Individual autonomy

A normative and analytical core of democratic welfare statehood

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Summary

In most European countries, activation strategies are associated with changes to the basic principles of welfare provision that entrench upon access to and the extent of social security benefit provision. These changes affect not only income distribution but also the citizens' expectations, which formerly relied implicitly on status-securing risk coverage in the case of unemployment. The underlying assumption of my argument is that activating reforms entail fundamental shifts in the implicit – and consensual – social understanding of social welfare. I argue that 'these in-depth effects of reform' become visible if we rely on analytical approaches that take account of categories such as individual autonomy and identity.

While the distributive dimension of welfare provision has been widely researched during the last two decades, our knowledge of the dimension of social recognition and empowerment as a second core dimension of welfare statehood remains underdeveloped. This is possibly why welfare state research lacks substantial arguments (political or scientific) to counter the advocates of welfare retrenchment who point out the detrimental effect of social welfare on the individuals' motivation. Adherents of the Marshallian approach to social citizenship, on the contrary, stress that the ongoing changes concern the core of welfare provision in terms of its normative and democratic dimensions. These authors point out that the democratic function of social welfare provision (i.e. to enable citizens to actively participate in social and political activities) may be undermined by the current developments in social policy. This turn of comparative welfare state research to the normative core of (welfare) statehood prepares the way for a more comprehensive understanding of changes in the post-fordist welfare state.

Departing from this premise of the concept of social citizenship, I suggest that research on welfare state change should be based on approaches such as the political theory of recognition, which conceives the welfare state, above all, as a mechanism of mutual social esteem and respect. I therefore propose to apply a theoretically well-founded concept of individual autonomy as a normative reference and analytical tool for the comparative assessment of objectives and outcomes of national activation strategies. The theoretical resources that I draw on include normative democratic theory and theories of socialisation and social work. The category of identity, which has been brought into the debate by feminist scholars, represents a core element of this new analytical grid.

A so enriched concept of individual autonomy can be connected to existing bodies of welfare state research in several ways and allows methodological conclusions to be drawn for further empirical research. Insofar, one objective of developing the individual autonomy approach is to "bring the subject back in" to the analysis of welfare state development and change.

1. Introduction

A growing stream of comparative welfare state research draws on 'new' categories such as *rights* and *norms* as cultural aspects, claiming that current welfare reforms remain undertheorised if research remains confined to the 'redistributive paradigm' (Goodin 1988; Rothstein 1998; Mau 2004). Adherents to the redistributive paradigm ignore the fact that welfare policies affect individuals not only in their material existence but also in their normative claims for respect and recognition as citizens (Young 1990; Fraser 2001; Nullmeier 2000). The relevance of this latter perspective is also supported by empirical observations: The German labour market policy reforms e.g. led to the fusion of unemployment assistance and social assistance and changed the rules of access to unemployment benefits. It is to be classified as paradigmatic reform, not because of its impact on income distribution and the increase in poverty but due to its impact on the citizen's implicit social expectations and the redefinition of the level and content of public social policy (Bothfeld 2008; Dörre, Behr u.a. 2008).[1] If we acknowledge that social policy is about securing individual life perspectives (Kaufmann 1973; Evers/Nowotny 1987), social policy changes will also affect the implicit social expectations and claims that citizens address to the State. These 'in-depth' effects of policy reform remain unnoticed by public evaluation research, which focuses on efficiency and draws on indicators such as labour market insertion rates, and comparative approaches that exclusively focus on institutional change. As Peter Hall has stated, taking the ideational dimension of policies into account allows us to distinguish incremental from paradigmatic change (Hall 1993). In contrast to Hall, I would argue that paradigmatic policy change does not consist of ideational change in policy sectors alone, but that it requires repercussions on the micro-level of practices and attitudes to qualify as paradigmatic. In other words: The change in policy discourse on the activation of unemployed persons is a necessary condition for paradigmatic change but it is certainly not the only one.[2] I am arguing here that the micro-level of the

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[1] Following Robert Castel's concept of social vulnerability, a German research group led by Klaus Dörre considers the precarisation of a growing part of the German society as one consequence of the Hartz Reforms. The authors identify a mechanism of disciplinarisation as the major outcome of the reforms by lowering the 'level of respectability' below a decent level where a socio-cultural minimum that secured a self-responsible life-authorship has been cancelled (Dörre, Behr u.a. 2008: 28ff.)

