends</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Deregulation of labour markets:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Incentives for atypical employment forms</td>
<td>unstable working careers</td>
<td>erosion of core worker status (esp. Germany, France)</td>
<td>decreasing share of unionised workers and weakening of trade unions’ power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Easing dismissals</td>
<td>in-work poverty</td>
<td>diversification of employment statuses</td>
<td>political conflict between trade unions and government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Redefinition of ‘acceptable’ jobs for the unemployed</td>
<td>pressure on general working conditions</td>
<td>deteriorating labour market status of weaker groups &amp; dualization of labour markets and social security provision (esp. Italy, Spain)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Unstable working careers</td>
<td>erosion of core worker status (esp. Germany, France)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Political conflict between trade unions and government</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Betzelt and Bothfeld, 2011a

Obviously, this deregulation strategy has a detrimental effect on the quality of working conditions in terms of pay and employment protection, so that working careers become increasingly unstable (see left-hand column of Table 1). A particularly serious impact of labour market deregulation on the social status order is observed in Italy and Spain, which have experienced a ‘dualization’ of their employment regimes (see middle column of Table 1). In these countries, a growing gap is observed between certain well-protected core groups (male core workers, pensioners) and groups which are neither included in welfare provisions nor in regular and sustainable employment (women, young people, migrants). The deregulation strategy in Italy and Spain only affected the weaker groups, whereas the still strongly protected core worker status has remained untouched.

However, the direct and indirect deregulation of labour markets may also increase the pressure on regular employment, either by disciplining the workforce of core workers or by substituting regular jobs with atypical ones. In Germany, for instance, this strategy has contributed to declining wage levels and growing insecurity for the core work force, so that the core worker status itself is exposed to erosion. On the individual level this may cause a downward spiral and an irreversible loss of professional and social status attainment. The fear of unemployment is not solely due to an eventual loss of income, but it is associated with the threat of losing a once-attained social status. The (real or suspected) loss of status evidently encroaches upon the citizens’ autonomy. Concerning collective rights, it becomes increasingly difficult for workers and their representatives to defend a decent level of pay and protection, at least in periods of high unemployment (see right-hand column of Table 1). The flexibilisation strategy has clearly contributed towards further decreasing the share of unionised workers and has raised political conflict between governments and trade unions, for instance in Spain where a general strike in 2002 opposed this political strategy (Pérez and Laparra, 2011, p. 157).
**Active labour market policies (ALMP)**

The main objective of activation policies, to enhance individual responsibility, creates a tension between the need to standardize the ‘treatment’ of a growing number of people to be activated, and the necessity to meet individual needs according to the citizens’ personal circumstances (van Berkel and Valkenburg, 2007). To find well-balanced (institutional) solutions to this tension is even more difficult under the condition of restricted public resources.

Overall, three main trends in ALMP are observable: Firstly, the replacement of ‘human investment’ oriented long-term vocational training to measures of direct employment assistance (Bonoli, 2010) like short-term job-search training or employment subsidies (in France, see Béraud and Eydoux, 2011) indicates a shift in the profile of ALMP to a more supply-side oriented strategy. Secondly, a typical trend is the targeting of new groups of unemployed or ‘inactive’ persons, indicated by the abrogation of former exemptions from working obligations such as for certain social groups. Thirdly, New Public Management instruments became dominant, installing the cost-benefit ratio as a major allocation mechanism for activation measures and dismissing the logic of social compensation, with the aim of attaining a behavioural change amongst benefit recipients. Resources are now spent according to cost-saving client-segmentation procedures and on standardized terms, while frontline members of staff often have considerable discretion to decide upon individual cases. Moreover, implementation of activation policies has often been decentralised, including a delegation of budget-authority to the local level, as e.g. in the Netherlands (van Berkel, 2011).

