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**Reformen in westeuropäischen Wohlfahrtsstaaten –
Potentiale und Trends**

mit Beiträgen von:

Robert Henry Cox und Josef Schmid

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Josef Schmid

Vorwort: Reformen in westeuropäischen Wohlfahrtsstaaten - Potentiale und Trends

Die vorliegenden Beiträge über die Potentiale und Trends der Reform von westeuropäischen Wohlfahrtsstaaten basieren auf Diskussionen, die wir anlässlich des zweiten Besuchs von Robert Cox am Institut für Politikwissenschaft der Universität Tübingen im Januar / Februar dieses Jahres geführt haben. In diesem Zusammenhang hat auch ein kleiner Workshop stattgefunden, auf dem Robert Cox einige seiner Thesen zur Diskussion gestellt hat. Aufgrund des regen Interesses und der Überschneidungen der längerfristigen Forschungsperspektiven in Fragen der Theorie und Empirie des Wohlfahrtsstaatsvergleiches hat es nahe gelegen, ihn um eine schriftliche Ausarbeitung seines Vortrages zu bitten. Zugleich schien es sinnvoll, ein kleines Essay beizufügen, das unsere eigenen Erfahrungen, Untersuchungen und Fragestellungen skizziert.

Auf diese Weise entsteht zugleich eine Art mehrdimensionaler Triangulation – d.h. eine Standortbestimmung durch zwei Bezugspunkte - in der Einschätzung der wohlfahrtsstaatlichen Politik westeuropäischer Länder, v.a. was die jüngsten Entwicklungen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, den Niederlanden und Dänemark angeht. Diese gilt sowohl in Bezug auf die Erkenntnisinteressen, die zwischen Theoriebildung und praxisorientierter Analyse liegen, die methodischen und methodologischen Differenzen zwischen eher qualitativen und quantitativen Vergleichsstrategien sowie einigen impliziten Wissensbeständen und kulturgeprägten Annahmen, die sich aus dem amerikanischen bzw. deutschen lebensweltlichen und akademischen Kontexten ergeben. Diese Mischung an Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschieden in der jeweiligen Forschung hat nicht zuletzt dazu beigetragen, daß zumindest wir voneinander gelernt haben. Inwieweit es bei den untersuchten Ländern der Fall ist, bildet einen wichtigen Gegenstand der folgenden Erörterungen.

Josef Schmid

Von den Nachbarn lernen – Reflexionen über eine Grauzone zwischen Bildungsreisen und komparativen Analysen

1. Der politische und wissenschaftliche Hintergrund

Gegenwärtig findet in Deutschland eine Debatte über internationale Modelle und Vorreiter in der Sozial- und Arbeitsmarktpolitik statt: Vor allem die Niederlande und Dänemark, aber auch – meist mit politisch etwas anderem Vorzeichen – Großbritannien, Neuseeland und die USA stoßen auf reges Interesse in der Politik und in den Medien. Etwa im SPIEGEL, DER ZEIT oder DER WOCHE – um einige prominente Beispiele zu nennen – werden ganze Serien von Berichten über die Erfolge und Instrumente der dort praktizierten wohlfahrtsstaatlichen Politiken verfaßt. Dieser intensive Austausch von Ideen und Konzepten ist grundsätzlich nicht neu, schon die Maßnahmen der frühen deutschen Sozialreformen sind in anderen Ländern (z.B. in Dänemark und den Niederlanden) diskutiert worden. In den siebziger Jahren ist ferner vielfach vom „Modell Deutschland“ (vgl. dazu Simonis 1998) die Rede gewesen und das System der industriellen Beziehungen sowie die gesamte politische und ökonomische Performanz haben als vorbildlich gegolten. Extreme Nachzügler im Modernisierungsprozeß im vorigen Jahrhundert wie Japan (während der sogenannten Meiji-Reformen) haben sogar bewußt mehrere Kommissionen auf die Reise geschickt, um den Informationsaustausch und die Lernprozesse zu beschleunigen.

Aber auch heutzutage werden solche Informations- und Konsultationsreisen durchgeführt: Die gegenwärtige Bundesregierung hat inzwischen Arbeitsgruppen mit Großbritannien und Dänemark eingerichtet, um gemeinsame Fragen in der wohlfahrtsstaatlichen Politik zu erörtern und von den Best Practices der anderen zu lernen (vgl. dazu Anthony Glee in Die Woche vom 6.11.1998, S. 25: Ehe auf dem dritten Weg). Möglicherweise folgen weitere Kooperationen mit den Niederlanden und Frankreich. In der vom Bundeskanzleramt organisierten deutsch-dänischen Konsultationsgruppe zum Beispiel, welcher der Verfasser angehört, werden ausgewählte Probleme der aktiven Arbeitsmarktpolitik, der Ökosteuer und der europäischen Koordination der Wirtschaftspolitik behandelt. Aus ähnlichen Gründen ist im Rahmen der Verhandlungen um ein „Bündnis für Arbeit“ eine Arbeitsgruppe Benchmarking (u.a. besetzt mit den beiden Sozialwissenschaftlern Wolfgang Streeck und Rolf G. Heinze) gebildet worden. Dies ist ebenfalls eine der weichen Steuerungsstrategien, die die EU einsetzt, um die Diffusion und Anwendung von erfolgreichen Politikkonzepten zu fördern.

Gerade die gesteigerten internationalen Kontakte und das Berichtswesen der Kommission können diesen Effekt steigern (vgl. für den Bereich der Arbeitsmarktpolitik Auer 1998; kritisch Tidow 1999).

Freilich treten hierbei auch Grenzen auf, die in den unterschiedlichen politisch-institutionellen Rahmenbedingungen und ökonomischen Strukturen der Länder begründet sind. Darüber hinaus ist neben der unmittelbaren Lösung drängender Probleme der Arbeitsmarkt- und Sozialpolitik die längerfristige Etablierung eines europäischen Politikmodells, einer Neuen Mitte oder neuen Sozialdemokratie – je nach Kontext wandeln sich die Wörter - mit dem Ziel der Gewinnung der intellektuellen Hegemonie Ziel der Bemühungen, die im übrigen bei den ausländischen Gesprächspartnern durchaus auf positive Resonanz stoßen.