[2] In this perspective, solely the reference to the concept of 'self-responsibility' (*Eigenverantwortung*) in the media discourse or in the law does not represent paradigmatic change; neither does the modification of institutional rules. They may *unfold* paradigmatic change if they impact on the citizens' chances of realising their individual life plans and subsequently on their expectations and practices. Although it may be difficult to measure change under these premises, this view allows us to take incremental institutional change into account as it might be highly relevant and it may prevent us from over-estimating observed changes in the political discourse.

citizens' practices, attitudes and expectations is the appropriate level for analysing welfare state change.[3]

In this paper, I therefore propose to elaborate a well-founded concept of individual autonomy that goes beyond a too simplistic definition that conceives individual autonomy as the basic capability of developing and realising 'self-determined' individual life plans. I argue that only a *reflexive* notion of individual autonomy that integrates aspects of the social and political recognition of individual and particular identity can provide an appropriate theoretical framework that may be operationalised primarily by indicators such as practices, attitudes and expectations. Such a concept would include both a normative-political dimension and a descriptive dimension such that it may function as an analytical tool allowing an appropriate assessment of in-depth qualitative change in basic welfare principles. Policy changes would then become discernible as enhancements or constraints to individually perceived autonomy and not as (objectively identifiable) increases or decreases in the chances of realising 'self-determined' life-plans.

In the second section – drawing on two fields of theory, political normative theory and social work or education theory – I elaborate the three major dimensions of an enriched concept of individual autonomy: affiliation, self-reflection and the capacity for collectivity. In the third section, I present existing streams of comparative welfare state or social policy research that comprise arguments and ideas that can be linked to the concept of individual autonomy and provide methodological approaches for empirical research. In the fourth and final section, I draw some conceptual and methodological conclusions for further research on welfare state change.

2. Three dimensions of individual autonomy

As a consequence of the universally recognised megatrends of social individualisation, the transition to the knowledge economy and knowledge society and the changes to the means of earning a living, changes have occurred in the basic conditions for the manner of functioning and acceptance of the consolidated European social model. This relates not only to the economic and social conditions for the provision of social security benefits but also to the citizens' expectations and abilities.[4] I am arguing that we should consider the impact of social and political change on the individual in terms of gains and

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[3] My paper attempts to make a contribution to the debate about the 'dependent variable problem' in comparative welfare state research as I suggest consideration of the 'outcome' of reforms in cultural terms and analysis of how the basic comprehension of social security provision has been changed. This basic comprehension materialises in social and political discourse, in the shape and content of social laws and in the citizen's practices and attitudes.

[4] To what extent individuals become more independent or self-determined, has been object of a fierce sociological debate about the impact of modernisation on the individual (Beck, Giddens u.a. 1996).

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losses of individual autonomy. To do so requires a theoretically well-founded concept of individual autonomy, which I would like to elaborate in the following sections.

In general terms, individual autonomy can be defined as "the individual's capacity for (self-directed, independent) action", which includes control over one's own lifestyle and independence from external constraints (Ullrich 2004). As adequate as this definition first appears, it is based on the assumption of objective and generally applicable conditions. However, if one pursues a more cultural understanding of the welfare state and acknowledges the citizens' subjectivity and individuality, the creation of subjective freedom to pursue comparative orientations to action, i.e. the advance of social esteem would be the central social-political objective (Nullmeier 2000). How can this objective be reconciled with the establishment of 'self-directed, independent action'? To what extent can we assume that individual's capacity for action is a universal principle? And what can the individual be reasonably expected to endure as 'external constraint' without causing an unnecessary loss of autonomy? Although it is not possible to discuss all of the relevant facets of the moral-philosophical debate in their full breadth, in the following I would like to use these three questions as a basis to develop a differentiated definition of individual autonomy that can be applied in social policy analysis and avoids a restricted, individualistic use of the term. I believe that alongside the aspect of self determination (a prerequisite to the capacity to take action I would rather suggest to name self-reflection) – generally the only aspect mentioned – an individual identity and the ability of to show solidarity are also two equally important aspects of individual autonomy.

