

**SOCIAL LEGITIMACY OF THE EUROPEAN
WELFARE STATE**

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justice with some empirical illustrations**

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SOCIAL LEGITIMACY OF THE EUROPEAN WELFARE STATE

**Sociological reflections on solidarity and re-distributive
justice with some empirical illustrations**

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1. Introduction

The social legitimacy of the welfare state is a continuously debated issue. In the academic literature there are two types of approaches to it. One regards largely theoretical, and often normative analyses, which point to certain developments in society that are believed to lead to an increasing rejection of the redistributive and solidaristic welfare state by large groups in society. In this approach, some authors have pointed at structural developments like the rise of the middle class as a ‘comfortable majority’ who are reluctant to extend the welfare gained for itself to the minority of the poor (Galbraith, 1992). Others have emphasized cultural developments, like the rise of post-material attitudes (Inglehart, 1990), or the increase in an individualistic a-moralistic civic ethic (Zijderveld, 1999). The second type of approach is quite rigidly empirical, surveying and analyzing people’s beliefs about the welfare state, and trying to assess whether there is a mismatch between such beliefs on the one hand, and the institutional design and actual outcomes of the welfare state on the other hand. Typical is that, while the first theoretical approach tends to come to pessimistic conclusions about decreasing and insufficient support, the findings of empirical studies in European welfare states invariably show a large public support for a comprehensive and redistributive, nationally organized welfare system (e.g., Ferrera, 1993; e.g., Pettersen, 1995; Gelissen, 2000).

Clearly, there is a need for a better understanding of the mechanisms that affect popular support for the re-distributive welfare state. In this contribution I will reflect upon such mechanisms from a theoretical sociological perspective, and provide some interesting, but admittedly not definite, empirical illustrations of my main arguments. I conclude the paper by discussing a number of compelling issues in the present-day welfare debate from the perspective presented here. Issues regard the questions whether a substantial retrenchment of European welfare states, allegedly urged for due to globalization pressures, would safeguard the support for re-distribution towards the most needy, and how the stronger emphasis on individual responsibility might impact the overall legitimacy of European welfare states.

Starting points for my discussion are, firstly, that re-distribution of life chances is a core feature and function of the welfare state institution, and secondly, that re-distribution is a two-sided process.

2. Re-distribution has two sides: solidarity and justice

The welfare state institution has many faces and it is defined in various ways (see for a review e.g., Wincott, 2003). For our purposes here we focus on state organized redistribution of life chances as one of the core characteristics and functions of the welfare state (Goodin & LeGrand, 1987; Barr, 1992). What is under emphasized in the literature, in my view, is that this basic function of the welfare state analytically has two sides to it. On the one hand, there is the process of collecting resources from society and its members needed for the production of welfare, and on the other hand, there is the process of re-allocating what has been collected and produced. These two sides represent two topics crucial to debates about the functioning and legitimacy of the welfare state, which tend to be discussed in isolation, and which are not recognized as each focusing on different aspects of the problem.

In continental Europe, the legitimacy of welfare is typically associated with questions of solidarity, the main issue being the degree to which welfare redistributions are backed up by patterns of solidarity, such as between rich and poor, old and young, good risks and bad risks, small and large households, employed and unemployed, indigenous people and immigrants, etc. For instance, the need for pension reform is in part justified by pointing to the eroding effect that changes in intergenerational solidarity would have on the legitimacy of existing pension arrangements. Or, the lack of solidarity between indigenous people and immigrants is seen as a threat to the social legitimacy of income protections schemes. In the Anglo-Saxon welfare state debate, however, the concept of solidarity is used much less frequently and it tends to have another connotation. Influenced by the EU social policy debate the concept starts to be used by UK colleagues (e.g., Ashcroft *et al.*, 2000; e.g., Rodger, 2003), but in for instance the USA the term of solidarity is nearly exclusively used in analyses of the development and functioning of labor unions (with the notable exception of Baldwin, 1990). In stead, re-distributive justice is the alternative concept used in the Anglo-Saxon world to discuss and analyze issues of welfare state legitimacy. Welfare arrangements are seen as legitimate when they produce a redistribution that is considered to be just. For instance, the low legitimacy of social assistance programs in the USA is often related to the fact that the majority of the people feel that benefits are allocated largely to groups that are considered to be undeserving (notably consisting of Afro-American people, and increasingly also Hispanic people) (e.g., Gilens, 1999).