Ein solches „Learning by Seeing“ durch „Policy-Borrowing“, „Monitoring“ und „Diffusion“ – so die entsprechenden politikwissenschaftlichen Konzepte - hat zugleich den Vorzug, daß es erheblich geringere Voraussetzungen an die Informations- und Entscheidungskapazitäten eines politischen Systems stellt als zentral geplante Strategien. Dies ist gerade in der Bundesrepublik als einem „semisouveränen Staat“ (Katzenstein) von hoher Bedeutung, weil hier markante Defizite und Reformbarrieren bestehen, bzw. die Gefahr von Blockaden und Immobilismus durch den Föderalismus, das Regieren mit Koalitionen, die starke Position der Bundesbank und des Bundesverfassungsgerichtes nicht von der Hand zu weisen sind. Verhandlungsdemokratie, Mehrebenenpolitik, dezentrale Kontextsteuerung, etc. sind hier Stichworte aus der aktuellen Diskussion. Wechselseitige Anpassung durch Imitation, Diffusionsprozesse und die Entwicklung von Strategien, die quasi als Ersatz für formale Entscheidungen fungieren, können hier einige Erleichterung schaffen – freilich auf eine etwas ungewohnte Weise. Als analytische Grundlage kann dabei die Diffusionsforschung herangezogen werden. Hier haben schon früh Collier/ Messieck (1975) die Verbreitung von Sozialversicherungen untersucht und typische Muster der Verbreitung entdeckt.

Ähnliches läßt sich im übrigen ebenfalls im deutschen Bundesstaat identifizieren; auch hier „kopieren“ die Länder einander etwa in der Sozial-, Industrie- und Arbeitsmarktpolitik. Gute Beispiele hierfür sind die Sozialstationen in den 70er Jahren oder die Sozialen Betriebe in den 90er Jahren, die sich schnell über die Länder hinweg verbreitet haben (vgl. dazu Schmid 1990: Kap: V; Blancke/Schmid 1998). Neben der Diffusionsforschung kann in diesem Zusammenhang auch auf neuere Ansätze zum Policy-Lernen zurückgegriffen werden (ansatzweise für die Arbeitsmarktpolitik Schmid 1998), bei denen mittelfristige Veränderungen nicht primär aus der sozio-ökonomischen Umwelt als aus den internen Verschiebungen innerhalb des politischen Systems erklärt werden, wobei es hierbei weniger um Macht als um Wissen geht (vgl. insgesamt Héritier 1993, Bandelow 1998). Diese Art von Politik kann dabei zu überraschenden Ergebnissen bzw. zu erheblichen Abweichungen von den typischen sozio-

ökonomischen Determinanten der Staatstätigkeit führen und beispielsweise mit erklären, warum sich die berühmte Frage „Do Parties Matter?“ nicht immer so einfach beantworten läßt. Intelligente ausländische Projekte würden demnach auch von anderen, nicht derselben Familie angehörenden Parteien übernommen.

Am Beispiel der Wohlfahrtsstaatsentwicklung hat Borchert (1998) die unterschiedlichen Erklärungsmuster rekonstruiert und die hier betonten Aspekte der Diffusion und des Lernens in Feld 1 verortet. Die dabei zugrunde gelegten Dimensionen – exogen und akteursorientiert – veranschaulichen die Spezifik dieses Ansatzes sehr gut.

Abbildung 1: Ursachen wohlfahrtsstaatlichen Wandels in verschiedenen Ansätzen nach Borchert

	<i>exogene Ursachen</i>	<i>endogene Ursachen</i>
<i>Akteursebene entscheidend</i>	(1) internationale Diffusion kollektives Lernen	(2) Rational Choice Machtressourcenansatz (z.B. Stärke von Linksparteien)
<i>Strukturebene entscheidend</i>	(4) Modernisierungstheorie Globalisierungstheorie	(3) historische Pfadabhängigkeit Neo-Institutionalismus

Innerhalb der deutschen Sozialwissenschaften sind bislang freilich Überlegungen zur Policy-Diffusion in der Regel eher skeptisch beurteilt worden. Im Unterschied zu den bahnbrechenden Studien zum Wohlfahrtsstaatsvergleich von Alber (1982) und Schmidt (1998), die in dieser Sache zu einem negativen Urteil kommen, diskutieren Heinze/ Schmid/ Strünck (1998) und Scherrer/ Simons/ Westermann (1998) dieses Phänomen des Wettbewerbs der Ideen – und nicht nur der Ökonomien relativ offensiv und mit geringerer methodischer Rigorosität.

Gerade die fortschreitende Globalisierung und Internationalisierung, so das Argument, führt zu gesteigerten transnationalen Kommunikations- und Informationsprozessen, die eine günstige Basis für den Transfer von Politiken und für politische Lernprozesse bilden. Dasselbe gilt für die zunehmende europäische Integration, was mittlerweile als ein relevanter Faktor bei der Erklärung nationaler Politiken gesehen werden muß. Beispielsweise hängen einige interessante arbeitsmarktpolitische Innovationen in den neuen Bundesländern mit Förderprogrammen der EU zusammen.

2. Voraussetzungen und Fallstricke des „intelligenten Kopierens“

Allerdings klingt die Überlegung, daß man von anderen Ländern etwas lernen kann, auf den ersten Blick sehr plausibel, ist jedoch auf den zweiten Blick nicht ganz so einfach. Daher gilt es, zunächst einige methodische und theoretische Voraussetzungen zu diskutieren und auf einige Einschränkungen bei der internationalen Transferierbarkeit von Wissen und Erfahrungen über wohlfahrtsstaatliche Reformpolitiken hinzuweisen (vgl. zum folgenden Heinze/ Schmid/ Strünck 1998):

