

Introduction: Themed Section on Social Welfare and Social Democracy

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For much of the post-war period, the advanced industrial nations of Europe congratulated themselves on having it both ways: successful capitalist economies which also provided effective welfare states – affluence plus social justice. Commentators have traditionally seen social democracy as the friend of social welfare. More recently, the virtuous liaison of social democratic politics with successful democratic welfare capitalism has been called into question. Welfare states face pressures from economic globalisation, population ageing, spending constraint and changes in labour markets and in family patterns; it is argued that traditional social democratic approaches find it difficult to pursue policies that will enable welfare states to adapt and continue to combine high social standards with economic growth in the changed conditions of the twenty-first century. In short, the social democratic welfare state is outmoded.

This section of *Social Policy and Society* takes social welfare and social democracy as its theme. It provides a critical examination of some of the challenges to social democratic welfare. In the first article, Ruth Lister uses both theoretical analysis and practical experience to argue for the broadening of policy debate to include disadvantaged groups at the national as well as at the local level. The principle of equality of respect requires that all citizens are equally involved in decision-making that affects their lives, and what is required is the extension rather than the curtailing of social democratic politics. In the second, Huber and Stephens challenge the view that generous citizenship-based welfare states are no longer viable because they cost too much, encourage dependency and damage competitiveness in an increasingly globalised world. These writers use detailed cross-national data analysis to demonstrate that the highest-spending welfare states in Europe are in fact the most effective in enhancing competitive capacity by mobilizing the labour force and raising the quality of human capital, particularly among lower income groups. This argument restores the happy linkage between social democratic state welfare and successful market-based economies.

The other two articles deal with debates about the ‘modernisation’ of social democratic approaches in Europe. The possibility that left parties are converging towards a ‘third way’ politics that combines more equal opportunities with more flexible labour markets has been extensively discussed. Bonoli and Powell discuss developments in Europe, and argue that the various political shifts must be understood in the context of national political, social and economic settlements. The view that a particular perspective is driving policy change on the left is as likely to prove misleading as the view that there is convergence towards a single welfare state paradigm. Clasen discusses recent reforms in Denmark, Germany and the UK. He distinguishes the question of why social democratic parties have revised their social policy programmes from that of how far party restructurings have led to policy reform. These questions are analytically separate and can only be answered through the detailed examination of national political debate.

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Taken together, these articles show that neither globalisation nor the third way render the social democratic tradition of state welfare obsolete. They also demonstrate that theoretical discussion in this area can be advanced by careful empirical work and that cross-national comparative analysis provides good opportunities for examining the ways in which the different kinds of welfare states develop. Much of the reading for exploring these issues further is contained in the references to the articles. A brief guide to additional reading is also included.