

Introduction: An Overview of Welfare Reform in Europe and the United States

To describe the widespread progression of active labour market policies (ALMPs) as a process of political infatuation is no exaggeration. It is in the context of persistent mass unemployment and economic inactivity (CEC, 2005) that the virtues of ALMPs began to be rediscovered, especially within supranational organisations such as the OECD and the European Union. The OECD defines ALMPs as follows: 'First, they make receipt of benefits conditional on the benefit recipient demonstrating active job search and/or a willingness to take steps to improve employability. Second, they provide a range of pre-employment services and advice to help the individuals in question find work or get ready for work' (OECD, 2002: 9). ALMPs interact with 'passive' labour market policies such as unemployment and social assistance benefits. When there is a tendency to activate passive benefits, such policies can be described as generic 'activation' policies. They are defined by their goal: they intend to help people of working age back into the labour market. From the outset, the term 'activation' contains a strong normative judgement about the unemployed and the inactive. Such populations are portrayed as 'passive', as opposed to 'active', that is working, citizens. Henceforth, the inactive, that is passive, citizens are in need of activation and support to get back into paid employment. ALMPs comprise an array of measures from special assistance for job search and training for the unemployed to in work benefits, subsidised employment and measures for the disabled.

In Western Europe, Scandinavian countries pioneered the rediscovery of activation policies as the best way to solve the problem of unemployment and social exclusion, but Continental welfare states like France,

Germany and Italy, traditionally portrayed as 'immobile welfare states', followed suit in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The interesting question is how this activation paradigm is being interpreted by policy makers in different welfare states. The book assesses the extent to which welfare policy communities can resist radical ideological and political pressures for change in this particular sub-sector. This volume examines the source of ideas in the process of policy change in active labour market policies in the United States, France, Denmark, the United Kingdom (with a strong emphasis on England and Wales) and at the European Union (EU) level since 1997. It also analyses the role of advocacy coalitions and policy communities in setting the agenda for change in welfare policies. More importantly, will welfare reform become more punitive towards social assistance recipients, thus implying that the EU will only pay lip service to the commitment to social justice that is at the core of the European social model? Answering these questions will aid in casting some predictions about the future of the European social model. It will also help assess the extent to which United States social policy will continue to follow its distinct trajectory. This volume has two principal objectives:

- 1 Assess whether there has been a shift towards a punitive stance towards social assistance recipients (workfarism).
- 2 Identify the role of policy communities and/or advocacy coalitions in recent welfare reform policies.

The book focuses on social assistance recipients because they represent the lowest tier of public income schemes in Europe and the United States. The focus on social assistance claimants as opposed to the unemployed in general is justified by the political and ideological salience of the issue of social exclusion. Since the emergence of mass unemployment and poverty in Europe and the United States, the underclass, the socially excluded and the marginalised have attracted renewed academic and political interest. As they remain at the margins of the labour market, socially excluded people are for the most part ineligible for contributory-based unemployment benefits. By contrast to the unemployed whose exclusion from the world of paid work is considered usually temporary and who, as such, are entitled to insurance-based unemployment benefits, socially excluded people apply for last-resort, means-tested welfare benefits. The most common categories of people at risk of social exclusion are the long-term unemployed, unemployed youth, migrant or/low-skilled workers, single mothers and, in certain