As far as I can see, and would like to suggest, is that the roots of these different approaches to the debate on welfare legitimacy can be traced back to the more collectivistic continental European social-philosophical tradition (e.g. Hegel's work) in which the collectivity, and especially the state, appears as a central actor to which individuals are subjects, on the one hand, and the more individualistic, Anglo-Saxon utilitarian philosophy (e.g. Scottish moral philosophers), which regards the individual as central actor, on the other. In the collectivistic tradition the socio-political problem seems to be more how individuals can be motivated to comply with and contribute to the collective interest, while in the individualistic tradition the emphasis is more on what rights and entitlements individuals should have vis-a-vis the collectivity.

Be it as it may, in the sociological literature, based on the work of Durkheim and Weber, the standard concept used for situations where individuals contribute to collective interests, even when this would negatively affect their personal interests, is 'solidarity'. While the issue whether, from a distributive point of view, the right people benefit, is discussed and analyzed as a matter of 'justice'. For instance, in his *Principles of Social Justice* Miller (2001) describes justice as: "how the good and bad things of life should be distributed among the members of a human society".

My suggestion is that a broader perspective on the issue of welfare state legitimacy is possible, firstly, by looking more closely into solidarity as that which concerns contributions to a common good, and secondly, at justice as that which concerns the re-allocation of what has been contributed.¹ From this perspective, the legitimacy of the welfare state is nourished (or not, in which case the welfare state has a legitimation problem) from two sources: people's motives and related willingness to contribute, and people's beliefs about the principles and practices of the re-allocation of welfare. These are the two sides of the coin of welfare legitimacy that I will discuss separately .

¹ Of course, there are relationships between the two fundamentals of welfare legitimacy. For instance, people might be less willing to contribute to an arrangement, if they feel it is targeted wrongly. But as we will see, there are other factors influencing people's willingness to contribute, which means that solidarity and justice issues do not overlap completely.

3. Solidarity

Motives for solidaristic behaviour

Seen from the contribution side of the coin of welfare legitimacy, the question is what motivates people to support and contribute to welfare arrangements. Such motives are various, and can be derived from sociological theories on social solidarity, since these are concerned with the question why and under which conditions people are willing to contribute to the common good, even when this would conflict with their personal interests.

Durkheim (1966/1893), as well as Weber (in Henderson & Parsons, 1964), perceive of social solidarity as a state of relations between individuals and groups enabling collective interests to be served. The essence of and basis for such relations is that people have or experience a common fate, either because they share identity as members of the same collectivity and therefore feel a mutual sense of belonging and responsibility, which is the central idea in Durkheim's conception of mechanic solidarity and Weber's 'communal' type of relations of solidarity. Or, because they share utility, in the sense that people need each other to realize their life opportunities, which refers to social bonds of a type described by Durkheim as organic solidarity and as 'associative' relations of solidarity by Weber. The scope and strength of solidarity in a social system is a function of such shared identities and shared utilities, because they form the basis from which people are motivated to contribute.

Several types of motives exist. The role of people's feelings and sentiments in this respect is stressed by Mayhew (1971). In his view, the degree to which people feel attracted to one another and are loyal at the micro level, and the degree to which they perceive a collective identity and we-feeling at the meso level are decisive for their willingness to contribute to the common good. A second motive for solidarity, figuring explicitly in the solidarity theories of Durkheim (1966/1893) and Parsons (1951), depends on culturally-based convictions, which imply that the individual feels a moral obligation to serve the collective interest. Enlightened self-interest can be a third motive for solidarity. It is central in Hechter's rational choice based approach to solidarity (Hechter 1987) and it underlies Durkheim's organic solidarity in a modern differentiated society, where people learn that they benefit from contributing to the collective interest (if not immediately, then in the long run). The motive is also the basis for Weber's associative relationship, in which people agree to help one another, either by exchanging goods or services or by co-

