

Workfare Tendencies in Scandinavian Welfare Policies

by

Nanna Kildal

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Abstract

During the 90s, the problem of unemployment has been answered by workfare-similar welfare reforms throughout Western societies. In this article the focus is on the shaping of these policies in Scandinavian welfare states. The first part consists of a conceptual discussion and demarcation of the concept of 'workfare' in relation to other activation policies as 'active labour market policy' and 'welfare to work' programmes. Secondly, the overall institutional pattern of the Scandinavian welfare states is presented along with an empirical overview of the policy-trends and their workfare elements, and lastly, the workfare-tendencies is evaluated normatively in relation to some basic ideas of democratic, decent societies, and in relation to the Scandinavian universalistic welfare model.

Workfare Tendencies in Scandinavian Welfare Policies

By Nanna Kildal

1. Some ideas in European welfare policies

Unemployment, or worklessness, is firmly on the agenda in Western welfare policies. The problem of non-work is given much political attention even in countries with no experience of high unemployment rates, such as Norway, which has recently introduced welfare reforms to confront this problem. Another feature of European welfare policies is the general trend of the reforms; towards active measures rather than passive, sanctions rather than incentives, duties rather than rights. Further trends include the approval of a public contract approach rather than a rights-based approach and an emphasis on selectivity rather than universality (Ferrera & Rhodes 2000 p. 4-5). Thus, there seem to be a kind of convergence both in the interpretation of political challenges, as in the political answers, irrespective of national institutional preconditions.

This tendency towards convergence in national welfare policies is, it is true, mixed with divergent trends in other respects. Nonetheless, there are reasons to affirm that “another strand of thinking has been sweeping the world”, a strand which is presented in three characteristic forms: ‘active labour market policies’, ‘workfare’ and ‘welfare-to-work’ programmes (Standing 1999 p. 313). The Scandinavian welfare states are no exception in being affected by the new ideas. And even if the significance of this policy change is yet quite unclear, the question has been raised whether these states are in fact experiencing a ‘silent revolution’ (Goul Andersen 1999).

This article is concerned with the ‘workfare’ variant of the new policies. The aim is to trace workfare tendencies in the welfare reforms of the 1990s, in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Furthermore, as all welfare programmes express certain norms and ideas, some normative issues raised by the new workfare policies will be discussed. Finally, workfare policy will be considered in the light of a basic idea of equality which, according to Dworkin (2000) no legitimate government can neglect: that citizens should be treated with equal concern and respect.

However, to be able to trace and discuss workfare programmes, a definition is needed that delimits these from the other above-mentioned policies, ‘active labour market policy’ and ‘welfare to work’ programmes. Even if they all are activation policies, they still remain distinctive, a fact that is frequently ignored in contemporary welfare discourses. ‘Workfare’ is sometimes so vaguely and broadly conceptualised that important distinctions and normative issues are blurred, like the ones between different kinds of duties (more or less strictly enforced), and different kinds of activity (e.g. ‘work’, ‘education’). The Scandinavian ‘active labour market policy’ is for instance sometimes referred to as a model for ‘welfare-to-work’ programmes, or it is fused with workfare policies (Giddens 1998 p. viii; King & Wickham-Jones 1999 p. 71; Torfing 1999, p. 9, 23).¹

¹ In an article on Danish workfare policies, Torfing defines workfare as both ‘offensive’ and ‘defensive’ active labour market policy, and as “the subordination of social policy to economic demands for greater labour-market flexibility and lower public social expenditure” (ibid.). These characterisations are of little analytical help in clarifying essential traits of the policy and, not least, in considering its normative principles.

2. Three forms of activation policies

‘Activation’ as a socio-political labour market strategy has a long history in Scandinavian countries. The term is broad and refers to a wide range of policies that i.a. are targetted at people receiving public benefits, and/or in danger of being excluded from the labour market (Drøpping et al. 1999). Goals and measures may differ; the goals may be (re)entrance into the labour market, the development of work-related skills etc., while the measures may vary from voluntary training to obligatory work programmes. Other instruments may be job creation, wage subsidies and financial incentives. ‘Activation’ is thus an ‘umbrella concept’ comprising a multitude of schemes (Abrahamson 1999 p. 411). Its popularity today reaches far beyond the Scandinavian countries; the concept has become representative of the new Western welfare thinking.

2.1 *Active labour market policy*

‘Active labour market policies’ (ALMP) together with a general welfare policy and a solidarity wage policy, characterize the Scandinavian countries of the post-war period (Meidner 1997 p. 88). The aim – the achievement of full employment in times of economic restructuring – has made this policy a key indicator in classifications of welfare states. ALMP involve both universal and selective instruments, such as general economic policy and actions aimed at specific regions, at industries, or at certain groups of people. Educational programmes, training and other competence-building activities have been the main strategies for adapting the labour force to structural changes within the labour market.

Participation in these programmes has traditionally been based more on rights and opportunities and less on duties and sanctions. Nevertheless, ALMP programmes include both carrots and sticks. Even the so-called ‘passive’ part of labour market policies, income maintenance schemes, promotes the goal of full employment insofar as recipients of unemployment benefits are required to actively seek work. It is precisely this linking of social security systems with labour market services that underlies the ‘work’ and ‘activity approaches’ in Scandinavian welfare policy. It has given the Scandinavian welfare being regarded as ‘the activist corner’ of Europe (Hvinden 1999).