- ◆ Es ist zu berücksichtigen, daß interessante Politiken und „best practices“ anderer Länder pfadabhängig sind, d.h., daß sie vielfach spezifische historischen Entstehungsbedingungen sowie die institutionellen Strukturen des jeweiligen Wohlfahrtsstaates reflektieren. Dementsprechend können sie nicht einfach – im Sinne des simplen Kopierens – auf deutsche Problemzusammenhänge übertragen werden. Ihre zentrale Bedeutung liegt vielmehr darin, daß sie als Leitbilder fruchtbare Impulse und Diskussionsanstöße für eine sozialpolitische Reformdebatte liefern können. Dabei schließt eine solche Auseinandersetzung auch ein, daß aus negativen Erfahrungen und Fehlern in anderen Ländern gelernt werden kann.
- ◆ Es gibt auch bei den meist herangezogenen innovativen Fällen Niederlande, Dänemark und Neuseeland keine heile Welt des Wohlfahrtsstaates mehr, kein Paradies für alte linke Rezepte wie Umverteilung, keynesianische Nachfragepolitik und Vollbeschäftigung unter den Bedingungen des Normalarbeitsverhältnisses. Ferner existiert auch kein Königsweg, der schmerzfrei aus der Misere führen könnte. Selbst die „Musterschüler“ der Reform haben sehr hohe Opfer bringen müssen, meist in Form erheblicher Einschnitte in das soziale Netz, und sie weisen in der Regel immer noch über fünf Prozent Arbeitslosigkeit auf.
- ◆ Die genannten interessanten Fälle waren im Grunde genommen in der vorangegangenen Dekade vor allem als „Sorgenkinder“ der OECD-Welt aufgefallen. Hier hatten sich verschiedene ökonomische, soziale und politisch-institutionelle Momente der Krise verbunden, waren alle Rezepte und Versuche mehrerer Regierungen gescheitert, so daß ein radikaler Kurswechsel in den wohlfahrtsstaatlichen Politikstrategien nahezu unausweichlich war. Im Unterschied dazu ist zu jener Zeit eher noch das „Modell Deutschland“ als Vorbild gepriesen worden bzw. umgekehrt war in der BRD der Problemdruck und der Mißerfolg nicht zuletzt wegen der politisch-institutionell verankerten „Politik des mittleren Weges“ (M. G. Schmidt) erheblich geringer. Im übrigen darf nicht vergessen werden, daß die Wiedervereinigung ein deutsches Spezialproblem darstellt, aus dem ein erheblicher Teil der derzeitigen Probleme des Wohlfahrtsstaates stammen.

- ◆ Bei den momentan als Vorbilder diskutierten Fällen handelt es sich um eine besondere Gruppe, nämlich um kleine Länder. Diese unterliegen dem Druck des Weltmarktes in viel höherem Maße als große Länder; hier prägt der hohe Umweltdruck als Sachzwang den politischen Prozeß. Sie sind in der Regel auch intern weniger ausdifferenziert bzw. die politischen Netze sind enger geflochten. Das erleichtert das Regieren und die Erzeugung von sozialem Kapital bzw. Vertrauenskapital, das die Kooperation von staatlichen und gesellschaftlichen Akteuren, aber auch die gesellschaftliche Selbststeuerung verbessert.
- ◆ Schließlich kommt hinzu, daß diese kleineren Länder häufig mit einer Nischenstrategie bzw. mit kleineren Maßnahmenbündeln relativ gute Erfolge verzeichnen können. Dem stehen die politisch-ökonomischen Verhältnisse in der BRD entgegen, da es sich hier um ein mittelgroßes Land handelt, das innerhalb der EU sogar die Position einer dominierenden Ökonomie bekleidet. Externalisierungsstrategien sind hier erheblich schwieriger. Angesichts dieser Schwierigkeiten bei der direkten Kopie können innovative Politikstrategien anderer Länder wohl eher dazu beitragen, das Problembewußtsein zu schärfen und festgefahrene Diskussionen und Routinen aufzubrechen. Grundlegend für jedwede Maßnahme ist nämlich, daß die politische Gestaltbarkeit erkannt wird und das Problem als etwas wahrgenommen wird, was nicht komplett von den existierenden politischen Institutionen und ökonomischen Strukturen vorgegeben und bestimmt wird. Dies ist eine zentrale Bedingung dafür, daß ausländische Modellalternativen überhaupt wahrgenommen und für die eigene Reformdiskussion als relevant angesehen werden.

Zwei Aspekte sollten jedoch in diesem Zusammenhang stärker berücksichtigt werden: Zum einen lassen sich sozial- und wirtschaftspolitische Problemlösungen um so eher transferieren, je stärker sich Wohlfahrtsstaaten in ihrer Form ähneln. Zum anderen muß beim Transfer einer Politik stärker unterschieden werden, um welche Art bzw. Ebene der Problemlösung es sich handelt, d.h. ob es um relativ weitreichende ordnungspolitische Diskurse und Leitbilder oder um Teilbereiche umfassende Programmpakte oder um einzelne Instrumente geht. Gerade bei einer politisch-normativen Bewertung ist es von zentraler Bedeutung, etwa die Einführung von Marktelementen danach zu beurteilen, ob es sich um ein Ziel handelt, das ein breit angelegtes Ordnungsmodell beschreibt oder bloß um ein Instrument, das in unterschiedlichen Zielsystemen zum Einsatz gelangen kann. Hilfreich ist es daher, in diesem Zusammenhang zwischen globalen Problemdefinitionen und Lösungsstrategien einerseits und spezifischen Programmen und Instrumenten andererseits zu unterscheiden. Stellt man ferner in Rechnung, daß sich politisch-ökonomische Rahmenbedingungen ähneln oder unterscheiden können, erhält man folgendes Tableau an Diffusions- und Lernpotentialen bzw. Möglichkeiten und Problemen der Übertragung:

Abbildung 2: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Übertragbarkeit erfolgreicher Politik

<i>Inhalt der Politik</i>	<i>Bedingungen ähnlich</i>	<i>Bedingungen verschieden</i>
<i>globale Problemdefinitionen und Lösungsstrategien</i>	(1) Möglichkeit einer Übertragung bzw. des Lernens ist hoch	(2) Konsensdefizite
<i>spezifische Programme und konkrete Instrumente</i>	(4) Effizienzdefizite (technische Kompatibilitäts-probleme)	(3) Wahrscheinlichkeit einer Diffusion ist niedrig

Eindeutig sind die Felder (1) und (3), während – und dies dürfte der normale Fall sein – in den Konstellationen (2) und (4) Probleme der Übertragbarkeit auftreten. In diesen Fällen müßte die Kompatibilität erhöht werden – entweder im technischen Sinne oder im politisch-institutionellen Bereich. So müssen – will man etwa Modelle der Teilzeitarbeit übernehmen – neue Konzepte an die sozialrechtlichen Bedingungen angepaßt werden, beispielsweise durch eine entsprechende tarifpolitische Absicherung der unteren Lohngruppen (ggf. durch ein System von Mindestlöhnen).