operating to achieve a common goal. Clearly, solidarity does not need to be grounded in warm feelings of love and duty; it can be based on a rational calculation. Fourth, support for solidarity is not necessarily spontaneous, or completely voluntary. According to Parsons (1951), contributing to the collective interest is an act of solidarity only if it results from institutional role obligations. In Hechter's theory enforcement figures even more explicitly. Free-riding necessitates coercion to and control of contributions to the common good. Enforced solidarity can only be stable in the long run if it is exercised by a legitimate authority. For instance, obligations to behave solidaristically, installed upon citizens by the state, can be perceived as legitimate because the state is itself seen as a trustworthy, legitimate authority.

To conclude, the legitimacy of relations of solidarity, including those present in re-distributive welfare states, will generally be stronger to the degree that: such relations link up with existing patterns of mutual affections and identification between donors and receivers; they correspond with relevant moral convictions and perceived duties being in force; they correspond to the (long term) self-interest of individuals and groups involved, and; to the degree that they are backed by a legitimate authoritative body. Solidaristic relations and arrangements that are legitimate on the grounds of all four motives are likely to be the strongest. Consequently, re-distributive welfare arrangements have a stronger legitimacy to the degree that more people are motivated to contribute to the arrangements, and people have a wider range of motives to contribute.

Some empirical illustrations of solidarity motives

In a 1995 and a 2006 national survey Dutch people were asked about their reasons for paying contributions to national, re-distributive social security schemes. The specific question was also included in a 2001 Belgian (particularly Flemish) survey. Table 1 shows the answers, which operationalized the motives of self-interest, moral duty and affection.²

² The motive of accepted enforcement could not be operationalized well, since paying social security contributions is a legal duty in The Netherlands and Belgium. The survey question was formulated as: "Paying contributions for social security schemes is a legal obligation. Apart from that, people may have other reasons for paying them. How is this in your case? In other words, to what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

' For me paying contributions for social insurances is a thing I also do because:

- a. It secures me of a benefit in case I would need one myself
- b. I regard it as a moral duty towards the less well-off in society
- c. I personally feel with the situation beneficiaries are in "

Answering categories: (1) strongly agree (2) agree (3) agree, nor disagree (4) disagree (5) strongly disagree

Table 1: Why pay social security contributions?
[% '(strongly) agree']

<i>Paying contributions is obligatory, but I do it also because...</i>	The Netherlands 1995	The Netherlands 2006	Belgium (Flemish) 2001
<i>Interest</i> ...it reassures of a benefit when I am in need myself	82	85	83
<i>Moral principle</i> ...it is a moral duty towards the less well-off in society	64	65	58
<i>Affection</i> ...I personally feel pity for claimants	42	38	45

Source: The Netherlands: 1995: TISSER Solidarity Study, Tilburg University; 2006: SIG Survey, Tilburg/Rotterdam Universities; Belgium: TOR Solidarity Study, Free University of Brussels.

The table 1 shows that a large majority of more than 80% of the Dutch and Flemish publics accept paying for social security on grounds of a perceived self-interest. Seemingly, the comprehensive character of the Dutch and Belgian social security systems, with their earnings-related benefits for sick, disabled and unemployed workers, and their non-means-tested old age pensions and child benefits are experienced as profitable arrangements by nearly the whole of the populations. There seems to be no sign here, like in the United States, of a middle class perceiving welfare as being reserved for the poor only (Weir *et al.*, 1988; Kluegel *et al.*, 1995), or of a legitimacy depending on '...loyalties of the numerically weak, and often politically residual, social stratum' as Esping-Andersen (1990) typified the situation in residualist welfare states like the United States and Canada. But self-interest is not the only motive. No less than about 60%-65% of the two populations also perceive paying contributions as a moral obligation towards the needy in society. The motive of affection, empathizing with the situation of beneficiaries, is least strong, but nevertheless given by as much as 38% tot 45% of the respondents.

