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**Review of *Reconciling Work and Poverty Reduction: How Successful are European Welfare States?* Bea Cantillon and Franz Vandenbroucke (Eds.), and *Activation or Workfare? Governance and the Neo-liberal Convergence.* Ivar Lødemel and Amilcar Moreira (Eds.). Reviewed by James Midgley**

James Midgley  
University of California, Berkeley, midg@berkeley.edu

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## Book Reviews

Bea Cantillon and Franz Vandenbroucke (Eds.), *Reconciling Work and Poverty Reduction: How Successful are European Welfare States?* Oxford University Press (2014), 464 pages, \$40.00 (hardcover).

Ivar Lødemel and Amílcar Moreira (Eds.), *Activation or Workfare? Governance and the Neo-liberal Convergence.* Oxford University Press (2014), 384 pages, \$59.99 (hardcover).

The role of employment as the primary means of promoting people's welfare has long been recognized. The policies of the New Deal in the United States, the recommendations of the Beveridge Report in Britain and the emergence of the Scandinavian welfare states after the Second World War were all predicated on the principle of full-employment supported by family leave, child care and other policies that promote work. However, many social policy scholars are ambivalent about work, believing that social needs should be met independently of employment and that benefits should be provided to those in need on the basis of rights. This view has been reinforced by the idea that social welfare should decommodify labor and that entitlements to benefits should be unconditional and unilateral. Although popular in social policy circles, this view has been challenged by policymakers, and various measures that promote employment have been given high priority. It is in this context that the two books reviewed here provide interesting insights into current thinking about the relationship between work, poverty reduction and social welfare. Both books focus on Europe and raise a number of important issues of policy relevance today.

The first book, edited by Cantillon and Franz Vandenbroucke, seeks to unravel the complex relationship between work, poverty and social welfare. As the editors explain in the book's introduction, this is a complex relationship in which the respective contribution of employment and

social benefits to poverty reduction is not properly understood. To investigate this relationship, they commissioned a number of chapters that focus on different aspects of the debate such as the meaning and measurement of poverty, the role of employment, particularly low-wage employment, and the contribution of social policies that invest in the capabilities of workers and enhance their participation in the productive economy. This latter aspect reflects the growing interest among European scholars and policy makers in what is called *social investment*, which some believe represents a new phase in welfare state development, replacing the earlier neoliberal and democratic approaches.

The book's first batch of chapters dealing with poverty show just how complicated attempts to define and measure poverty are and how difficult it is to reach conclusions about poverty trends and the extent to which social investment policies and programs contribute to poverty reduction. Nevertheless, there is evidence to show that despite increased social spending, poverty remains a persistent and apparently intractable reality in many European countries. The second batch of chapters deals with social investment, focusing on social policies and programs that create and support work. As mentioned earlier, social investment has recently become a popular issue in European social policy circles and the literature on the subject has increased exponentially. In an interesting analysis, Hemerijck concludes that social investment marks a profound change in European social policy, and several other authors agree, pointing out that many governments have prioritized social investment, with the result that social spending on active labor market and related policies has increased.

However, it is not clear whether this has been to the detriment of traditional social spending on cash transfers. A chapter by De Deken admits that the evidence is mixed and that the methodological issues make it extremely difficult to reach conclusions on this question. Also, it is not clear that the social investment approach has positive implications for redistribution. Indeed, the chapter by Van Lancker and Ghysels contends that family policies that support employment have what is cleverly called a "Matthew effect," benefiting the middle-class

rather than poor. Of course, this issue is not new, having been debated by Titmuss and his colleagues at the London School of Economics in the 1950s. In the light of these complexities, the editors conclude that there is still a great deal that sociologists and social policy scholars do not know about poverty, employment and social policy in Europe. The question of whether the social investment approach is paying dividends is also undecided. Nevertheless, despite the book's tentative conclusions and eclectic nature, it makes a significant contribution to understanding the complex relationship between poverty, work and social welfare.

The second book, edited by Lødemel and Moreira, is more tightly focused on labor activation policies and programs that have been adopted by many Western governments over the last two decades, largely in response to persistent unemployment or, otherwise, to the perceived economic and social problems that are alleged to accompany the payment of social assistance cash benefits. In a useful introduction, the editors grapple with the diverse ways the concept of labor activation has been employed. They distinguish between the "workfare" approach, designed to reduce the numbers of recipients of social assistance benefits by requiring employment, and the active labor market policy (ALMP) approach, which is not focused exclusively on social assistance recipients but rather seeks to promote labor force participation in general. They also provide a helpful summary of the findings of the book's country case studies which were specifically commissioned to document trends in activation as well as welfare to work programs in a number of Western nations—including Norway, Denmark, Germany, United Kingdom, France and the United States, as well as Portugal and the Czech Republic—which do not feature prominently in the comparative social policy literature. These country case studies are very thorough and provide a wealth of descriptive information about recent developments. The chapter on the United States focuses primarily on the TANF program and is useful for providing information about recent developments in the program's implementation.

In addition to providing descriptive information, the contributing authors were asked to examine governance patterns and the way they affect activation in each country. This aspect

of the book is less coherent, primarily because terms like *governance* have been used in very different ways and also raise a host of complex conceptual issues. Consequently, the question of whether the governance of these programs is being shaped by neo-liberal ideology remains elusive, although the editors do point out in their excellent summary that outsourcing of job training and job placement services to commercial providers has increased significantly in recent years. They also show that activation programs are being increasingly decentralized and managed by local government authorities.

Another interesting finding is the way activation policies in a number of countries have moved away from a simplistic "work first" approach inspired by developments in the United States in the 1990s to a more nuanced set of policies and programs designed to promote economic participation. They point out that greater use is being made of counselors, advisers and job coaches who seek to address the individual needs of different clients. They wonder whether this marks the beginning of a "second wave" of welfare-to-work reforms characterized by greater complexity and diversity.

Both books are part of the International Policy Exchange Series edited by Douglas Besharov and Neil Gilbert that has produced a useful collection of books on comparative social policy in recent years. Like some of the other books in the series, the two reviewed here reveal the extent to which comparative studies in social policy have become far more nuanced and sophisticated. Although the field retains a strong preference for typologies that reduce the complexities of government intervention in social welfare to a series of simplistic categories, both books show just how complicated the issues are. They also suggest that more research is needed to understand the way governments develop and implement policies that enhance social well-being in the context of the rapidly changing world of work, economic development and welfare. Both books, and the series, are to be commended for tackling these difficult issues.

*James Midgley, School of Social Welfare,  
University of California, Berkeley*