Hier läßt sich einiges von anderen Ländern lernen; freilich weniger durch „Abkupfern“ als durch Nachdenken. Schwieriger ist das Feld (2), wo nur langsame und nur schwer steuerbare Veränderungen des Institutionengefüges und der politischen Kultur einen politischen Kurswechsel zulassen. Vor diesem Hintergrund ist es nun besonders interessant, die Analysen von Robert Cox zu betrachten. Er präzisiert die Überlegungen der Diffusionsforschung, indem er ein aktives Konzept, eine bewußte politische Strategie unterstellt, die er „Policy Borrowing“ nennt. In Verbindung mit seiner These der liberalen Agenda sind damit die Voraussetzungen für solche Kommunikations- und Konsultationsprozesse günstig: Von den Nachbarn Lernen – entsprechend den Bedingungen von Feld (1) – ist daher möglich. Freilich steht dies nicht im Zentrum seines breiteren Forschungsprojektes, in dem es vor allem um die langfristigen Entwicklungslinien des Wohlfahrtsstaates in den Niederlande, Dänemark und Deutschland geht. Einige wichtige, stärker empirisch orientierte Aspekte seiner Argumentation sind zudem schon in einem früheren Paper in dieser Reihe dokumentiert worden (vgl. Cox 1998). Dort sind insbesondere die Momente der Aktivierung, die die neueren Politiken charakterisieren herausgearbeitet worden.

3. Einige Probleme und Vorschläge des internationalen Vergleichs und Benchmarkings

In diesem Zusammenhang ist abschließend noch ein kleiner Exkurs in die vergleichende Methodologie nötig, denn eines der Probleme, die hier eine Rolle spielen, ist die Konstanz der Randbedingungen. Gerade die politische Bedeutung von Indikatoren kann bei mangelnder Berücksichtigung dieses Umstandes zu eklatanten Fehlurteilen führen. So ist es üblich, die Lage am Arbeitsmarkt durch die Arbeitslosenquote zu indizieren, freilich geht das nur bei annähernd gleicher Erwerbsquote. In einem Vergleich der Arbeitsmarktpolitik der deutschen Bundesländer haben wir durch den Bezug auf (EQ/ALQ) vergleichbare Bedingungen hergestellt. Ergebnis dieses „Kunstgriffes“ ist eine „Normalisierung“ der Lage in Ostdeutschland, da hier die hohe Arbeitslosenquote mit einer hohen Erwerbsquote einhergeht und damit die Leistungsfähigkeit eher mittel als schlecht ausfällt (vgl. Blancke/Schmid 1998, s.a. Roth 1998).

Das selbe Vorgehen belegt darüber hinaus im internationalen Vergleich westeuropäischer Länder die schlechte Performanz der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (s. Grafik aus Heinze/Schmid/ Strünck 1998):

Abbildung 3: Alternative Verfahren des Vergleichs von Arbeitsmarktpfermanzen

Formel: Erwerbsquote / Arbeitslosigkeit – Langzeitarbeitslosigkeit = Performanz-Index des Arbeitsmarktes (Bezugsjahr um 1997)

•BRD:	61 / 10,0 - 48	= -41,9
•GB:	67 / 6,6 - 40	= -29,8
•NL:	58 / 4,7 - 50	= -37,6
•F:	59 / 12,0 - 40	= -37,6
•DK:	75 / 5,7 - 27	= -13,8

Ein anderes Beispiel dafür ist die Verwendung der Sozialleistungsquote als Erfolgsindikator für Sozialpolitik. Auch dies geht nur unter den Bedingungen ähnlicher Arbeitslosenquoten, ansonsten kann dieser Wert auch ein Beleg für den Mißerfolg der Beschäftigungs- und Wirtschaftspolitik sein. Durch diese Berücksichtigung eines zentralen Kontextfaktors wird vor allem dem Unterschied zwischen aktiven und passiven Strategien und der notwendigen (analytischen wie praktischen) Integration von Sozial- und Arbeitsmarktpolitik Rechnung getragen. Das hat aber erhebliche Konsequenzen für das Ranking der Fälle. So liegt die Bundesrepublik, bezogen auf die Sozialausgaben, dicht hinter den Niederlanden und weit vor Großbritannien; allerdings weist sie eine deutlich schlechtere Entwicklung am Arbeitsmarkt auf. Nach

der Abstimmung der Daten liegen die Niederlande weit vorn und Großbritannien und Deutschland etwa gleich auf. Neuere Daten dürften den Korrektoreffekt durch das Verhältnis von arbeitsmarktpolitischen Effekten und Sozialleistungsquote noch deutlicher werden lassen.

Abbildung 4: Verhältnis von Sozialausgaben und Arbeitslosigkeit

	Großbritannien	Frankreich	Deutschland
Anteil der Sozialleistungen an den Staatsausgaben	20,1 %	30,6 %	30,8 %
Arbeitslosenquote	6,6 %	12,0 %	10,0 %
Relation/Quotient	3,05	2,55	3,08
alter/neuer Rang	8/6	5/7	4/6
	Dänemark	Schweden	Österreich
Anteil der Sozialleistungen an den Staatsausgaben	33,7 %	39,7 %	28,1 %
Arbeitslosenquote	5,7 %	9,2 %	4,5 %
Relation/Quotient	5,91	4,32	6,24
alter/neuer Rang	2/3	1/5	6/2
	Niederlande	Spanien	EU-Durchschnitte
Anteil der Sozialleistungen an den Staatsausgaben	32,8 %	23,8 %	28,2 %
Arbeitslosenquote	4,7 %	20,8 %	10,6 %
Relation/Quotient	6,98	1,14	2,66
alter/neuer Rang	3/1	7/8	

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Robert Henry Cox

Ideas, Policy Borrowing and Welfare Reform¹

Welfare states are becoming more similar. Social assistance is becoming more residual, pension schemes are becoming more contributory, and active labor market policies are transforming the passive character of social insurance. Not only are countries adopting similar programs, but also they are using similar language to legitimate them. From Sweden to the United States, policy makers justify programs because they promote individual responsibility, strengthen the rewards of work, and correct perverse incentives. Present theories of welfare state development do not adequately explain these trends because, I argue, they lack historical perspective and focus too narrowly on the policies that comprise the welfare state, rather than the idea of the welfare state. As an idea, the welfare state is more than a set of policies, it is also a way to conceptualize the meaning of those policies, or the grounds upon which those policies are deemed legitimate.

The absence of a clear sense of how politicians legitimate ideas for welfare reform makes it difficult to explain the apparent convergence in welfare reform. This paper outlines out a historical explanation of the recent convergence in welfare reform. Briefly, I argue that the liberalization of economic and political institutions in the nineteenth century embedded liberal values into those first welfare programs. The expansion of welfare programs after World War II resulted from an embourgeoisement of the political values of the political parties who enacted those reforms. This embourgeoisement of politics continued until the present day, and today liberal language is central to the way welfare reforms are legitimated. As this convergence of values has taken place, policy makers find that the world offers more possibilities for new policy ideas, hence the increase in policy borrowing.