Clearly, the Dutch and Belgian systems of social security have a strong legitimacy base of solidarity among the populations at large, the strongest foundation lying in perceptions of self-interest, but firmly sustained by considerations of moral obligation and feelings of mutual identification and affection.

The large role played by the motive of perceived self-interest may come as a surprise for those who see self-interested individuals, and perhaps the entire process of individualization, as threats to the re-distributive solidarity that is underlying many of the comprehensive European welfare states. However, to understand its role as a legitimizing

foundation for solidaristic welfare arrangements it is good to realize that self-interest is usually too narrowly defined as something concerning a single person's actual interest, here and now. I would like to suggest a broader idea of self-interest, one that stresses its dynamic and social aspects. From a dynamic perspective, a welfare arrangement, say a social security benefit, may not only be perceived by a person as a matter of self-interest if this person receives the benefit at this particular moment, but also if this person has received it in the past, or expects with some certainty to be dependent upon it some time in future. And from a social perspective, the benefit may be seen as a matter (very close to) self-interest if the benefit is not received by the person him or her self, but by a close relative, friend or acquaintance. In other words, a more dynamic and social perception of self-interest might explain why so many Dutch and Flemish people refer to the self-interest motive when asked about their reasons for paying social security contributions. The question remains, however, to what degree benefit receipt is a part of people's own lives, and of the people close to them.

Table 2 offers this kind of information for the Dutch sample of 1995.³ It shows that a narrow definition of self-interest (person receiving a benefit here and now) leads to the conclusion that only a small minority of some 12% of the Dutch population had an interest in the social security schemes at issue. However, when socialized (including receipt by household members or good friends) and dynamised (receipt by person in past or expected receipt in future) the numbers convincingly show that a substantial majority of the Dutch population can be expected to perceive a personal interest in the Dutch social security system.

These figures suggest that, indeed, the rational, self-interested individual is not so much a threat to the legitimacy of the comprehensive welfare state, but one of its cornerstones in stead.

³ In half a year's time we will avail of these data for the Dutch 2006 survey. The dataset is under preparation at the moment, and will be released for analyses some months from now.

Table 2: Using social security benefits
 [%, 1995, The Netherlands, old age pension excluded]

	Unemployment benefit	Disability benefit	Sick pay	Social assistance	1 of these or more
respondent now	3	5	2	3	12
other household member now	6	9	3	-	16
friend now	38	46	29	36	71
respondent in past	23	8	39	9	55
high perceived future chance respondent	40	45	59	34	59
respondent, now, in past, or future					79
respondent, now, in past, or future, plus household member or friend now					92

Source: The Netherlands: TISSER Solidarity Study 1995, Tilburg University

4. Justice

Deservingness criteria

As for the other side of the welfare legitimacy coin, the important question is what criteria and conditions the public at large applies with regard to the rationing of welfare towards various groups of recipients. The legitimacy of a re-distributive welfare arrangements is higher if more people endorse the social direction and target groups of its spending. Or, in other words, people tend to support more those schemes which are targeted at groups they perceive as more deserving. In an earlier study (Van Oorschot, 2000) I concluded that five central deservingness criteria exist, based on the findings of several studies on the issue (Cook, 1979; De Swaan, 1988; Cook & Barrett, 1992; Will, 1993). A first criterion is 'control over neediness', that is, people who are seen as being personally responsible for their neediness are seen as less deserving (if at all). A second criterion is 'level of need', that is, people with greater need are seen as more deserving. Third, there is 'identity': needy people who are more close to 'us' are seen as more deserving. A fourth criterion is 'attitude': more deserving are those needy people who are likeable, grateful, compliant and conforming to our standards. And finally, there is the criterion of 'reciprocity': more deserving are those needy people who have contributed to our group before (who have 'earned' our support), or who may be expected to be able to contribute in future. Of these criteria control seems to be most important, closely followed by identity. De Swaan (1988) regards 'disability', or lack of control, even as a necessary condition for deservingness, implying that once the public feels that a person can be blamed for his or her neediness