2.1 The dimension of affiliation

Independence as the prerequisite for autonomous action proves to be the first problematic assumption. Even if we consider 'independent choice of action' as an element of individual autonomy, it must be clarified how this can be reconciled with a concept of the social welfare state that identifies the sense of affiliation, i.e. the capacity for mutual recognition as the quintessence of integration in a democratic society. From this perspective, the interdependence between the development of personal and collective values is the central moment of social integration (Anderson 2003).

In the socialisation theory the term "social bond" is used to describe the relationship between the individual and society (Geulen 1977; Geulen 1999; Krappmann 2000). Socialisation processes take place within the framework of constant interaction between the individual and their social, i.e. concrete material, cultural and social environment. These processes do not function as limitations on the subject, but represent a constitutive condition of being a subject: "We are subjects not although, but because we have been socialised and our state of being a subject is realised particularly through our social action." (Geulen 1999: 37). For this reason, a personality model that from the outset considers the existence of

a personality component created through socialisation to be heteronomous and assumes there was an original subject that was not first created through socialisation (ibid. 41) is to be rejected. According to this perspective, there is no more a universal subject character than the construction of an "independent choice of action". Consequently, it follows here that effects of social (and sometimes institutionally transmitted) norms and values already unfold during the genesis of the subject. To what extent is it at all possible for individuals to be free from the influences of their environment and develop their own personal options for action? The debate on the theory of autonomy offers three possible explanations here.

Firstly, the processes involved in developing a social identity do not produce the same result for each individual. Even if they are not always aware of it, individuals are 'vulnerable', i.e. mortal and imperfect, and must live with this experience. Consequently different horizons of (historic) experience systematically apply to men and women – but also for other social groups (members of a specific race or class) (Anderson 2003).[5] Membership of a community is therefore not simply a matter of course but also established through acts of inclusion that define the mechanisms and norms of affiliation (Anderson 2003: 153). The nature and extent of social affiliation are defined through moral principles that elude the individual's direct access because they are produced and reproduced through social interaction and are partly institutionalised through general social and political conditions. A greater or lesser degree of self confidence and self esteem develop accordingly – through positive or negative feedback to the individual's statements or behaviour. As such, self esteem is the product of social and cultural processes, not only the distribution of goods (Young 1990: 27) and characterises the individuals' attitude toward themselves and their life situation. It is not measurable or divisible but it gives rise to the capacity for the conscious development of personality as well as to attitudes of empathy and solidarity towards others – regardless of social differences.

Secondly, the development of identity occurs in a reciprocal process of identity assimilation and identity accommodation. That means that new social experiences are either "sorted out" and adjusted to the personality or effect a change in the identity that confronts them. As such, the development of identity rests on personal experience, which can confirm or negate prior experience. Accordingly, the development of identity is not an irreversible process during the course of which the subject's sense of coherency and perception of meaning continually increase. In this perspective, the development of an "authentic" identity with a high degree of "individual aspects" takes place on the basis of "the experience of one's own identity" (i.e. "identity narrative" Anderson 2003), which enables the individual to connect

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[5] Above all feminist theorists stress that the concept of identity always bears reference to the social context and therefore must be understood as a relational concept (cf. the contributions in Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000).

social experience with the "mature identity", i.e. to combine it with their personal history.[6] This presumes the individuals' creativity but also a certain measure of social participation and 'reasonable contact to reality' in which personal experience can be reflected within the context of community life (Leu/Krappmann 1999: 81ff.). The combination and the way these processes are worked through allows the identity to become a special and unique phenomenon (Leu and Krappmann 1999: 95).