Over the past decades, though, the goal of full employment has proved increasingly difficult to reach through ALMP. According to Rudolf Meidner, ‘father’ of the post-war Swedish labour market policy, this policy is capable of taking care of three to four percent of the labour force in a situation with low unemployment. An increase in this rate tends to reduce the efficiency of the programmes (Meidner 1997 p. 95). Esping-Andersen (1999) also emphasizes the difficulties meeting ALMP today. Undoubtedly we have a situation similar to that of the era of high industrialization when mass production and agricultural decline resulted in a massive outflow of rural populations. The difference is, however, that today the industrial jobs are in decline. Flexible jobs in the tertiary sector require quite different and less predictable qualifications, which represent a major challenge to labour and welfare policies (ibid. p. 24).²

² The resources that are directed towards the strengthening of education and qualifications for unemployed today will not necessarily prove to be a successful priority.

2.2 Workfare

Literally the term ‘workfare’ means ‘work-for-your-welfare’, sometimes formulated as ‘welfare-for-work’. The concept and policy of ‘workfare’ stem from US, where ‘welfare’ is the term for ‘social assistance’, the bottom safety net in American welfare policy. In regard to the popularity surrounding the concept of ‘workfare’ during the 1990s, the lack of precision is striking. In order to identify and normatively assess the policy of workfare, its essential traits must therefore be clarified. Recent research on workfare programmes in different countries makes it reasonable to distinguish four characteristics (Loftager 1998; Kildal 1999; Lødemel & Trickey 2001). Workfare programmes

1. oblige able-bodied recipients
2. to work in return for their benefits
3. on terms inferior to comparative work in the labour market, and
4. are essentially linked to the lowest tier of public income maintenance systems.

As stated above, significant distinctions between different kinds of activation policies are often blurred; not least do the ‘duty’ and ‘activity’ elements mislead politicians and researchers into equalizing workfare and ALMP. However, a duty to work on inferior conditions exclusively set by the last resort assistance system, certainly has to be separated from a duty to participate in the regular labour market. Furthermore, although failure to meet the conditions of eligibility specified by ALMP may result in the loss of unemployment benefits, a lower tier of social assistance has still been available in Scandinavia. Contrary to this situation, workfare represents an offer ‘you can’t refuse’ (Lødemel & Trickey 2001).

Although the idea of workfare has a long history in Western societies, the term originated in US during the late 1960s but as actual policy it was not established until 1981 when the US Federal legislation enabled states to introduce workfare programmes (Nathan 1993 p. 14-15). Five years later, 29 states were running variants of this policy and after Clinton’s welfare reform, The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, the number of workfare-programmes exploded. The new law limits state educational and training programmes, removes all constraints on workfare programmes, and terminate benefits after two years (Diller 1998 p. 23).³

When assessing the expansion of workfare programmes in Scandinavia, it is helpful to bear in mind the particular moral and institutional context in which the workfare policy developed, and what kind of problems it addressed. In the US dual welfare system large categories of non-working citizens are excluded from ‘Social Security’, the national social insurance scheme, and left to ‘Welfare’, which offers a number of means-tested programmes at low levels.⁴ The main recipient group is lone parents, mostly young black mothers, whose income support has been rather controversial since the introduction of welfare benefits in 1935.⁵ The main argument in favour of workfare – that generous and permissive welfare benefits cause passivity,

³ “*Two years and you’re out*” is the popular characterisation of the law, which also puts a five-year lifetime limit on the reception of welfare benefits.

⁴ These are targeted at the blind, disabled, aged, long-term unemployed and lone parents. None of these groups are expected to take paid employment, except lone parents and long-term unemployed.

⁵ Until the 1960s, most lone mothers were widows.

lack of personal responsibility, and ‘dependency cultures’ – was above all strengthened by the substantial increase in caseloads during the 1980s.

Workfare programmes in US are thus targeted at a heterogeneous group of non-working poor people. The government has never developed an active labour market policy to fight unemployment, nor an adequate welfare system to protect citizens’ income (except for the elderly). Hence, the policy of workfare was, and still seems to be, an answer to a combination of moral and financial challenges. The aims are to reinforce the work ethic and reduce caseloads in the welfare system.⁶ Traditionally, the primary aim of American welfare policy has been to end poverty. Yet the multiplication of workfare programmes after Clinton’s welfare reform, and the increase in poverty among even hard working people during the 90s, indicate that this goal has receded into the background.⁷

2.3 *Welfare to work*

In Great Britain, Blair and New Labour have put ‘Welfare to Work’ in the forefront of their modernisation programme, *The Third Way*. The aim of the reform was to bring the increase of a ‘dependency culture’ to an end by means of a comprehensive ‘New Deal’ programme based on the creation of new partnerships between public and private sectors. New Deal programmes cater for young unemployed people aged 18 to 24, the long term unemployed aged 25 plus, lone parents and disabled people. The programmes offer four options: a six month subsidized private-sector job, six months with a non-profit organisation, paid training or education (for those without basic qualifications), or work in a new ‘environment taskforce’. There is no fifth option of remaining on benefit; the unemployed aged 25 and below are sanctioned by losing their benefits.

Currently it is being debated whether this “much tougher and more market-oriented approach” in UK welfare policy may in fact be conceptualised as workfare (King & Wickham-Jones 1999 p. 63). Although ‘Welfare to Work’ programmes reflect diverse influences, it is obvious that they owe much to US’s work requirements (ibid.; Deacon 1997 p. xiii). Not least are the work requirement and the compulsion element in the lowest safety net joint characteristics of both workfare and ‘Welfare to Work’. However, even if a work requirement and a coercive element is common to the three activation policies; workfare, ‘Welfare to Work’ and ALMP, it is only workfare that lack training elements and options, and that implies inferior working conditions. In the New Deal’s four optional activities, three are in return for benefits, plus extras. The ‘subsidised job’ option, which includes training, is normally rewarded at the going rate for the job.