This paper is organized in three parts. First, I outline the critique of extant theories of the welfare state. Second, I propose an alternative, which I call the “logic of liberalism.” Finally, I outline how this perspective can be used to explain the frenzy of policy borrowing that has made welfare debates and their outcomes appear to converge in recent years. As an illustration of the argument, I discuss the case of the Netherlands, one country that has been an international model for policy borrowing.

1. Two Problems with Current Theories of the Welfare State

The first problem with many theories of the welfare state is that they are epochal. In other words, they divide the study of welfare states into distinct time periods and strive to build

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explanations for each time period. The period of postwar expansion has gained the most attention. Early studies (e.g. Korpi 1980) developed what is now known as the “social democratic thesis,” the idea that welfare states are largest when parties of the left control the government over long periods of time. An important contribution to the social democratic explanation was Gosta Esping-Andersen’s (1990) argument that there are three distinct types of welfare states, each defined by the ideologies of Christian democracy, social democracy or liberalism, depending on which dominated a country’s government during the postwar period.

Paul Pierson (1994 and 1996) noticed that the social democratic thesis did not explain the recent period of welfare retrenchment. Whereas in the past they were committed to implementing a particular ideological vision, Pierson argued that decision-makers in the epoch of retrenchment are more cynical. When they need to make cutbacks, they strive to avoid blame by making cuts that are difficult to detect, or target programs that benefit powerless constituencies. Pierson’s argument spawned a great deal of empirical investigation into the character of reform in a number of countries, and much of this research has shown that the parties of the left are equally likely to make cutbacks using such a strategy (Palme and Wennemo 1997; Green-Pedersen 1998). Moreover, all reforms seem to be moving in a liberal direction (Pierson and Myles 1997, Clayton and Pontusson 1998). Such research underscores Pierson’s claim that the politics of retrenchment are unlike the politics of expansion.

But, while the empirical findings are sound, the theoretical import of such theories could be improved. Developing new theories to explain new epochs in the development of welfare states is not a progressive step in theory building. A progressive step would be a theory that explained both the periods of expansion and contraction. Indeed, such a theory should actually explain three distinct periods in the development of welfare states: the period of program adoption, which began in the nineteenth century and lasted until World War II; the period of expansion that lasted roughly from the end of the war until the mid 1970s; and the period of retrenchment and reform, which is still underway (Alber 1988a). Such an explanation has to be historical, not epochal.

Of course, historical approaches to the study of the welfare state are not new, but they tend to be dominated by what we could call the Historical-Events method of analysis, and this is the second problem in the comparative studies of welfare states. This method, whose most well known advocate is Theda Skocpol (1985), seeks to explain the historical development of welfare states by examining its formative events. Skocpol developed the method in her famous study of social revolutions (Skocpol 1979). Social revolutions are events, and Skocpol’s method was to reconstruct the political process that produced the momentous event. The application of this method to the historical development of welfare states was facilitated by a coincident development, the growth in the 1970s and 1980s of the research field known as comparative policy studies (e.g. Heidenheimer, Hecló and Adams 1990). Comparative

policy studies changed the way scholars looked at the welfare state. By studying specific policies they were able to disaggregate the dependent variable. In other words, scholars reduced the abstract idea of a welfare state to a number of discrete policy fields that could be examined separately. Policy studies lent itself to Skocpol's method of analysis, because one could identify the date a law was passed or a program was established, and reconstruct the political process that gave rise to the creation of that law or program.

The problem with this method is that scholars very quickly began to talk about policies and programs, not the welfare state. For example, one of the major criticisms of Gosta Esping Andersen's (1990) popular typology of welfare states is that it is based on social insurance. Had he looked, for example at health care, the categorization of countries would have changed dramatically. To be sure, the welfare state is comprised of a number of policies that give it its form. But if we believe that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, then we must accept that the welfare state is more than a pile of policies and programs. In addition, and more importantly, the welfare state is an idea about the proper role of the state in securing and providing for the well being of the population. This idea is what policy makers everywhere must appeal to when they develop ideas to create new programs or reform existing ones. And, the idea of a welfare state varies in different countries as a function of differences in values. When they propose reforms, politicians must invoke the idea of the welfare state in order to legitimate their proposals.

Conceptualizing the welfare state as an idea about the relationship between state and society does not lend itself to the Historical-Events Method. Ideas are not static events that can be said to have an endpoint. Rather, they change and develop over time, altered by the way people choose to reinterpret their meanings. We still use the term welfare state, even if the programs and policies that comprise it are undergoing substantial reform. Scholars stuck in the epochal paradigm debate whether the welfare state has ended, in the way a social revolution can be said to have ended (see Clayton and Pontusson 1998). This does not offer a fruitful direction for further research. We need a better conceptual and methodological approach to make sense of how welfare states today continue to evolve.

Viewing the welfare state as an idea is not an unknown change in the conceptual framework. It is the way such early theorists as T.H. Marshall (1964), William Titmuss (1958) and Asa Briggs (1985) viewed the welfare state. But this change in conceptual orientation alters how we understand the political dynamic. The idea of the welfare state is socially constructed. It becomes the standard for evaluating the justness of a particular policy proposal. The challenge for policy makers is that they must legitimate their proposals for reform, and they do this by successfully arguing that their proposals are consistent with the way a society understands how its welfare state should operate.

2. The Logic of Liberalism as a Solution

To address these problems in comparative welfare research, the first challenge is to develop an approach that can encompass the entire history of the welfare state. Historical institutionalism is such an approach, but it needs to be combined with another method to answer the second problem as well. In this section, I outline an approach called “the logic of liberalism.” Briefly, this argument defines the welfare state as an idea about the state’s role in a liberal society. Those who propose welfare reforms seek to legitimate their ideas by appealing to this conception, and doing so compels them to embrace liberal language, or pay higher transaction costs to find acceptance for non-liberal ideas. In this section of the paper I outline the theoretical foundation of this argument.

Historical institutionalism makes three important claims about political development (see March and Olsen 1989; Thelen and Steinmo 1992):

1. Political development is path-dependent, because the establishment of an institution places boundaries on the direction of further developments.
2. Institutions embody important values and reproduce them, thereby structuring the normative preferences of political actors.
3. Institutions shape the strategic calculations of political actors, who need to consider the capacities of institutions if they are to be successful in winning decisions.

These aspects of institutional theory are rather widely accepted by scholars. Recent developments in institutional theory have concentrated on the theory of agency that is needed to explain why people act and how they develop strategies of action within their institutional environment (Blyth 1998). One branch of the new institutionalism draws its action theory from rational choice, arguing that actors have autonomous preferences and see institutions as obstacles, or constraints, in the realization of their preferences. In their action strategies, actors calculate how to negotiate the institutional hurdles so as best to maximize the realization of their preferences.