Third and finally, the realisation of independence is always spatially and temporally limited, i.e. bound to a specific biographic situation. The possibility of realising one's personal objectives is therefore not static and universally available. The individual identity and lifestyle are influenced not only by individual and collective experience but also by historical developments and upheavals. The individual always attempts to create a coherent interpretation of his or her identity, which is constructed ,through the process of narration. And as every structure of action and identity is created through narration (Benhabib 1995: 12), individuals are by nature unique and contingent.

Ideal practical autonomy is therefore created in a dialectic process of attempting to maintain the constant coherence of one's own 'identity narrative' and the acceptance on one's own inadequacies (Anderson 2003: 158). The restoration of coherence is necessary when changes in social conditions – perhaps through social upheaval or the change in individual life situation – are so great that inconsistencies and breaches occur between the perceived self image and the social norm. A constant (incremental) process of adjustment to altered general conditions is necessary in every individual life. Since the basic assumption of an inherently independent individual must consequently be rejected as unrealistic, it is also impossible to maintain the idea of the condition of complete autonomy (Bielefeldt 1997: 149; Anderson 2003: 150). Under the aspect of social affiliation, the expression of individual autonomy is an indication of the 'uniqueness' of an identity.

The question of possible options for social policy can now be reformulated: How can social policy contribute to increasing the perception of coherence, to promote creativity and consequently to preserve the individual's self esteem? Is it at all possible for social policy to contribute to balancing out a lack of self confidence or can it only play a preventative role (Leu and Krappmann 1999: 84)? Without being able to provide a conclusive answer here, it has become clear that individuals need a maximum of authenticity and freedom from manipulative and distorting influences to maintain and further develop their autonomy– in the sense of self respect, creativity and the creation of a coherent self image. This also means that the greatest possible autonomy cannot always be created by the same standards for all. Rather, it follows that universal objectives must be related to the nature of participation that is

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[6] The numerous positions of the moral philosophical debate hold different opinions on the question of how individuals generate new knowledge through 'internal reflection' (Christman 2003:4f).

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pursued by all members of the society and not to the use of means that bring about participation.[7] From this perspective autonomy would be considered a *regulatory principle* according to which individual deficiencies and idiosyncrasies are acknowledged and made comprehensible. Only this would guarantee that individuality does not lead to social differentiation but to a starting point for the development of mechanisms of inclusion that allows rather than represses wilful action.

2.2 The dimension of reflexivity

A second problematic assumption in the use of the term autonomy is the equation of autonomy with a form of freedom of action that only exists in the status of economic independence. However, if a minimum measure of autonomy can also be realised in situations of social and financial dependence, autonomy, according to my next argument must also be thinkable independent of the action.[8] According to the traditional Kantian line of thought, autonomy is created not in the possibility of self-determined action, but in the possibility of understanding one's own situation.[9] Here humanity's capacity for reason is the starting point for autonomous, collectively oriented (moral) action; here, self-determined action relies on the basic ability for reflection. Feminist positions stress this in that they reject the liberal view that autonomy consists solely of the self determined lifestyle and stress that understanding one's own situation represents an at least equally important aspect:

> "The revised conception of autonomy is not primarily self-authorship. It is autonomous authorship as regulated by reading and writing our relations with the world. So conceived, autonomy becomes, in practical terms, a regulative and always revisable principle. In so far as we achieve a limited authorship, autonomy is necessarily bound up with the partial nature of our knowledge of ourselves, especially knowledge of the contingencies of our lives as sexed/gendered agents in relation to other sexed/gendered agents" (Anderson 2003: 160).