Neither is it appropriate to compare this programme with the traditional active labour market policies of Scandinavia. ALMP involve more activism in terms of labour market interventions and broader options for the recipient. These policies also imply less strict enforcement of the claimant’s duties and much higher benefit levels

⁶ According to Lawrence Mead, a central consultant in the designing of US workfare programmes, the main aim of workfare is to fulfil a ‘mutual obligation’ to contribute something in return for the received benefits (1997 p. 221). An example of this new ‘social contract’ approach in welfare policy is to be found in Australia which introduced a “Work for the Dole” scheme in 1998 in which the concept of ‘mutual obligation’ is central.

⁷ Today many spokesmen for workfare prefer the term ‘new-style-workfare’, which combines the recipients’ obligation to work and the obligation on the part of the state to provide services, such as child care etc. (Nathan 1993). ‘Learnfare’ and ‘fair workfare’ are also terms that are gaining popularity.

and an additional safety net, social assistance. As a work programme, it seems that 'Welfare to Work' should be placed somewhere between workfare and ALMP.

3. Scandinavian welfare policy

Among the diversity of welfare state systems, more or less distinctive patterns of institutional design have emerged, expressing common ideals and values, a common internal logic. This especially applies to the Scandinavian welfare states. Whether described as an 'institutional redistributive model' (Titmuss 1958) or a 'social democratic welfare-state regime' (Esping-Andersen 1990), one of the most distinctive traits of Scandinavian welfare policies is that public benefits are instituted as social rights to high-level benefits. In principle, thus, the benefits cover all citizens regardless of achievements or financial means. In reality, though, the benefits are far from independent of the citizens' work related conduct.⁸

According to Esping-Andersen, a welfare regime is characterized by the way risks are pooled, hence the Scandinavian welfare states share some central features in dealing with risks (1999 p. 33-7). All three have step by step defined more risks as 'social' risks, i.e. as responsibilities of the state, thus expanding the categories of citizens with legitimate needs for income protection. And, although these welfare states act in conformity with the market, there has been a distinct effort to minimise citizens' dependency on the market, to de-commodify their welfare through universal generous benefits (Esping-Andersen 1990).

The inherent logic of Scandinavian welfare policy is thus associated with Marshall's idea of a welfare state (1950/1992). According to Marshall, good reasons for a welfare state are to moderate class divisions and protect the equal status of all citizens. By guaranteeing social rights to everyone, inequalities produced by the market are transcended. The welfare state thus lays the foundation of a democratic citizenship for all members of society. In this inclusive idea of citizenship rights is a constitutive element; benefits are established as social rights, not as mere subsidies, gifts or favours that the society may demand to have repaid (Reamer 1990 p. 143).

However, even if the Scandinavian countries have taken responsibility for a wide range of risks, they do not cover them all. Needy citizens, who neither receive income from wealth or work, nor fit into the national income-security system, are rescued by residual safety nets, Social Assistance Acts. These are framework acts, highly selective, that establish municipal welfare responsibilities for distributing social assistance on the basis of individual assessments and with extensive social control.

A third central feature of the Scandinavian welfare states, besides universal, generous social insurances, and selective, meagre safety nets, is the commitment to 'full employment'. Among comparable welfare regimes, the Scandinavian countries enjoy the highest rates of employment, including the highest rates of female employment, and the most comprehensive active labour market programmes. In 1954

⁸ For instance, in 1994 Denmark introduced a partial income-test of the supplementary part of the old-age pension, and Sweden passed a welfare reform in 1998 that restricts the universal basic payment to people with no or low employment activity. Also Finland's old-age pension reform of 1996-97 strengthens the link between pensions and contributions, while Norway, with its earnings-related supplementary pension scheme dating from 1967, increased its basic minimum pension substantially in 1998 (Kuhnle 2000 p. 388).

the 'Right to work' was even incorporated into the Norwegian constitution. A characteristic of the logic behind these welfare states is thus the close relation between the institutions of welfare and work; the Scandinavian countries stand out as both 'strong work societies' and 'strong welfare states'.

4. Current workfare tendencies

The 'active labour market policy' and the 'work approach' have been cornerstones of welfare policy since World War II, especially in Norway and Sweden. However, as indicated above ALMP seem to be less successful in contemporary socio-economic transformations than previously, when the structural policy steered (re)trained unemployed into new jobs in the emerging industries. In the current processes of flexibilisation and tertiarisation the situation calls for new solutions, and during the 1990s new 'work' and 'activity approaches' emerged in the three countries. While positive incentives, 'carrots', characterised ALMP, it is the negative ones, the 'sticks', that characterise the new work approaches. Tightened eligibility criteria and reduced periods and levels of support are among the characteristics of the new policies, which of course vary between the countries.⁹

The primacy of work has always been central to Scandinavian welfare legislation. Except for some social insurances like child and youth allowances, benefits for old age and for lone parents etc, welfare programmes are generally accompanied by varied kinds of obligations, especially the obligation to actively seek for work. The most distinctive difference between the new and old work approaches is thus the introduction of a quite new kind of requirement: a duty to work in return for benefits in the lowest tier of the income maintenance system. It is this workfare element of the new welfare policies in Scandinavia which may be regarded as a new trajectory, different from income security policy in terms of social rights which comes close to a 'citizen's wage trajectory' (Goul Andersen 2000 p. 80). In the following some central welfare reforms will be presented to describe this path in Denmark, Sweden and Norway.¹⁰

⁹ For instance, while the qualifying conditions for sickness insurance have been tightened in Finland and Sweden, but not in Norway and Denmark, all four countries have introduced stricter qualifying conditions for unemployment insurance (Kuhnle *ibid.*).