fully, other criteria become irrelevant. A fact is that in all empirical deservingness studies on the topic perceived personal responsibility or control stands out as the most important determinant of people's attitudes towards poor or otherwise needy people. The criterion of identity seems to play an important role too, especially in cases where neediness is related to ethnic or national minorities. There is the strong racial element in American welfare support mentioned earlier, while in Europe Appelbaum (2002) found that the degree to which the German public perceived various groups of minorities to be deserving of social benefits depended nearly only on how 'German' the groups were seen to be, and a Dutch study showed that migrants were seen as least deserving among a series of 29 different groups of needy people (Van Oorschot, 2000).

From these criteria we may understand why, as Coughlin and others have found, the public generally favors support for the elderly more than support for the unemployed (Coughlin, 1980). Reaching pensionable age, and getting older, is not something we feel people have much control over, while there is always doubt whether e.g. unemployment is a result of people's own passivity. Elderly people generally will be seen more as belonging to 'Us'. They are closer to the rich than the unemployed because we all have bonds with them (they are our parents) and we all have a good chance to belong to the category in future. As for their attitudes towards support, elderly people are known to be undemanding, grateful and not rebellious, while cases in which e.g. unemployed aggressively demand their rights in social service offices are enlarged in the media every time they occur. (The unemployed man who crashed the Tilburg social service's front door with his Jaguar after having been denied a one off payment received nationwide attention in the Netherlands. Clearly, there was something wrong with his understanding of deservingness criteria). Finally, in the public's eye, elderly people will be seen as having earned their right to be supported during all the years of their active life in which they contributed to society, while other needy categories, especially the young among them, still have to give proof of their worth for society. In short, support for elderly people will generally be high to highest because the group 'scores higher' on all criteria. With the exception perhaps of the level of need criterion, although elderly people tend to have higher health related needs. In contrast, as Coughlin and others found, the support for redistribution is less and more volatile when needy groups are concerned, who are not (visibly) old, sick and disabled, who are morally looked down upon, who are believed to be lazy and irresponsible, who are regarded as outsiders, as 'them' different from 'us', and such like.

Empirical illustration of deservingness criteria and rank ordering

That the various deservingness criteria play a role in people’s ideas about re-distributive justice in welfare rationing can be illustrated in various ways. From a European comparative perspective an interesting opportunity is offered by the European Values Survey of 1999/2000, which asked people about the degree to which they are concerned about the living conditions of four needy groups: elderly people, sick and disabled people, unemployed people, and immigrants. As explained and justified elsewhere (Van Oorschot, 2006), we interpret the degree of concern as a proxy of deservingness. Based on assumptions regarding these groups’ scores on popular deservingness criteria, we would expect that people would regard the group of elderly as most deserving, followed by the group of sick and disabled, the unemployed, and as least deserving, the group of immigrants: see table 3.

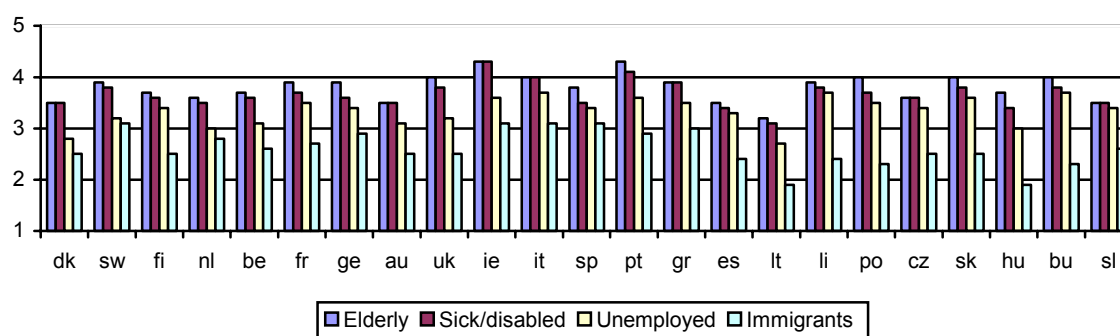
Table 3: Hypothetical scoring of needy groups on popular deservingness criteria and expected deservingness rank order