Therefore autonomy means the demand to understand and shape one's own life, i.e. one's own identity against the background of the respective social environment. In other words: Autonomy refers to the capacity for self reflection and for assessing one's own life design. Achieved autonomy is therefore expressed not primarily in an individual's action; the action only makes it perceptible from outside. This understanding is the much cited necessity for the development of a 'free will' that is the prerequisite for the formulation of a claim to autonomy (see also Leu and Krappmann 1999). It requires that one has the ability to at least partially emancipate oneself from instances of norms in the social environment but also from one's own needs. This places demands on both the individual and on the social environment.

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[7] I.M. Young consequently suggests that, rather than universalism, participation should be taken as the reference point for social policy design (Young 1990: 105).

[8] The relationship between poverty and autonomy in the USA is addressed by (Ben-Ishai 2006), who argues a separation of autonomy and economic dependence.

[9] As such there is a distinction here between related terms of 'moral autonomy' found in the Kantian perspective, which reflects social bonds and the liberal concept of 'individual autonomy' (see also Darwall 2006a).

However, understanding one's own situation presupposes not only self reflection but also the ability to perceive the social environment as essentially foreign (but not antagonistic). Darwall described this as the ability to assume a "second-person" standpoint (Darwall 2006b; Darwall 2006a). Here personal maturity and being able to speak for oneself entails individuals formulating their needs and demands – from whatever source – not simply as a response to their perceptions but to claim them – reflexively – under consideration of superordinate (at best generally acknowledged) principles (Darwall 2006: 281f.). First then can the formulated claim be recognised not only individually but it opens a second dimension of recognition: The recognition of the formulated need as justified and consequently the recognition of the freedom of judgement of the person who formulates this demand. The condition here is that the person refers to generally recognised principles and proves capable of recognising foreign principles.[10]

This capacity for autonomy, i.e. the capability of self reflection and to refer to generally applicable principles, is attributed to all persons in the Kantian perspective, even if they find themselves in a situation in which they do not exercise their autonomy. The implications of this claim is made clear using the example of dealing with children (Darwall 2006): Even when, for their children's wellbeing, parents intervene in their decisions and act against their wishes, this does not automatically reject a later and yet to be attained ability to make independent judgements. The parental limitation denies the children's *current* ability to make decisions which appears to be justified in that small children are not rational in the sense that they can reflect on their own needs, refer to general principles or recognise foreign principles as legitimate. This does not deny the children's essential capacity to develop the ability to make rational decisions. Rather, the parents act in respect for this potential capacity for judgement according to clear, and for the children understandable, rules. To the extent that they provide the children with the grounds for their decisions, they also provide them with the opportunity to learn the general principles (Darwall 2006). Individuals are acknowledged as politically mature citizens through the assumption that they possess this capacity to make rational decisions. Consequently, the individual's ability to make rational decisions is an important aspect of individual autonomy and a value in its own right, which is considered to have priority over paternalistically prescribed actions in a democratic society. As such, the critical moment is not the preservation or limitation of claims, but rather the acknowledgement or denial of the claiming person's ability to make rational decisions.

However, hierarchical relationships exist in all social contexts. The example of child rearing makes it clear however that there are many different ways in which power structures can be used. Here, an essential distinction must be made between authoritative and authoritarian procedures: While the

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[10] Prerequisite here however is that there are basic principles that the individual shares to the extent that they can make reference to them. These principles can be informal customs (mutual respect) or institutionalised rights to co-determination or legal rights.