¹⁰ Since the beginning of the 1990s, the political and macroeconomic developments in these countries have differed in terms of EU membership, the strength of the social-democratic parties, and not least, economic growth. The difference can be illustrated by the following unemployment figures:

	1990	1993	1998	
Norway	4.3	5.5	2.5	%
Sweden	1.6	10.4	6.5	%
Denmark	9.7	12.4	6.6	%

(Torp 1999 p. 68).

4.1 Denmark

Since the 1970s the idea of ‘activation’ has become well established in Danish welfare and labour market policies, an idea that was strengthened during the 1980s, partly as a reaction to OECD recommendations. However, very few changes took place until the 1990s; Denmark had by then experienced several years of retrenchment and high unemployment rates, yet by slowing down the speed of social reforms and rationalising the public sector, the economic crisis was brought to a close (Goul Andersen 2000 p. 75). However, the number of people dependent on the income maintenance system had escalated parallel to fears of uncontrollable payouts, and the growth of dependency cultures, and ‘activation’ had become a key notion in the political discourse.

Piecemeal amendments were introduced until the agreement of two important reforms, a labour market reform in 1993, which was supplemented by a second (1995), and third (1998), in addition to a social policy reform, implemented in 1998. Although the significance of these reforms is contested, some researchers interpret them as definite implementations of a workfare trajectory (Loftager 1998; Goul Andersen 2000). The ‘citizen’s wage trajectory’ whose main ambition was to maintain the standard of living for unemployed people, became less important. For instance, new leave arrangements (1992-93), which strengthened this path, fizzled out after some years.¹¹ This change of welfare trajectories may be read in the terminological shifts from ‘opportunities and rights’ (1990), via ‘rights and duties’ (1995), to ‘mainly duties’ (1998)¹² (Goul Andersen 1999 p. 204).

In the 1980s, unemployed people had been entitled to unemployment benefits for three years, including six months of participation in a work programme. Thereafter, this work made the unemployed eligible for three new years of benefits and so on. *The labour market reform of 1993* changed these rules. The reform comprised two elements; a decentralisation of labour market policy efforts, and activation of the unemployed through individual action plans.¹³ The aim was to improve both the qualifications of the unemployed and the labour market situation through a stronger link between ‘activation’ (job training or education) and unemployment benefits. Accordingly, the right to earn new entitlement for unemployment benefits through participation in labour market programmes was abolished. In addition, the maximum period of entitlement to benefits was reduced to seven years, of which the last three were transformed into an obligatory activation period. The availability rules and their control also became stricter.

The second labour market reform of 1993 cut the unemployment period to five years, reducing the so-called ‘passive contact period’ to two years. With the introduction of a ‘right and duty’ principle the availability duty was tightened (Larsen & Langager 1998 p. 11).¹⁴ The main aim of this ‘right and duty’ principle is to up-

¹¹ The leave arrangements, consisting of parental, educational and sabbatical leave, allowed for a temporary withdrawal from the labour market financed by public funds (Loftager & Madsen 1997). In order to encourage job-rotation, sabbatical leave required that long-term unemployed persons replaced those on leave.

¹² The Acts were implemented in 1994, 1996 and 1999 respectively.

¹³ Danish Ministry of Labour 1999, chapter 2.

¹⁴ This formulation is in accordance with international welfare vocabulary. It is nevertheless a strange formulation, as there is no logical correlation whatsoever between a person’s rights and the same person’s duties; to have a right means to have a claim on a certain treatment *from others*. Thus, just as the citizen’s right to work is correlated to the state’s duty to provide work, so the citizen’s duty to work

grade the skills and work-qualifications of the unemployed, and to strengthen the motivation to seek ordinary employment.¹⁵ In the third labour market reform in 1998, the maximum unemployment period was reduced to four years, three with obligatory, full-time activation. This was combined with an income ceiling corresponding to the maximum rate of unemployment benefit.

In 1996 special youth measures were introduced for low-skilled young unemployed people below 25, who qualified for unemployment benefits. After six months' unemployment this group has a 'right and duty' to education or work training for at least 18 months, on highly reduced benefits (Goul Andersen 2000 p. 81).¹⁶ From 1999 youth measures were extended to include all unemployed people in this age group. Also those who have acquired formal qualifications have a 'right and duty' to activation before reaching six months' unemployment.

In addition to the third labour market reform in 1998, a new *Social Assistance Act* and an *Activation Act* for social assistance claimants, were implemented. On the whole, the workfare element in Danish welfare policy is stronger in the schemes for non-insured people than for insured, and with these laws this element was strengthened. Already since the first labour market reform all social assistance recipients had been obliged to participate in some sort of activity arranged by the municipality. The new laws radically weaken the principle of income protection: a 20 percent cut in benefits is imposed on those who refuse to participate in activation schemes (Abrahamson 1999 p. 412; Goul Andersen 2000 p. 81). On the other hand, those who comply with job training will receive a wage in accordance with the collective labour market agreement, although this work does not entitle them to a new access to the unemployment benefit system. A recent change in the latter law has raised the age limit for immediate activation from 25 to 30 years, while recipients older than the age of 30 should be activated within 12 months of unemployment. A criticism, that claimants complying with the activation condition do not enjoy labour market rights similar to ordinary workers, was not taken into account in the amendment (Torfing 1999 p. 17).

