

Book Reviews

Magnus Paulsen Hansen (2019), *The Moral Economy of Activation: Ideas, Politics and Policies*, £75.00, Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 250, hbk.
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In this book, Magnus Paulsen Hansen presents a study that analyses the ‘moral repertoire’ of activation policies. The book shows how activation policies consist of ‘a plurality of different and often contradictory ideas’. Inspired by French pragmatic sociology, Hansen has studied newspaper articles, and composed an analytical framework of seven ‘cities’ that each represent a welfare logic. The cities are the following: Demand, Redistribution, Insurance, Incentives, Paternal, Investment and Activity. The empirical study offers insight into the dynamics of public debate, and how the cities are used to justify, critique and test policies and politics of activation reforms for insured and uninsured unemployed people.

Although the seven identified cities contain well-known ideas to social policy researchers, the book offers a useful analytical framework for mapping ‘the variety of cities of unemployment’. One of the aims of the book is to provide nuance to the traditional demarcation between human investment policies and work first policies, of ‘good and bad activation’. For instance, the book shows how human investment policies can legitimate the use of coercive measures. The combination of these two different elements of activation policies are known as a central tension of these policies, but the book provides useful nuance to understand what ideas these tensions consist of and how the dynamics of political debate can produce them.

The book is organised in three parts. Part I (chapters 1–3) presents the active turn, the theory and the analytical framework of the seven cities. Part II (chapters 4–7) presents the four empirical cases, consisting of two French and two Danish reforms for insured and uninsured unemployed people in each countries, respectively. The empirical material is chosen in accordance with an important point from French pragmatic sociology, arguing that it is in the ‘grey’ policies that morality of reforms are shaped, and not in the main elections or party programmes. This makes great sense and is an important contribution with the book. The author shows how the cities function as tests in public debate that adjust policies incrementally. Being grey news also implies that the empirical chapters can be a bit tedious to read. An exception is the fourth case (chapter seven), which is quite captivating to read. It involves tensions and justifications in reform of benefits for uninsured unemployed in Denmark. In particular, how the news cases of ‘poor Carina’ and ‘lazy Robert’ became public scandals that served to test existing policies and were drivers for policy change are interesting reading.

Part III consists of two discussion chapters (8–9). As a main finding, Hansen suggests that the activation reforms of the four cases are in particular driven by justifications from four of the seven cities, the 1) paternal, 2) activity, 3) investment and 4) incentives. One implication of this finding, Hansen argues, is certain legitimate understandings of unemployment that place stronger weight on individual behaviour and control, which can lead to a view that people who do not realise their potentials or are not mobile job seekers will be labelled as unworthy as opposed to those who act in accordance to the four cities. Hansen argues that the four cities that drive through activation reforms are moral and he calls upon the reader to ‘consider its

attractiveness'. As a reader, it can be tempting to agree with the implication of the cities of activation. However, to what extent the emphasis on certain cities in politics and policies do in fact lead to moral views in society on unemployment is an empirical question that newspaper articles alone cannot answer.

Hansen further points out that, in the city of activity, the moral justification of coercion can be justified even if the measure fails because being in activity is good per se. In the cities of investment, incentives and paternal, coercion can be put to the test if a measure fails according to obtaining qualifications (investment), increasing incentives or supervising the recipient (paternal). Therefore, the co-existence of the city of activity means that there is a risk that activity per se is valued irrespective of the quality or functioning of the measure.

Another interesting point Hansen makes is that the outcome of activation policies can always be critiqued (i.e. there is no logical end to improvement of individual behaviour), which implies that the four cities are objects of 'infinite tests' in policies and politics. An alternative interpretation could, however, be that this may also include elements of a continual improvement of the service provision of the welfare state. Hansen further argues that the co-existence of four cities means that there is an instability regarding the 'whatness' of unemployment, as well as that attention is directed towards individual factors (what it takes to make individuals employable) rather than structural factors. This implies that the consequences of changes in policies and programmes become 'incalculable' for the citizens. Yet another important contribution is that simply labelling activation policies as neoliberal is incorrect, as the term does not fit with either of the four cities.

The remaining three cities of redistribution, insurance and demand are 'unwillingly' attached to 'passive' governing, Hansen argues. However, although one can easily relate to Hansen's discussion of negative consequences of denouncing the three remaining cities, there could also be good reasons for this development. For instance, that claimants need services and active measures in a modern labour market, and not just benefit receipt.

In chapter nine, Hansen makes a good contribution by suggesting how the problematic aspect of the coexistence of composite and tension-filled cities will also imply tensions and ambiguity for the frontline bureaucrats as well as for the voice of the unemployed. However, since the book does not include a study of frontline implementation, nor clients' actual experiences with the services, Hansen draws the implications for practice 'on the ground' a bit too far. At this point, the discussion could have been more open to the empirical question of how frontline bureaucrats implement the policies and interact with unemployed people, as well as how unemployed people experience their interaction with the bureaucrats.

In the last pages of the book, Hansen discusses basic income and social enterprises as alternative arrangements that can challenge the moral economy of activation. However, these measures would have deserved more attention than provided in the last pages of a chapter, and are based on a 'refusal' of activation policies that appear too critical. Certainly, it is hard to disagree that activation policies contain measures that can be harsh to unemployed people. Nevertheless, previous researches have shown how the frontline implementation stage can provide more humanised treatment than the demanding tone of politicians. Hence, although investment is made obligatory or activation may look like meaningless activity, one should be more open when discussing the implications of policies and politics.

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