authoritative agent acknowledges the basic value of the (potential) capacity for rational decision-making, the authoritarian approach basically denies it. Authoritarian structures suppress the realisation of individual autonomy. This repression can have five forms, exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence (Young 1990: 40). An authoritarian act that suppresses individual autonomy cannot be considered the equivalent to the use of violence however the moment of repression is given once the individual is placed in a position of helplessness or when core characteristics of their cultural identity are not respected. Oppression does not only occur under authoritarian rule but also in day-to-day practice in the well-meaning liberal society, "it is systematically reproduced in major economic, political and cultural institutions" (Young 1990: 41). In contrast, authoritative structures imply precautions that firstly, can ground overriding the power of judgement with reference to a superordinate principle and secondly, present this as a temporary exception. The principle of rule of law, which provides the individual with understanding and the option to appeal or place a claim, is such a principle. The respect for individual autonomy does not depend on whether a person in reality currently exercises this autonomy but rather that this respect is of a fundamental nature, "..it means that respect for autonomy is required independently of the actual autonomy displayed by the person who is the object of that respect" (Christman 2003: 12). However, the attribution of the (potential) power of judgement can only be justified with a normative assertion that points to the dignity of the individual and provides protection from oppression through authorities and paternalistic interference. A central question is that of how the individual's dignity can also be assured in authoritative acts of public policy when dignity lies in respect for matters that relate to individual identities: What institutional precautions can a society take to assure the citizens' dignity the greatest possible measure of protection (see the considerations posed by Margalit 1996)?[11] In relation to social policy, this raises the question of how can policy design assure the greatest possible understanding and transparency for the citizens and acknowledge their power of judgement, including mutual respect and social esteem for each other. Consequently, individual autonomy must also be guaranteed at times of non-action and the ability and the need for reflection, to understand and evaluate situations must be accorded. A social policy strategy that considers the only moment of recognition to be the (active) economic participation and sets this as its sole objective does not do justice to the concept of individual autonomy chosen here.

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[11] Questions of this nature are answered formally by the Federal Constitutional Court in Germany. To date, there are almost no empirical findings in respect to the 'law in action', i.e. the question of to what extent people feel that their individual autonomy is limited by public political acts or to what extent social policy fulfils its protective function.

2.3 The dimension of reciprocity

Finally, the establishment of a balance between the protection of individual autonomy and the realisation of collective objectives is a problem for democratic theory. How can the acceptance of superordinate principles that can be drawn on by all persons equally be explained? In my opinion, there are two types of bonds between the individual and the community, one symbiotic and the other dialectic.

The more symbiotic form of bond is described by the communitarian perspective, in which the community and a collective principle is accorded fundamental priority over the realisation of individual needs (Forst 1996: 211). Commitment to the collective principle can be created in different ways, through enforcement, benefits or norms. There is usually a combination of these typical commitment or control patterns, whereby one factor may be more prominent. Communitarian theorists stress that the optimal and most durable form of commitment and social cooperation is the internalisation of a value system whose norms are universally acknowledged. This value system would be supported by the individual consideration of additional benefits and can call, if necessary, on legitimated sanctions as enforcement. What is necessary and the normative objective is therefore that the society increases its responsiveness to its members and their needs. The implicit consensus would be threatened through the processes of alienation and inauthenticity resulting from industrialisation, bureaucratisation, rationality and manipulation (cf. in detail Etzioni 1975).[12] Two basic problems with this 'symbiotic' explanation of collectivity are the question of how social differences can be responded to and how the bond to the community is to be maintained during social change. In respect to social differences it must be considered that for individuals (internalised) moral demands can form dilemmas of very different intensity between their own needs and the social expectations placed on them. For example, men and women are confronted in very different ways with the expectation of providing care for others or of realising an egocentric life plan. In principle very different moral demands are formulated here and consequently the same behaviour is subject to very different moral judgement. For example, gender can be linked to very different moral obligations (Gerson 2002: 8f.). The commitment to a general collective principle implies that the tendentially different forms of coercion demands different degrees of 'adaptive preference formation' (Elster 1993) of individuals, so that on first examination the communitarian perspective is not one which enhances autonomy or tolerates differences among all individuals equally. Secondly, it remains unclear how social change and altered social expectations – e.g. in the course of

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[12] These considerations, which have been picked up in Europe, esp. in Great Britain, are based on the following political aspects, which can be described as the indicators of a "responsible" society: Recognition of democracy as a value in its own right, anchoring binding basic rights in the constitution, divided and differentiated loyalties, tolerance as a basic principle, limited enforcement of von "identity policies" and conducting society-wide moral dialogue to achieve mutual consensus on a collective value system (Etzioni 1997).

changing gender relations – can be conceptualised. Thus, from this perspective, change – i.e. placing a dominant value in question – is only conceivable as a crisis-ridden degradation of the social cohesion. Dealing with periodical and surmountable phenomena of social change is difficult if commitment to collective principles represents the central moment of social integration. From the perspective of Kantian moral philosophy, the basic communitarian idea appears generally problematic because as willingness to commitment to the collective the individual's rationality and capacity for reflection are perceived as secondary and the collective and the individual are conceived as two poles of a dichotomy, which of course they are not (Forst 1996: 212).