Denmark has been a pioneer in Scandinavian compulsory activation: a distinctive feature of the Danish welfare and labour market reforms of the 1990s is a strong emphasis on activation and duty, and a trend towards workfare. On the other hand, as the Danish active employment measures mainly have focused on the supply side of the labour market policy, on work and vocational training, a variety of different activities have developed. Some of these may indeed be described as programmes for the development of human capital. The 'duty' element was however strengthened during the 1990s, as well as the image of activation as a second-rate 'offer you can't refuse'. According to Danish researchers, it is noteworthy that the changes towards this workfare trajectory in Denmark were introduced during the 1990s, after the recovery of the Danish economy (Loftager 1998; Goul Andersen 2000 p. 69).

is correlated to the state's right to have work performed. Since rights protect goods that are of paramount importance, the work offered should be beneficial. A duty, however, is obligatory and makes all beneficial consequences of work irrelevant. The formulation 'right and duty' is thus a confusing inconsistency.

¹⁵ Danish Ministry of Labour 1999, chapter 2.

¹⁶ Unemployment benefit reduced by 50 percent, and is thus at the same level as allowance and support in the ordinary educational system (Danish Ministry of Labour 1999, chapter 2).

What are the effects of the new policy-trend? In general, it is exceedingly tricky to evaluate complex labour market reforms like the Danish ones. The wide range of different activation measures that are in use in Denmark today naturally have different effects. A number of external factors such as economic cycles which have been in Denmark, favourable influences the labour market and the employment figures. Finally, the Danish reforms are newly implemented and their impact still. Accordingly, The Danish National Institute of Social Research emphasises in an evaluation of the reforms, that their report only gives an *indication* of the significance of the labour market effects of the reforms (Larsen & Langager 1998, p. 9). Nevertheless, the 'active line' with its strong workfare tendencies has been interpreted as a success, as it has turned out that most young unemployed were able to find a job before the activation period started, and that the unemployed in general who are about to lose their benefits, "seem surprisingly able to find a job" (Goul Andersen 2000 p. 81).

Results are naturally dependent on the kind of success criteria that are being used. Using 'participation in regular employment' as a criterion, preliminary evaluations seem to indicate that different obligatory activation measures reflect a social division among unemployed recipient: selective mechanisms work in such a way that those participants with the best qualifications end in 'job training', while those with least qualifications end in 'education'. Still, only a minority of participants in 'job training' actually achieve regular employment (Abrahamson 1999 p. 412). These findings bring in a general problem with work programmes, that the more job-ready clients are likely to be 'creamed off' while the less employable, those with problems exceeding worklessness, are left behind in the compulsory program.

4.2 Sweden

The Swedish concept 'arbetslinjen' ('the work approach') has a history dating back to 1916. The term was introduced in conjunction with the implementation of a national insurance for industrial accidents, to underscore workers' own responsibility to get back to work (Zetterberg & Ljungberg 1997 p. 82). In 1918 subsidised work for the unemployed was introduced, a preliminary initiative for the 1930s advancement of the principles of 'full employment' and the citizen's 'right to work'. In the post-war period, until the end of 1980s, Sweden was a prominent example of a country that exercised an active and effective labour market policy.

In the early 1990s, after a long post-war period of stable economic growth, the country experienced the worst economic recession since the 1930s. Both financially and politically the welfare system was challenged, with the result that "almost every part in the system is affected by ongoing reform work" (Palme & Wennemo 1998 p. 5). Several adjustments to welfare and labour policies were implemented, not least due to the explosion in unemployment figures.¹⁷ In the period 1992-96 youth unemployment (people aged 18-24) was close to 20 percent; between 1990 and 1997 the social assistance scheme doubled from SEK 6 billion to 12 billion (Johansson 2001). The government responded with a number of new measures in order to confront the unemployment problems. Among these were reduced levels of unemployment benefits and the introduction of waiting days. The municipalities were also increasingly empowered to organise and fund their own schemes in order to cope with the growing number of social assistance claimants not covered by national

¹⁷ See note 10.

security programmes (Salonen & Johansson 1999). Gradually the state's responsibility as labour market agent was transferred to the local authorities, and in 1995 the municipalities took over the entire responsibility for young people under 20. In 1998 this responsibility was extended to all the long-term unemployed aged between 20 and 25.

This shift in responsibility, from the state to the municipalities, was accompanied by a shift in responsibility from the public to the individual in the social assistance programme, i.e. a perceptible shift in the interpretation of clients' rights and duties. While the recipients primary obligation had been to actively seek work and to accept reasonable offers, this was transformed during the 1990s to an obligation to participate in municipal work or training projects. This change is made explicit in the revised Social Service Act from 1998, which says that those who refuse to participate or quit the programme may suffer a reduction or withdrawal of assistance (Salonen & Johansson 1999). As in Denmark and Norway, the act introduced a workfare element into society's last security net, the social assistance programme.

This tendency towards workfare, as this policy is defined in this article, was followed up by another act passed by the Swedish Parliament in 1998, The Responsibility of the Municipalities' Act for Young People Between 20 and 24 Years Old. This Act introduced the so-called 'Development Guarantee Programme' (Utvecklingsgarantin), addressing the young unemployed entitled to either unemployment insurance, social assistance, or to no benefits at all.¹⁸ During the first 90 days of unemployment, the local labour office is in charge of the young unemployed. Thereafter they become the responsibility of the municipalities and should be offered a place on a municipal work scheme or a competence-development programme for up to 12 months.¹⁹ For their own part, the unemployed are obliged to accept any offer, or risk losing their benefits. Contrary to former principles, but similar to Denmark's new policy, the activity in this programme do not qualify for unemployment benefits (Johansson 2001).²⁰

This is an unmistakable feature of workfare: the local authorities can require unemployed people to work for their benefits on terms that are inferior to equivalent work offered on the labour market. Moreover, there are even discrepancies between the incomes received by different beneficiaries of this scheme. They have the same duty to participate in the same work activities, but not the same right to remuneration (Salonen & Johansson 1999). While those entitled to unemployment benefits receive 80 percent of their former income as payment, those neither entitled to unemployment insurance nor social assistance receive much less (around SEK 2000 / EUR 225 per month). The compensation levels are no longer related to wages on the labour market, but to replacement levels in the social security and social assistance systems. Furthermore, as is the case with US workfare, the work activity does not qualify the recipient for unemployment insurance, sick relief or increased old-age pension.