	Elderly	Sick/disabled	Unemployed	Immigrants
Need	++	++	+/-	+
Responsibility	++	++	+/-	+/-
Identity	++	+	+	-
Attitude	++	+/-	+/-	+/-
Reciprocity	++	+	+/-	-
Expected deservingness rankorder	1	2	3	4

Figure 1, which shows the average deservingness score per needy group for a number of European countries, makes clear that the expectations are corroborated. That is, the rank order is exactly as expected in sixteen of twenty-three European countries. In all seven other countries (Denmark, Austria, Ireland, Italy, Greece, the Czech Republic and Slovenia) the difference with the universal rank order is that the deservingness of elderly and sick and disabled people is at equal high level. This is not a substantial, but a marginal deviance from the general pattern. Between the countries there is quite some variation in

the relative positions of the groups of needy people. In some countries, especially in the highly developed welfare states of Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands deservingness mainly seems to be differentiated along two groups: elderly, sick and disabled people on the one hand, and unemployed people and immigrants on the other. But in most other Western and Southern European countries elderly, sick and disabled still score quite close, but there are larger differences between the deservingness of unemployed people and immigrants. A typical pattern for the Central and Eastern European countries seems to be that the scale distance between immigrants and the other groups is relatively large, while the distances among the other three needy groups are relatively small. How these differences can be explained is uncertain. One could speculate that where national resources for social protection are low, as is the case in the Central and Eastern European countries, people tend to differentiate more strongly along the criterion of identity in terms of 'us' versus 'them' (in order to preserve the little there is for 'ourselves'), while in a context of affluence people tend to differentiate more along lines of incapacity, i.e. the control criterion.

Figure 1: Deservingness scores by country
(national averages)

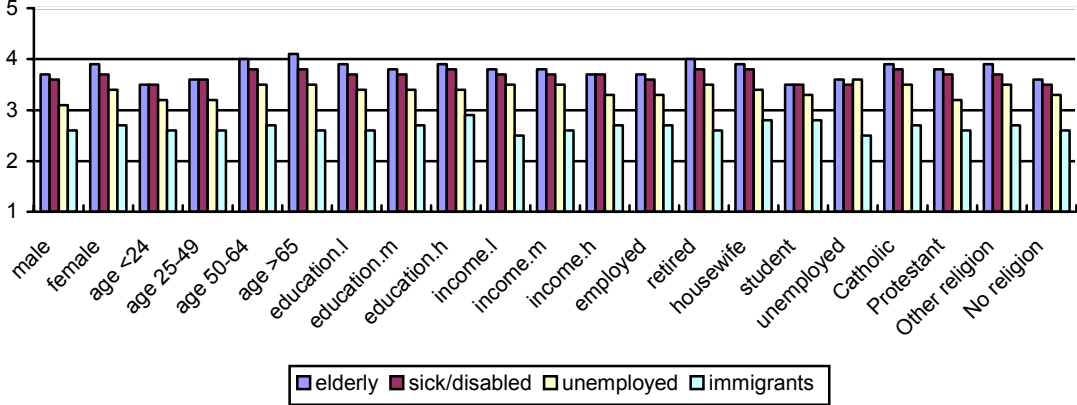


Source: The European Values Survey 1999/2000

The fact that the deservingness rank order is basically the same for all European countries indicates that the underlying logic of deservingness has deep roots. This is supported by our findings regarding the rank ordering by different social categories. Figure 2 shows that the deservingness rank order is the same among men and women, among different categories of age, educational level and income, among people with different social positions, and among people from different religious denominations. However, in our data

there is one exception. Unemployed people rate the deservingness of unemployed people a bit higher than that of disabled people.

Figure 2: Deservingness score by social category
(category averages)



Source: The European Values Survey 1999/2000 (pooled data set including the 23 European countries from figure 1)

5. Discussion

I conclude this paper by discussing two compelling issues in the present-day welfare debate from the perspective presented here. One issue regards the question whether a substantial retrenchment of European welfare states, allegedly urged for due to globalization pressures, would safeguard the social protection of the most needy. And a second issue regards the question of how a neo-liberal based stronger emphasis on individual responsibility might impact the overall legitimacy of European welfare states.