Table 2: Activation in the field of ALMP (active labour promotion) and impact on autonomy along policy criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ALMP General trends</th>
<th>QUALITY</th>
<th>STATUS</th>
<th>PARTICIPATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primacy of cost-efficiency principles (NPM) and shift in profile of ALMP:</td>
<td>• hard-to-place clients are disadvantaged</td>
<td>• blurred status between unemployed and inactive groups</td>
<td>• cost-efficiency logic of client-segmentation neglects needs for ALMP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Trend towards short-term training instead of upskilling</td>
<td>• individual needs &amp; wishes not sufficiently considered</td>
<td>• definition of new target groups ambiguous: recognition of need for support but delegitimised status of inactive persons, partly stigmatising</td>
<td>• lack of transparency and comprehensibility of rules and entitlements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Employment subsidies</td>
<td>• lack of ‘enabling’ support</td>
<td>• deepening of social cleavages due to client-segmentation practices and reinforced labour market segmentation</td>
<td>• conditions of individual rights &amp; duties incalculable due to regional differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Extended working obligations</td>
<td>• low quality of subsidised jobs</td>
<td></td>
<td>• lack of co-determination for citizens in activation process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Targeting; contractualisation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• contractual relationships with unclear effects on true participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Standardization, client-segmentation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Decentralisation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Betzelt and Bothfeld, 2011a.
Although these new governance modes of ALMP might harbour some potential for better addressing the individual needs of the diverse groups of unemployed and ‘inactive’ people, our findings instead indicate unfavourable effects on citizen autonomy. First, the hidden agenda of cost containment behind many activation reforms results in a decrease of quality of ALMP (see left-hand column of Table 2): The shift in profile in ALMP is particularly disadvantageous for groups categorized as ‘hard-to-place’ in the labour market (as is the case in Germany, the Netherlands, and France), who need tailor-made further training programs or sufficient and affordable childcare infrastructure to pursue their life plans and to achieve their own potential. Employment subsidies may indeed promote labour market integration, but often foster low standards of pay and high instability.

The definition of new distinctive target groups for activation – like young unemployed (in France, Germany or the Netherlands), immigrant women (in the Danish case), or long-term social assistance recipients or incapacitated persons in Norway – is ambiguous concerning the criterion of status (see middle column of Table 2). Targeted measures of active labour promotion may be supportive for unemployed/inactive people; but they often include much stricter sanctioning rules. The abrogation of previously legitimate statuses by expanding work obligations—such as inactive lone mothers or spouses in the UK (Wright, 2011), inactive or part-time working spouses in Germany (Betzelt and Bothfeld, 2011b) or migrant women in Denmark (Breidahl, 2011)—constrains the room for individual choice and disrespects the diversity of life circumstances. For example, in the UK there is little support for affordable childcare, and the ‘activated’ women are pushed into low-wage jobs. Targeting programmes might even have counter-intentional effects of withdrawal from the labour market where they collide with socio-cultural norms, as in the case of migrants in Denmark.

With regard to the third criterion of participation (see right-hand column of Table 2), the question is how unemployed people can choose and co-determine their contribution to becoming re-employed. Support is usually organised by ‘reintegration contracts’ (Kildal and Nilssen, 2011) or the monitoring of job search (van Berkel et al., 2011); but in many cases, the relevant rules regarding the individual’s rights and duties are not sufficiently transparent or comprehensible—a crucial precondition for cooperation. The decentralisation of activation policies implies locally varying concrete conditions of activation and benefit receipt, resulting in a low degree of certainty and reliability; citizens do not know what to expect from the agencies (see especially the Dutch case, van Berkel, 2011). The findings indicate that even in Norway the citizen’s wishes and preferences are not necessarily met due to the standardization of programmes on offer, the latent threat of losing benefits, and structural asymmetric power relations (Kildal and Nilssen, 2011).

Unemployment benefit schemes
Concerning the present level of protection secured by income maintenance schemes for the unemployed and inactive, there is a uniform tendency in all the countries studied. While the level of benefits provided by insurance schemes has remained stable, eligibility for benefit receipt has been narrowed and the payment duration shortened so that larger portions of the unemployed have to rely on the lower benefits of means-tested tax-financed schemes. This accompanies an enhancement of the principle of subsidiarity realized by stricter means-
tests, strengthened family maintenance obligations (in Germany for example) or household-related employment subsidies (in the case of France). In many cases, group-specific allowances have been abolished. This means that formerly distinct categories of citizens/beneficiaries (lone parents, older and incapacitated unemployed people) now all belong to the same uniform category of the (long-term) ‘unemployed’. The shift to ‘homogenising’ means-tested schemes for various groups of unemployed (Clasen and Clegg, 2011) could have inclusive effects, as it overcomes the status-segmentation of contribution-based schemes which traditionally exclude women and (other) groups with discontinuous work histories. However, financial compensation of (economic) inactivity may be justified for different reasons; but the standardised workfare requirement applied to any state of inactivity and enforced by severe sanctions indicates a deeply paternalistic approach to inactive people of working age.