According to a welfare report from Statistics Sweden, there has been a fairly limited decrease in total public expenditure on social benefits and services in the

¹⁸ Today the question is raised whether the municipality should be given the right to require activation from all unemployed age groups.

¹⁹ After 12 months, the individual, if still unemployed, may re-enter the activation programme after three months of job-seeking.

²⁰ The explicit model for the new Swedish policy is the Danish labour market policy of the 1990s.

period 1975-95, even though the relocation of resources for different purposes has been considerable (SCB 1997 p. 650). The labour market policy also changed character and function during the 1990s. It appears that, activity has become the central principle of many new decentralised programmes, which also are characterised by a new workfare-type of obligation.

The question remains, however, as to whether the young unemployed are becoming more employable as a result of the new legislation. As noted earlier, evaluations of labour market programmes in general cannot decisively answer whether these have had positive impacts on the labour market performances of the unemployed. Moreover, during the last years of the 1990s Sweden like Denmark, experienced a noticeable improvement of the labour market, with a reduction in unemployment rates and in the number of people engaged in various labour market measures. Accordingly, evaluations of the 'Development Guarantee Programme' seem to show the preliminary conclusions that this programme has been a success, not least due to the prosperous economic cycles (Angelin & Salonen 2000 p. 5). Still, a group of young long-term unemployed remains in the social assistance system, probably youth with serious physical or psychological handicaps.

4.3 Norway

As emphasised earlier, the primacy of work has always been central to Norwegian welfare legislation. Yet, the new 'work approach' ('arbeidslinjen') that was introduced in the Norwegian welfare discourse at the end of the 1980s, entailed more restricted access to several income protecting benefits. Similar to other contemporary work strategies, the Norwegian 'work approach' is primarily concerned with the strengthening of incentives to work, by use of sticks rather than carrots. A *Rehabilitation White Paper* of 1992, and a *Welfare White Paper* of 1995, thus brings Norway in line with other Scandinavian and European countries by explicitly declaring that the aim of the new policy is to replace the passive support in the income maintenance policy with an active linking of benefits to work requirements. The link between rights and duties is stressed; it is declared that the citizen has 'a right and a duty' to work or to prepare for work.

The new 'work approach' consists of various initiatives to increase labour market participation. The policy thus covers a range of piecemeal reforms that strengthens the link between contributions and the right to benefits. Though some non-market related benefits have also been introduced during the 1990s, such as cash support measures for parents with small children, a range of initiatives has restricted both the access to and the level of benefits for unemployment, sickness, rehabilitation, disability etc. The period of time single parents are eligible for benefits from the social security system has also, fairly dramatically, been reduced from ten to three years. The strict workfare element of the new work approach is however limited to the social assistance programme.

In the revised *Social Assistance Act* that was passed by Parliament in 1991, the municipalities were given the right to impose a new duty on recipients: to work in exchange for benefits. One of the main reasons advanced for this was to make "the connection between personal responsibility and rights perceptible" for young social assistance recipients.²¹ Neither the Act itself nor the accompanying circular from the Ministry includes any training component, and there is no separate pay scheme in

²¹ The Welfare White Paper (Velferdsmeldingen) (1994-95), p. 131.

operation for those who refuse to participate (Enjolras & Lødemel 1999 p. 480-1). Moreover, as the qualifying criteria for receiving unemployment benefits have also become stricter, unemployed newcomers to the labour market increasingly have to apply for the less favourable social assistance benefits (Torp 1999 p. 69; Halvorsen 2000). In 1997 the minimum income requirement for receiving unemployment benefit was nearly doubled, and in 1998 eligibility criteria were further tightened; from that time the obligation to accept any work the employment office might find suitable anywhere in the country was reinforced.

The new scheme comprises all the characteristics of workfare: an obligation to work in return for the benefits in the last safety net on terms inferior to comparable ordinary work on the labour market. According to the circular from the Ministry, the target group should be able-bodied social assistance recipients between 18 and 35 years old. They may be required to work a maximum of 15 hours a week in six months in individually adjusted work, in return for their social assistance.

The government provides only broad guidelines; the responsibility to implement and design the new workfare policy is principally handed over to the local municipalities. An important question is then how the municipalities actually interpret and implement the new condition in the legislation. One answer is given in an evaluation study that revealed great local variations in the implementation of the new workfare scheme (Vik-Moe & Nervik 1999). About 25 percent²² of the municipalities have put the scheme into practice in ways that, not surprisingly, vary in the use of sanctions (positive or negative), working hours, age groups etc. The content of the work activity varies too, from activities aimed at lifestyle-changes to work in the ordinary labour market. Thus, the duty to work in exchange for benefits is not a standard condition, but is adjusted individually and regionally to local labour market schemes.

This variation in the implementation of the duty is problematic as approximately 59 percent of the local authorities implement the scheme in conflict with the few specifications made by the national authorities. Moreover, according to another implementation study, the majority of the local authorities use the work requirement to design a much harsher programme than the Ministry had decided. For some of them municipal savings has become the purpose of the reform (Lødemel 1998 p. 151-52).