If commitment cannot be created for an indefinite term through the citizens' belief in the collective ethical-moral values, it must rest on a dialectic relationship between the citizen and the society.

The Kantian perspective raises the individual's capacity for rationality to a prerequisite for individual autonomy and associates the capacity for self-determination with the ability to develop moral precepts of action. The basic assumption (the 'categorical imperative') here is that every human being also uses their practical reason to reflect on moral exigencies and in doing so develops personal maxims for action. As such, the individual always possesses moral autonomy, which in fact rises from the ability to subject oneself to (objective) moral laws, so that morality is considered a fundamental principle of social organisation (Christman 2006). Basically, it is assumed that individuals will be able to find a balance between their own practical interests and collective objectives. More specifically, in the Kantian perspective individuals are obligated to recognise and contribute to a moral order because of they are capable of reflection and possess the power of reason (Bielefeldt 1997: 527).[13] However, this order is generated through social interaction and not through acknowledgement of given metaphysical principles. The starting point for the subjugation of personal interests to collective objectives is therefore individual insight an not the (once off) internalisation of superordinate foreign principles, that is essentially the individual's capacity and willingness for reciprocity, which is founded on their ability to act judiciously in accordance with a norm or, in the case of doubt, to question its validity (Forst 2004).

Collective objectives to which individuals commit themselves are developed through social negotiation processes so that the objectives of state intervention can also be acknowledged by the individual. Problems can arise when the arguments are no longer comprehensible to the citizens either because they are too complicated or because they are not acknowledged as valid.[14] If the citizens' autonomy is

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[13] Alone the human capacity for reflection (rather than a metaphysical order) provides the basis for moral order as the foundation of a community. This was the basis of the revolutionary nature of Kantian philosophy at the end of the 18th Century, because it endowed the individual with the task of designing and the responsibility for the community (Bielefeldt 1997: 534).

[14] An interesting question here is to what extent can people accept the promise of social security (e.g. through the fastest possible reintegration in the labour force) a later but not fixed point in time.

to be respected, it must be made possible for the addressees of public social policies to understand the need for these measures. Applied to social policy, foregoing the satisfaction of practical interests is accepted if the law or norm is recognised as a valid principle.[15] Otherwise the rule, which is justified by majority opinion, is enforced with authoritative force. Social rules can be institutionalised as laws or regulations or exist as social values and norms, which are transmitted through social interaction or through political discourse. For the analysis of social policy, this poses the question of how collective rules that limit freedom of action must be formulated so that individual autonomy, i.e. the individuals' basic ability to assert their entitlements and to command respect, is protected. One solution is to guarantee respect for individual autonomy by providing clear and comprehensible justification for the (new) demands of reciprocity, which gives the individuals the opportunity to understand and develop an – accepting or rejecting – stand toward them (Forst 1996). It also applies here that social justice, in the sense of guaranteeing individual autonomy, is not identical with the realisation of specific social values but finds expression that society promotes the creation of institutional conditions that are necessary for the realisation of these values (Young 1990: 37).

2.4. Interim conclusion: An extended concept of individual autonomy

If one takes the three aspects of identity, reflexivity and reciprocity as equally important and constitutive components of individual autonomy seriously, the result is an extended concept under which more than independent freedom of action is to be understood. Here the ideal of practical individual autonomy means being able to develop a balance between one's own interests and collective expectations and to develop an individual life plan on the basis of self respect, self-awareness and self-commitment to a community based on the dialectical acceptance of common objectives and values (cf. Table 1). For policy making, autonomy is a regulative principle according to which individual differences are acknowledged, the individual's essential power of reason is respected and their capacity and willingness to collectivity are taken as the point of departure.