Admittedly, there is still little consensus about the precise impact the process of globalization has on the character and comprehensiveness of the well-developed European welfare states (see for reviews of debates and studies e.g., Montanari, 2001; Sainsbury, 2001). However, one important line in the debate is the view that globalization urges comprehensive welfare states to cut back and retrench in order to sustain their social protection for those who are most in need. Substantial retrenchment would be necessary to be able to compete on labor costs, which therefore should be alleviated significantly from the burden of taxes and contributions, and to inhibit the ‘welfare magnetism’ effects of generous and easy accessible social rights, which would put a halt to the inflow of welfare dependent economic migrants. The central idea is that through retrenchment the social

protection for the weakest in society could be maintained. However, from my discussion of solidarity and the role of self-interest in the legitimacy of welfare arrangements, my point would be that the latter can be doubted. That is, if comprehensive welfare states retrench substantially in order to sustain protection for the neediest only, this can but mean that the larger middle class will lose its actual and perceived self-interest in the welfare system. In my view this is a threat to the overall legitimacy of the remaining welfare redistribution towards the most needy, since in such a situation the chances are high that, like in the residual American welfare state, a permanent debate will arise about the deservingness of the neediest, with as a longer term result a downward trend in their social protection. According to Skocpol (1995), the residualisation of welfare in the USA has over the years totally undermined the social legitimacy for collectively organized care and security, while others associate the state of affairs in the North-American welfare state with a permanent 'war against the poor' (Gans, 1995). In other words, my point would be that in a comprehensive welfare state the support of 'the rich' for contributing to the protection of 'the poor' is to a degree a spin-off of the solidaristic redistribution 'the rich' organize for and among themselves. Without the latter, the deservingness of the neediest will constantly be at gun point, with a downward trend in their social protection as a most likely outcome in the longer term. Substantial retrenchment of European welfare states, as an answer to globalization, would not safeguard the protection of the most needy, on the contrary.

Secondly, one of the central tenets of neo-liberalism, an ideology which has gained widespread popularity among policy makers of many European countries over the last two decades (George, 1996; Schmidt, 2000), is that citizens have a personal responsibility for their life situation. In a European welfare state context this has meant a shift from seeing the state as the major actor responsible for providing care and protection, towards a view where individual citizens are increasingly held responsible for being in or out of work, for having an adequate (household) income level, for being 'employable', and even for being a disabled worker or not. For instance, underlying much of nowadays 'welfare to work' thinking and practice is the idea that unemployed people, social assistance claimants and older and partially disabled workers should take up their personal responsibility to try and become economically independent. 'Activation' measures often take the form of creating an incentive structure for welfare dependants that stimulates them to try and find work, to increase their employability, etc. From the viewpoint of the legitimacy of state organized welfare there is a certain danger connected to the emphasis on personal responsibility, which would manifest itself if it would turn into a serious degree of 'victim blaming'. That

is, if the idea that people should take more personal responsibility to improve the situation they are in, would turn into the idea that people who are in a dependent situation are primarily responsible for that themselves. In that case the deservingness allotted to them by the general public would substantially drop, with as a most possible result a loss in the legitimacy of welfare arrangements directed at them. An interesting empirical question is, of course, whether the general public's ideas about personal responsibility for social risks are really changing along the neo-liberal line. Again, we only have illustrative data, which gives some information on the Dutch case. A comparison of the Dutch 1995 and 2006 surveys mentioned earlier, shows that the proportion of Dutch who are of the opinion that having a good job is something that people have personal control over increased from 37% to 62%; the proportion that feels that being unemployed or not is something people have personal control over doubled from 13% to 26%; and, seeing being a single parent on social assistance as something people have personal control over increased from 15% to 25%. In short, at least the Netherlands has witnessed a clear shift in public opinion towards a stronger perception of personal responsibility for social risks.

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