Another branch of new institutionalism assumes that preferences do not develop *a priori*, but are embedded in a social environment. This perspective argues that the relationship between actions and institutions is reciprocal and dialogic, not linear and preference driven (see Hall and Taylor 1996). Indeed, this perspective is philosophically distinct because it assumes not only preferences, but also identity to be socially constructed. Actors develop their preferences as a consequence of their institutional environment, because they internalize the values upon which institutions are built. To state it simply, the difference between the two perspectives is the relative importance they attach to the social construction of meaning. For rational institutionalists, meaning is individually constructed; therefore it exists before any social environment and can be based on individual preferences. For embedded

institutionalists, meaning is socially constructed, and institutions are the vessels that carry it. Embedded institutionalism assumes a rather more fragile human ego, whereby one's sense of meaning is strongly tied to a social context. Yet logical plausibility and empirical accuracy provide a more compelling case for the embedded perspective (Sen 1977).

The institutionalization of meaning establishes a context in which actions are evaluated. Actions that accord with dominant values are deemed legitimate, and those indefensible are illegitimate. Political actors appeal to this sense of legitimacy, as this accords their actions a greater likelihood of success. Yet meaning is often ambiguous and a number of potentially contradictory actions could be deemed legitimate. The path of least resistance is to engage in acts whose legitimacy is uncontroversial. Actors who push open the envelope by proposing actions of disputable legitimacy need to find a way to make their proposals more acceptable to the mainstream. Tom Rochon (1998), in a marvelous study of social movements, outlines three ways in which political actors legitimate their actions.

1. *Value conversion* "is the replacement of existing cultural values with new ideas on the same topic" (Rochon 1998: 54). This involves a confrontation with existing ways of thinking. In the history of welfare states, replacing charity assistance with the idea of social citizenship is an example of value conversion.
2. *Value creation* is "the development of new ideas, concepts or categories of analysis that apply to situations that had not previously been the subject of explicit cultural values" (Rochon 1998: 54). Most of the success of the environmental movement stemmed from its ability to create new values that legitimated programs to save endangered species, promote recycling and avoid climate change.
3. *Value connection* is the development of a conceptual link between phenomena that previously were not seen to be connected. In the era of welfare reform, policy makers justify cuts in pension benefits on the basis of intergenerational equity. Equity is not a new value, but this application of it is novel. In societies where the public accepts these new linkages, reforms are easier to implement.

When these new connections or conversions are accepted by a society, they alter that society's shared conception of meaning. The values are institutionalized and become part of the new conception of meaning. Future actors take them for granted. In this way, political action brings about social change, but that change tends to have an incremental bias. Radical policy changes will be difficult to legitimate, and therefore are least likely to be successful. Less radical changes that more persuasively connect to the existing value structure have a greater chance for success.

If we think of the effort to legitimate a policy proposal as a transaction cost, the costs of legitimating radical reforms are higher than for incremental reforms. Strategic actors may not

always be sensitive to transaction costs, but most are likely to be, and therefore will seek to lower transaction costs by pursuing incremental change.

In western countries, liberal institutions define the political and economic realms. All countries possess liberal economies, recognizing contracts, free markets, property rights, etc. They vary in the way the state organizes market processes, but these produce variations on a theme, not fundamentally different economic systems. All are some version of a mixed market economy (Kesselman, et. al. 1997). Political institutions are even more decidedly liberal. All western democracies are based on the rule of law, individual rights, and procedural systems of representation that give individuals the opportunity to participate in politics. Again, there are variations on these themes, but at their core, they are all liberal polities.

Liberal political and economic institutions have educative effects that reproduce liberal values. Contact with these institutions teaches people about liberal values and that those values are highly regarded. The result is that actors tend to internalize liberal values. Actors then adjust their preferences accordingly. As they act on their preferences, people reconfirm liberal values and contribute to placing political development on a path-dependent course. Radicals and renegades are not precluded by this argument. Indeed, every liberal society has lots of people who advocate sharply illiberal ideas. But these people operate on the margins unless they can find a way to capture wider attention. If they wish to motivate normal people to support their ideas, they have to connect their ideas to the existing value structure. In a liberal society, the processes of value connection, conversion and creation can be described as *embourgeoisement*. People gain support for their ideas by wrapping them in liberal language. This draws the mainstream to embrace new ideas, but it also pulls their advocates closer to the mainstream. In the balance of gravitational pull, the liberal mainstream, supported by stronger institutions, pulls harder. Though not inevitable, embourgeoisement is the most likely outcome as the values and preferences of actors drift towards the liberal center.

The history of the welfare state offers a useful case for application of this idea. That is not the purpose of this paper, but I discuss it briefly to make the case. In the early part of this century, the term welfare state was unknown. The original social policies were conceived as a response to the “socialfrage,” the question of how the state can maintain peace in an industrializing economy. Workers insurance, and in some countries improvements in poor relief were the policy responses to the social question, and they were formulated in a world where liberalism was transforming political, economic, even social institutions. The liberalization of life was more or less successful in various countries, and the degree to which liberalism was established had a large impact on the early development of social policy.

As liberal political institutions became more established they moderated the character of party politics. Parties on the left and right of the political system were confronted with

important choices. They could remain true to their ideological principles, at the risk of remaining marginal actors in the political system, or they could moderate their appeal in the hopes of gaining influence. Moderation required exercises in value creation, conversion and connection. Moderates sought to broaden their appeal by demonstrating how their values were related to widely held values. As the political systems became more liberal, the process of moderation brought about an *embourgeoisement* of ideological principles. Embourgeoisement of social democrats was quick and pronounced in some countries. For example, in Denmark (Petersen 1996) and the Netherlands (Brinkman 1993), social democrats embraced the bourgeois principles of the British Beveridge Plan, and made social rights part of their party manifestos. In Germany, the opponents of the Beveridge Plan were stronger, and resisted the efforts of social reformers to write the language of social rights into the welfare system.

In the postwar period, embourgeoisement also changed the orientation of parties of the right. In Germany the Social Market Economy was a Christian democratic idea that combined a liberal economic order with a Christian ethic (Alber 1988b, Kersbergen 1995). In the Netherlands the embourgeoisement of Christian democrats was more decisive (Cox 1993b). The embourgeoisement of the right accelerated during the 1980s. Margaret Thatcher moved the British Conservative Party off its traditional emphasis on noblesse oblige to embrace individual rights and responsibilities. Christian democrats in Germany began to speak in terms of liberal rights, and implemented welfare reforms that emphasized individuals more than families (Borchert 1995).