Table 3: Activation in the field of Unemployment Benefits and impact on autonomy along policy criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unemployment benefit system General trends</th>
<th>QUALITY</th>
<th>STATUS</th>
<th>PARTICIPATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Levelling of social security:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Shift from insurance to means-tested schemes</td>
<td>financial hardship, increased poverty risk</td>
<td>accelerated loss of once attained status when long-term unemployed</td>
<td>low participation in social life due to low standard of living for beneficiaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cuts of benefit levels (tax-financed)</td>
<td>increasing portion of workforce without social security</td>
<td>in means-tested schemes: loss of individual entitlements and increased maintenance obligations (gendered effects)</td>
<td>lack of transparency, reliability and comprehensibility of rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Access restrictions to insurance schemes</td>
<td>in-work poverty</td>
<td>growing social cleavages</td>
<td>low benefit levels not tailored to needs produce resistance and aggression amongst recipients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Withdrawal of group-specific benefits</td>
<td>pressure on groups who lost benefits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Betzelt and Bothfeld, 2011a.

In terms of quality and status (see left-hand and middle column of Table 3), activation reforms often increase poverty risks and financial hardship for those who lose access to status-preserving insurance benefits. This has severe status-deteriorating effects: The once-attained income and occupational status often cannot be regained by workers having discontinuous work histories which mostly do not allow for upward mobility (Betzelt and Bothfeld, 2011b). The welfare states of Italy and Spain still lack any kind of sufficient public security provision, and are thus classified as sub-protective (Graziano, 2011; Laparra and Pérez and Laparra, 2011): Those unemployed without insurance entitlements, in particular young people, have no source of social security provision except their family (Laparra and Pérez and Laparra, 2011), social cleavages further increase.

The findings show that the potentially inclusive effects of a ‘homogenisation’ of means-tested schemes are often not realised. In Germany, for instance, the stricter means-tests in
the new unemployment benefit scheme result in stronger economic family dependency as women cohabiting with a wage-earning spouse now lose their benefit entitlements even sooner than before. The new means-tests entail maintenance obligations expanded to step-children and unmarried spouses, thus overstretching mutual responsibilities within a household. Moreover, the new rules for means-tested benefits in Germany mean that all adults in a household are now obliged to accept full-time employment, if any household member is a benefit recipient (Betzelt and Bothfeld, 2011b). The lack of transparency and comprehensibility of rules also applies to the changed rules for income maintenance schemes, indicating that the criterion of participation is damaged in this domain as well (see right-hand column of Table 3). First of all, sanctioning has become a more widely used instrument in many countries (Immervoll, 2010), with particularly high sanctioning rates for certain groups like young people due to much stricter requirements (e.g. in Germany). Secondly, at least in Germany, benefit levels are regarded by many welfare experts and welfare associations as being too low to make ends meet (for example to cover housing and energy costs in the cities) and too complicated to understand and administer. This has led to legal as well as political conflicts. The large numbers of law suits against job centres, the increasing aggression against frontline staff (for example in Germany), but also political protest and particularly the protest movements of young people in Spain and the UK indicate a lack of participation in collective as well as individual terms.

**Concluding remarks**

Analysing the impact of activation policies with regard to the three criteria of quality, status, and participation reveals three major tendencies:

**Re-commodification:** Labour market deregulation, changing profiles of ALMP and overall reductions of social provision to unemployed people have contributed to the destabilisation of employment careers, deteriorated working conditions, abrogated opportunities to re-train and increased poverty risks. Altogether these changes can be read as a decrease in the quality of labour market programmes, or as a tendency to re-commodification.

**Erosion of core worker status:** Reshaping social security systems by incrementally replacing insurance with means-tested schemes, increasing the share of atypical workers, and reshaping ALMP to speed-up re-employment rather than enhance skills can be read as a process of deepening status-segmentation contributing to processes of downward rather than upward mobility, in some countries bringing about a ‘dualization’ between core groups and weaker groups (Palier and Thelen, 2010). However, the reforms do not solely change the relative structure of social statuses but also undermine the core worker status as such, which has been the reference for public intervention with the aim of protecting the middle classes. Abandoning the middle class status as a reference for redistributive processes will, in the long run, lead to a general downgrading of social security provision and reinstall a high degree of market dependence.

**Counter-participatory policies:** Top-down implementation of NPM principles in the absence of providing for sufficient individual rights to co-determination, a lack of transparency, reliability of rules, and the standardisation of procedures that do not recognise the diversity of needs violate the citizen’s capacities to participate and generate conflict and opposition
or resignation. Individual refusal or increasing perception of insecurity as well as political protest and the occurrence of strikes show that the re-definition of responsibility and the new rules are not compatible with the expectations and needs of many citizens. The changes may indicate that the paternalistic aspect of social provision has been reinforced, in contrast to a more empowering and emancipatory strategy.