In Norway, as in the rest of Scandinavia, the new workfare schemes, to a certain degree, are supplementing the active labour market policies, contrary to the UK and the US, where workfare actually is the only active labour market policy. It then follows that a comparison between the workfare activities and the active labour market programmes for young people in Norway, reveal significant differences in the policies towards the same universe of people: in the ordinary labour market programmes participants are paid tariff wages, working hours are regulated, employers are partly subsidised and time is set aside for training. The most vulnerable members of this universe have thus been offered fewer benefits and less security; workfare seems to lead to a new social division of work-training as in Sweden (Lødemel 1998, p. 153). Whether the workfare work leads to steady work in the regular labour market is an issue that is far too early to elucidate in Norway, as in the other two Scandinavian countries.

²² This percentage varies from 25 to 50, depending partly on the definition of workfare.

In Sweden and Denmark, the official reasons for implementing the new welfare reforms, with their elements of workfare, were high unemployment rates and increased public spending.²³ In Norway, however, the economic situation has been quite different. After experiencing some recession at the beginning of the 90s, economic growth has been high and unemployment figures low, thanks partly to oil and gas revenues. In Norway, then, the justification for the new reforms has partly been financial concern for future generations, i.e. future challenges, and partly a concern for the work ethic and the dissolution of personal responsibility (Kildal 1998).

5. New trends in the welfare policies

Scandinavian welfare policies have undergone both minor and major changes during the 1990s, some of which imply stricter, others more generous welfare policies. The recent processes are complex and ambiguous, which may be one reason for the different interpretations of them. Whereas some maintain that the institutional characteristics of the Scandinavian type of welfare state are deep-rooted, and will remain so for the foreseeable future (Kuhnle 2000), others argue that a process of convergence is pushing diverse European welfare states towards a 'corporate welfare model' and a dualization of welfare protection (Abrahamson 1999 p. 55). 'The flight from universalism' and 'a shift of paradigm' are characteristics that sum up the latter position (Sunesson et al. 1998; Cox 1998). The message in these formulations may be somewhat dramatic. However, it is essential to bear in mind that even seemingly insignificant, piecemeal changes are more than merely instrumental and may be indicative of deeper trends in the development of the welfare policies.

In summing-up the specific 'workfare tendencies' in Scandinavian welfare policies, it may be appropriate to stress the ambiguity inherent in the trends. Although workfare tendencies are traceable in both parts of the two-tiered welfare system, they still represent only a small part of the Scandinavian welfare reforms. Furthermore, the measures are mainly regionally or locally designed, which form the basis of substantial differences in the ways these policies are shaped. The indication of *convergence* in the international welfare policies may thus go along with new *divergences*. Another tentative conclusion is that the overall income-maintaining system has not been replaced, but rather slightly scooped out and supplemented by workfare-like schemes. However, the schemes represent a decentralised, individually adapted market solution to a problem of social risks, and as such, it represents a principle *departure* from mainstream Scandinavian welfare policy, while complying closely with recommendations provided by the OECD and EU over the last two decades. Two basically conflicting paths have thus been followed in Scandinavian unemployment policy during the 1990s; a 'citizen's income trajectory' based on the right to income protection, and a 'workfare trajectory' based on the duty to work (Goul Andersen 2000). Which of these will be the winning solution will depend on a variety of factors. That the US, New Zealand, Australia and parts of Europe have chosen the latter option, will certainly constitute one of these factors.

The success of workfare in the US is said to be clear-cut, despite the methodological problems and thus highly uncertain results that are associated with such evaluations. This is clearly demonstrated by the ambiguous conclusions that may

²³ As mentioned above, not all researchers agree with this official justification, cfr. Loftager 1998 and Goul Andersen 2000 p. 69.

be drawn from different studies.²⁴ The problems that arise using either non-experimental or experimental data, and a limited time perspective, naturally also apply to Scandinavia. However, there exists a growing international literature on evaluations of long standing labour market programmes that are not unambiguous.²⁵ The success of active labour market programmes in helping the unemployed back to work is in general highly questionable. At least for the time being, it is thus not feasible to answer the pressing political question: ‘does workfare work’? However, efficiency is not the only important welfare issue, and certainly not the sole type of question that workfare programmes raise. As welfare institutions are not just instrumental tools, but moral institutions based on norms and ideas of ‘justice’ and ‘social recognition’, the normative basis of workfare will be considered to this article.

6. The workfare path: some normative challenges

Criticisms of workfare focus especially on the compulsory element. The introduction of compulsion in Blair’s New Labour policies is for instance described as a remarkable turnaround from Labour’s long held conviction that benefit entitlement for the unemployed should be unconditioned (King and Wickham-Jones 1999 p. 63). As noted previously, this coercive element is not new in a Scandinavian context. In particular Norway and Sweden have always been ‘work-societies’ with strong roots in the Protestant work ethic. The obligation to be available for work on the same conditions that apply for everyone else in society is neither new nor morally challenging (Loftager 1998). Moreover, the duty has been enforced quite liberally, allowing the claimant to reject one or two offers. Those who reject all offers eventually have forfeited their right to unemployment benefits, but even so, there has always remained a last chance for assistance in the society’s final security net. Hence, the conditionality of the right to benefits does not constitute an entirely new idea in Scandinavia. What is new, however, is the kind of activity the client is obliged to participate in, and the sanctions for not participating.