3. Liberal Convergence and Policy Borrowing

Policy borrowing is not a new development, and was commonplace in the historical development of the welfare state. Bismarck's programs were examined closely by others. British social reformers in the 19th Century examined Denmark's new Poor Law (Levine 1988). The Beveridge Report was borrowed extensively in such disparate countries as the Netherlands and Pre-communist Czechoslovakia (Cox 1993a). Borrowing has always occurred, and in each case it was prompted by a myriad of causes. Sometimes the policy makers engaged in careful and systematic examinations of foreign countries to find a variety of solutions to a similar problem and borrow ideas they could use. Sometimes they borrowed entire programs (Robertson and Waltman 1992). Often less systematic investigations caused learning by accident, as for example when officials from different countries happen to meet at an international conference (Deacon and Hulse 1997). But what caught the attention of welfare state researchers in recent years was the increase in the amount of borrowing, and the growing importance of foreign models in the public debate about welfare reform. In Europe, and especially in Germany (Pinzler 1997; Schmid 1997) the Dutch miracle captured the attention first of journalists, then of academics. Intense scrutiny caused the bud to fall from

the rose, as people realized the model was not as perfect as originally thought. The next year Denmark became the model country, followed by New Zealand, and the coming year may bring yet another model.

The logic of liberalism provides a way to understand the increase in policy borrowing across countries. As the argument describes, the basis upon which policy makers legitimate their ideas represents an embourgeoisement of welfare states. This process occurs in content, as the character of programs becomes more residual, contributory and individualistic. And there is a borrowing of rhetoric, as the terminology used to justify reforms exhibits increasingly similar, liberal themes. How do we explain this phenomenon?

Such a convergence breaks down the distinctions that were often assumed to exist between welfare states. These distinctions, for example between social democratic, Christian democratic and liberal models of the welfare state, created social constructions that influenced policy makers. When there were families of welfare states, decision-makers looked for ideas from among those foreign examples they perceived were like their own. This reduced the cost of borrowing ideas, because the similarities in the environments meant that the principles upon which the programs were legitimated, as well as the institutional configurations were more likely to be compatible.

There is an extensive literature on the topic of policy borrowing that establishes this point. According to that literature, officials look to countries they perceive to be similar to their own, or to have problems like theirs. Borrowing is even heaviest among countries with a similar language, because policy makers understand their foreign colleagues easier (Studlar 1993; Wolman 1992). Even on the subnational level, research on policy borrowing among the states in the American federal system demonstrate that borrowing is most vigorous among neighboring states, or states with similar political and administrative cultures (Hanson 1991).

The logic of liberalism, and the embourgeoisement of politics breaks down the barriers that may once have inhibited borrowing. When policy makers believed there were ideological differences among welfare states, they used this as a filter to select the countries they would consider. Now, ideology has disappeared from the equation, and policy makers are more self-consciously pragmatic in their quest for foreign lessons. The American case is no longer irrelevant to the European discussion because some of the specific programs offer useful ideas to pragmatic reformers.

The increased frenzy of borrowing can also be attributed to the rapid increase of information, but this explanation is incomplete. Internet technologies and the general improvement in news services have produced a wealth of information on countries that never before would have received much attention (e.g. New Zealand). But what makes the technological explanation incomplete is that the increase in information makes every country

a potential model for borrowing. Why, then, does the debate seem to latch onto a few specific countries, and treat them like fads and fashions?

In this new, non-ideological, pragmatic environment, fad and fashion has become a new filter for information. Confronted with information overload, people are not inclined to search vigorously for other models. Decision-makers are often forced to make quick decisions, without the time or resources to make an exhaustive study of the subject (Rose). Because of this they rely on fad and fashion to substitute for ideology as the filtering mechanism.

Filtering mechanisms are also useful for legitimating proposals. The obviousness of an ideological similarity between one's own and a different welfare state once made it easy to justifying importing a policy from that country. Now, in the search for pragmatic solutions, everyone is looking for the country with the best policies. That means they are all looking for the same country. This produces a swarming effect as a country is discovered and there is a rush to take ideas from it. It doesn't even matter if the successes of the model case are not confirmed, and that after the initial euphoria, disappointment prompts a drift to a new case. Instead, the swarming activity around a few fashions provides the comfort of crowds. One is not completely wrong when in the company of others. Lemmings may be wrong, but they do not die alone.

4. The Dutch Case as Illustration

The attraction of many of these foreign models is their ability to satisfy the interests of disparate political groups. The attraction of such models as the Netherlands, Denmark and New Zealand is that their economies are successful, measured in traditional economic terms, and this is combined with a strong commitment to extensive social provision. Because the economic success is measured in traditional terms, it cannot be disputed by neo-liberals. And, the ability to combine reform with a strong commitment to improving the situation of the disadvantaged captures the attention of social democrats. The ability to satisfy the value preferences of the left and right makes these countries especially attractive to pragmatic policy reformers.

For left wing pragmatists, these countries demonstrate how policies important to the left's major constituency can be maintained while undermining the potential criticism of right wing opponents. The same is true for right wing governments. They too, can argue that these countries provide examples for how to liberalize the welfare state, and to do so in a way that avoids open confrontation with the supporters of welfare programs. The combination opens the political space for reform. But can the examples be so idyllic? Closer examination of the Netherlands should cast some doubt.

The key to the Dutch miracle is the long running commitment of the labor unions to wage moderation (Visser and Hemerijck). Wage moderation has permitted a success story that conforms to orthodox economic principles. If one wants to be more competitive, one must lower the costs of production because this lowers the cost of goods and allows businesses to maintain their market position in the face of increasing global competition. Wage moderation, because it curbs the growth of labor-related production costs, is consistent with this orthodoxy. Yet in the Netherlands, wage moderation has come without a substantial reduction in the level of social support. The generosity that made the Dutch welfare state famous appears to be intact. This is the “too good to be true” combination that attracts foreign attention.

The answer is a series of long term consequences that are overlooked by many who have examined the Dutch miracle. The first problem is to explain how a labor movement would embrace wage moderation since it is simply not in their interest to do so? The answer is that Dutch unions actually are weak actors in the policy process and have been unsuccessful in defending their interests. Declaring themselves to be placing economic growth ahead of their own interests is nothing more than an effort to put a good face on a bad situation, and to claim some credit for the economic success.