What alternative policy approaches can be identified that aim for more social inclusion and higher labour market participation without encroaching upon the citizen’s autonomy? A purely supply-side strategy of shifting the responsibility for economic sustainability onto the individual without acknowledging structural labour market problems and the fundamental power imbalances between labour and capital has proved a problematic and ineffective strategy. Reform debates and projects should rather clarify the state’s responsibility for establishing or maintaining strong institutionalised guards against market forces (Marshall 1963). Overall, the decommodification effect of social security is still crucial as social benefits and services are not solely necessary to protect against old and new social risks but more generally to allow for opting-out opportunities for caring, education, recreating health or other ‘good’ reasons. The protection of a middle class status (the ‘core worker’) necessitates that occupational and skills-levels are secured in periods of unemployment, and employment standards like minimum wages and dismissal protection ensure decent working conditions. Only within such an institutionalized framework can individual citizens develop their autonomy. ‘Activation’ is not in principle incompatible with the concept of autonomy if it is spelled out within a framework that encourages the citizen’s capacity to self-determination, initiates economically and socially valuable activities, and remains actively committed to the commonly shared values within a society.

Finally, does the present economic and fiscal crisis impede or even defeat social policies that protect individual autonomy? Of course, activation policies do not directly result from economic pressure but from a normative change, strongly connected to the neoliberal paradigm and widely supported in the public discourse. But the crisis gives tailwind to further cuts in the social domain and hampers any supplementary social investment. For sure, the provision of generous benefits becomes a particular problem in times of public budget constraints, as does the provision of tailor-made programmes and costly services. But the crisis also shows how important social policy and the enhancement of individual autonomy is, and what happens if large segments of the population are suddenly exposed to existential risk. Instead of further austerity policies and cuts in public services and the social security net, an alternative strategy of sound macro-economic and fiscal policies is called for, including demand-oriented wage policies (Dullien et al., 2011). The neoliberal paradigm—including activation policies—has produced many detrimental effects and not responded appropriately to obvious market-failure. What is needed, therefore, is a fundamental reorientation so that the promise of more individualised labour market policies is based on a sufficient (economic) basis, thereby taking the individual’s preferences and capacities into account. Taking the issue of the citizen’s autonomy seriously would provide policy makers and scholars with an alternative and optimistic perspective on democratic social policy making.
References


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1 This text has benefited a lot by the many comments and suggestions that colleagues have made to earlier versions of this paper. We are indebted to all contributors to our collective volume and also to Jane Jenson, Björn Hvinden and Jean-Claude Barbier for their perspicacious questions and criticisms at the final conference of the EU Network of Excellence “RECWOWE – Reconciling Work and Welfare in Europe”. Former comments by Christina Bergqvist (at the RC 19 meeting in Stockholm) and Amparo Serrano Pascual (at the Espanet conference in Budapest) have helped us to clarify the ambivalence of the concept of autonomy.

2 This article draws on the results of our collective volume ‘Activation and Labour Market Reforms in Europe: Challenges to Social Citizenship’, (Betzelt and Bothfeld, 2011a), comprising extracts from eight country case studies (D, F, UK, NL, DK, N, IT, ES) following the same analytical perspective.

3 Individual autonomy has been the subject of many philosophical debates. Feminists in particular have used the concept in order to make gender inequality in the public sphere more visible (Anderson, 2003; Friedman, 2003; with reference to social provision see Ben-Ishai, 2012). An early and most prominent account of different approaches to the concept of autonomy is ‘The inner citadel’ by John Christman (Christman, 1989). It is not possible to address all of the concepts and issues which are subject of contemporary philosophical debate around individual autonomy, but significant findings are referred to in order to clarify concepts and implications where necessary.
The economic and emotional dependence of women (within a marriage or traditional societal contexts) and their ways of coping with this is one of the main subjects of feminist reasoning in this domain (Anderson, 2003).

An increasing dualization of welfare provision between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ has been posited by some scholars (Palier and Thelen, 2010) explicitly for Bismarckian welfare states such as France and Germany. In these countries however, we observed more an erosion of the core worker status rather than simple dualization (see also Barbier and Knuth, 2010), while in the sub-protective welfare states such as Italy and Spain the dualization hypothesis seems more convincing, although we would rather not refer to the neoclassical ‘insider/outsider’-terminology.

Bonoli found in the period from the mid 1990s to 2008 budget cuts of ALMP in the six western European countries examined and concluded that in this period of the ‘activation turn’ “countries preferred the less costly alternatives” of ALMP measures instead of more costly upskilling training schemes (Bonoli, 2010: 23).

As a measure especially targeting migrant women, the rules for married social assistance recipients in Denmark require 450 hours of regular employment within two years (Breidahl, 2011). The effects were ambiguous: Many women withdrew from the labour market. At the same time others, particularly those supported by local activation services, actually took jobs.