6.1 The duty to work on second-rate terms

In workfare-programmes the duty is to work for the benefit, which implies less pay and inferior conditions compared to ordinary work. An idea of ‘less valuable workers’, of a ranking of people, is accordingly a defining characteristic of workfare. Workfare workers are priced lower than other workers, and, moreover, they lack the freedom to choose their work. Nor do they have any bargaining power, or labour rights to sickness or unemployment benefits, vacation etc. Ultimately, the workfare schemes might result, not in full employment, but in the construction of a two-tiered labour market characterised by divergent ideas of rights and duties.²⁶

²⁴ The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation in New York is conducting a national evaluation of Welfare-to-Work strategies under a contract with the US Department of Health and Human Services, and has published a multitude of different regional studies that are far from unambiguous and far from optimistic.

²⁵ Naturally, this is partly due to variation in content and organisation of the programmes, and in economic environments.

²⁶ If the move of clients from welfare to work turns out to be successful, this might affect working conditions at the lower end of the labour market. In compliance with indications from US, it is likely that ‘welfare’ will lead to ‘temporary work’ and “casual earnings so low as once to have been thought unacceptable for fellow citizens” (Solow 1998 p. 38). Since labour force participation is higher today than it was 2-3 decades ago, and includes other risk groups, Solows’ claim will certainly apply also to the future of the Scandinavian societies, given the preference for a ‘workfare path’.

According to Margalit (1996), a moral minimum for practical policies in a 'decent society' is to be found in institutions that do not act in ways that provide sound reasons for a person to feel humiliated and rejected from community. In his argument "work under coercion is a paradigmatic example of humiliation", since coerced labour means the subordination of a person to a will of another (ibid. p. 255). However, most of us are forced to work under the authority of others. The fact that some of us are obliged to work on second-rate terms, will however never pass the test of a 'decent society'.

6.2 *Sanction: withdrawal of safety-net*

Social rights have never been entrenched in the same way as civil and political rights. Nevertheless, the majority of democratic welfare systems have guaranteed a safety-net for their citizens: no one should be denied basic and necessary goods. The adequate level of some of these goods, such as health, education, income and security, has always been a controversial issue. Yet, recently this discussion has been replaced by a far tougher discussion of "what should count as an adequate reason to deny citizens such a good, at whatever level it is provided" (Gutmann & Thompson 1996 p. 273, my italics). Not fulfilling the duty to work on terms no other citizens would have accepted, is an adequate reason, according to workfare spokesmen. The moral challenge of workfare programmes is accentuated by this sanction, as a participation in such programmes is 'an offer you can't refuse' (Lødemel & Thickery 2000).

With this sanction, the Scandinavian welfare states have handed back some of the responsibility for the burden of risks, to the citizens; some risks are being de-collectivised, citizens' lives are being re-commodified and the safety-net has become less secure.²⁷ The trend is towards a labourist solution to peoples' social and economic problems, a market-oriented more 'tough love'.

6.3 *Justice and recognition*

No legitimate government can neglect to treat its citizens with equal concern and respect. The basic question is though, what kind of policy equal concern and respect requires (Dworkin 2000). This is of course an awkward question. However, by posing the question negatively it should at least be possible to indicate what the policy should not be like: What kind of policy is inconsistent with the treatment of everyone with equal concern and respect?²⁸ As I have characterised it, workfare is such a policy. The reasons for this are twofold:

Firstly, a welfare policy that obliges needy citizens to participate in second-rate, inferior work is not based on an idea of the equal status of all citizens, but rather on an idea of the unequal status of citizens; some people are accorded lesser privileges than others; they are of lesser value. The policy implies a social recognition of some citizens and the denial of recognition of others, and as such it is a policy of discrimination.

²⁷ Some writers celebrate the transformation of the safety-net into a trampoline. For others, the preference for markets over people is morally disturbing.

²⁸ Principally, the understanding of what a good society requires is limited compared to the knowledge we possess concerning the evils societies may cause, cfr. Margalit (1996) and Popper (1966).

Secondly, the justification for denying needy citizens the necessary means of subsistence is based on an assessment of the citizen's responsibility for his or her fate; the claimant is to blame for his/her situation. According to a widely held idea of justice, inequality is unjust if it is caused by circumstances outside the individual's control. However, causal relations of this sort may be difficult to assess. In some cases it is obvious whether people's fates are caused by own choice such as lack of industry, or by circumstances such as lack of work opportunities. However, assessing how these causes interact is basically problematic, especially when it comes to unemployment. The interaction poses what Dworkin describes as 'a strategic problem' for most political theories (2000 p. 324). The core assumption in workfare policies, that non-work is caused primarily by lack of incentives, lack of will or of competence to assume responsibility for one's own life, is thus rather strange. The statistics clearly demonstrate that the probability of becoming 'superfluous' is a collective fate that is scarcely attributable to the individual (Habermas 2000 p. 30). The reasons to deny unemployed citizens basic goods are thus not sufficient to justify a policy of workfare.

Citizenship is a core institution of contemporary societies, essential to both justice and identity. According to Marshall, citizenship ensures that everyone is treated as a full and equal member of society, irrespective of class divisions and market-related achievements. This vision of a democratic citizenship has deeply influenced the institutions of the Scandinavian welfare states. Citizenship is however ambiguous, and involves some difficult problems, i.e. the problem of drawing a demarcation line between members and non-members. With the new workfare policies this line has been less inclusive as the recognition of citizens as full members of society is being increasingly based on the citizen's market performance. The new policy is less concerned with mutual recognition than with mutual obligation, less concerned with justice than with personal morality. The basic normative challenge of workfare policy is that it ignores the fact that non-humiliating and just institutions matter.

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