Wage moderation happened in the Netherlands because a number of important welfare reforms crowded wages off the table in collective bargaining. I briefly discuss two of these; the relaxation of mandatory requirements for many types of social insurance and the development of tax-advantaged private savings schemes.

The relaxation of mandatory requirements is a reform that many countries have implemented to help stem the growth in social insurance. Often called privatization, the effect of this change moves social insurance from the realm of public policy and onto the collective bargaining table. When governments relax the requirement to provide social insurance, unions seek to patch the ensuing holes in the safety net by using collective bargaining to reinstate their lost coverage. In the Netherlands, this privatization has occurred in widows and orphans benefits, sickness, and is being debated in the area of disability (OECD 1998; Fase 1995; Teulings, Veen and Trommel 1997). In each case, unions claimed credit for maintaining coverage because they were able to reinstate the benefits in collective bargaining. Employers win because even though they are still paying for insurance schemes, adding them to the collective bargaining table crowds wages off the table. Related to this is a growing role Dutch unions have taken on to provide worker retraining. As a response to globalization, unions are seeking to keep their members employed by training them to operate the new information technologies. To provide such training, however, unions need resources, and this has become another of the “wage-crowding” demands in collective bargaining.

The second development is the expansion of tax-encouraged savings schemes. These schemes allow employees to place a portion of their income into special savings accounts. To promote such accounts, the money placed in them is exempted from income taxes and social contributions. There are at least four different types of such schemes in the Netherlands and their relation to wage moderation has not been carefully examined by the proponents of the Dutch model. This is surprising given that the legislation that established one of the schemes was titled the Wage Moderation Act (Ackermann, Bolhuis, and Weeren 1994). Each of these schemes establishes a perverse incentive. By shifting part of his wages into such an account, an employee can gain a small wage increase if he considered the forgiven tax debt a gain in income. Because they provide a legal means to avoid social contributions, these schemes undermine social solidarity. The authors of the Wage Moderation Act justified it as a reform that would help to increase the distance between those inside and outside the labor force. Moreover, the benefits, and the incentive to participate in the schemes are greater for people with higher incomes (Venema and Weeren 1995). Employers also have strong incentives to promote these schemes because the compensation is also exempt from the employer's portion of the social contribution (Bikker 1994). Other programs operate with similar incentives, and they are used extensively in the Netherlands.

If we consider the long-term consequences of these changes, they point towards a creeping liberalization that gets overlooked by most foreign observers (Veen and Trommel 1997). The system of social support may still be generous in the Netherlands, though it is now a product of collective bargaining, not state mandate. But when welfare benefits move into the realm of civil society, they become subject to the bargaining capacity of social actors to protect and defend them. For many forms of assistance, one no longer can speak of a right to assistance in the Netherlands. Instead, the degree to which people have such assistance will be a function of their ability to negotiate for it in the private sphere. In the future, when labor is weaker, they may easily lose the support they now enjoy. At least they will not have the state on their side.

If this is the effect, why then, has the Netherlands been such a model case? There is no simple answer to this question, but much of it can be explained as a function of swarming and a greater concern with the rhetoric of policy debates than the substantive reality of policy reform. As a function of swarming, the initial attention in the Netherlands was induced by the attractiveness of its macro economic performance. Modest economic growth throughout the 1990s combined with a dramatic drop in the rate of unemployment. The initial attention to the country was encouraged by a few entrepreneurial Dutch officials who sought to capitalize on their country's new image as a model case. The new image was especially important for a country that only a decade earlier was derided as the exact opposite. Dutch Disease was a phrase associated with high unemployment and stagnant economic performance.

Though the realities of economic and social reform dispersed many of the swarm, who moved on to discover other models, such as Denmark and New Zealand, those who stuck around found helpful lessons in the way the Dutch implemented major policy reform with a minimum of social unrest. Unions remained pacified and no other social group raised strong objections. On this point, the important lesson of the Dutch case is how one packages liberal reforms for general consumption. For example, in the 1980s, the initial debate over global competitiveness threatened to cause polarization between unions and employers. Instead, Dutch officials engaged in a series of value conversions that helped to create support for the reforms. Jelle Visser and Anton Hemerijck (1997) called this a process of puzzling and powering, whereby repeated rounds of debate led first to consensus about the nature the policy problems, then agreement on how to handle them.

The important part of this process was how it altered the collective understanding of the welfare state, and how this opened political space for policy reform. For example, in the 1980s, employers asked for more flexibility of labor legislation to allow them to better utilize their productive capacity. Unions opposed this, perceiving flexibility to be a trojan horse that would bring on shift-work, part-time work and weekend schedules. As they puzzled through this process, someone (the record is not clear who) chose to repackage the problem. They found a solution in the discussion over the growing number of women in the work force. Many of these women, it was argued, chose to work part time precisely it afforded them flexibility to balance work with family duties. Excessive regulation was portrayed as stifling of individual choice and a welfare state based on “one-size-fit-all” mandates was perceived to be inappropriate to the new economic world. In a short time, the whole debate about flexibility turned on its head and unions embraced it as a concept that would give their members more control over how they balance work and family (or work and leisure).

These types of rhetorical shifts are the gold to be mined from foreign examples. The specific content of policy may or may not work if imported, but what policy reformers always learn from a successful case is that reforms well presented establish the legitimacy necessary to make them broadly accepted. Today, Germany’s “Standortdebatte” is the same debate over flexibility that took place a decade ago in the Netherlands. In Germany, however, the debate has produced a stalemate because unions are loath to accept the kinds of reforms that have been implemented in the Netherlands. If German policy makers really want to learn from the Dutch case, they should look not in the specific details of policy, but at the rhetorical skills employed by some officials to shift the debate away from areas of conflict and onto generate legitimacy.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to explain the sudden increase in borrowing of welfare reforms across countries. My explanation is simple, but it rests on a controversial claim that this paper carefully details. That claim is that the present spate of cross-national borrowing is the result of a process of liberalization that has been underway throughout the entire history of the development of welfare states.

Drawing upon the new institutionalism, I argued that the adoption of the first welfare programs coincided with the entrenchment of liberal political and economic institutions and that these reproduced liberal values in society. A theory of agency that focuses on the process by which policy reformers seek to legitimate their reforms encourages an embourgeoisement of politics as reforms are adjusted to conform to liberal values.

This liberalization of politics has broken down the distinctions that were once thought to create families of welfare states. As politics has become more pragmatic, the search for best cases produces a swarming effect, as reformers from around the world seek to learn from model cases. But the real lessons of these model cases lies not in the details of their policies, but in the way reformers legitimate their proposals for reform.

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