Accordingly, the core principles of social policy would be the promotion of social esteem, protection from repression and humiliation and the support of shared values and the development of common objectives. In the following section, I will argue that some but not all of the elaborated aspects have already been the object of comparative welfare state or social policy analysis, although they are not always theoretically founded or combined in this way.

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[15] Capacity for reflexion on one's own and general needs, rational association between moral and **ethical** grounds (respect for reciprocity)

Table 1: Conceptual, policy and methodological dimensions of individual autonomy

	Affiliation	Reflexivity	Commitment
Conceptual dimension			
Expression	Unique Identity (rather than independence or "unencumbered self")	Self-determination (rather than freedom of action)	Capacity of reciprocity and solidarity (rather than maximising benefits)
Individual Requirements	Self Respect, Creativity, Coherency	Self Awareness and Power of Judgement	Self commitment, insight or acceptance
Policy dimension			
Core Policy Principle	Promotion of Self-Esteem and Inclusion	Protection from oppression and humiliation Promotion of mutual respect	Support of shared social values and objectives
Methodological dimension			
Concepts of measurement	'sense of belonging' a persons' integrity coping strategies	Mutual respect and social esteem Comparative orientations (e.g. deservingness)	Attitudes and expectations towards the state (justice, trust and acceptance)
Related theoretical approaches	social exclusion research social citizenship	Recognition theory (Moral economy) (social citizenship)	Moral economy Sociology of law
Source: Own presentation.			

3. The concept of individual autonomy at the crossroad between social policy and comparative welfare state research

The subjective perception of social security, which is affected by the social context and constructed through complex mechanisms (cf. the exemplary study by Evers and Nowotny 1987), is the key to the citizens' well-being and to thier acceptance of social policy reforms. Social security, however, is to be understood as a dynamic phenomenon that assigns the social security system the task of reducing the uncertainty about the future that results from social and economic change, rather than a (static) life-long guarantee of a particular standard of living (Kaufmann 2003: 101). This conception of social security is closely linked to our understanding of individual autonomy that should – in the ideal case – be supported and protected by social policy intervention.[16]

The most recent social policy reforms, which were inspired by the activation paradigm, run in the opposite direction.[17] Furthermore, they have been accompanied by a social policy discourse in which arguments that point to the risk of misuse are presented to justify cuts to benefits: Citizens are no longer defined as the bearers of social rights but as the object of moral judgement (or the German case cf.

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[16] In democratic welfare states, what is judged a social risk finds explicit expression in the content of the social security system and it is implicitly reflected in the structure of collective expectations and the development of day-to-day practices (Evers and Nowotny 1987).

[17] See for an early comparison the volumes by Trickey/Lödemel 2000 and Van Berkel/Hornemann Moeller 2002).

Bothfeld 2007; Mohr, 2007).[18] The renewed interest in research into social policy on the subject also appears to be an expression of critical reflection on this development.[19] In the following I would like to show that the concept of individual autonomy can be situated at the crossroads of four – more or less critical - theoretical bodies of welfare state or social policy research: the moral economy of welfare states, the sociology of law, the social citizenship approach and cultural welfare state theory, which is based on the normative political theory of recognition. It is worth exploring these approaches as they allow us to draw methodological conclusions for our research on individual autonomy.

3.1 The citizen as the legitimator of social policy action

The citizens' subjective experience and attitudes towards the State and their co-citizens have remained valid empirical objects of social policy research, even if they are not always explicitly linked to social policy intervention or to explicit theoretical foundations. The common feature of these studies is their functionalist perspective of the citizens' well-being and attitudes as they – implicitly or explicitly – depart from the idea that social cohesion and inclusion are necessary prerequisites for a state's legitimacy. The objects of research are various facets of the individuals' commitment to the State's activities or normative rules that can be indicators for social cohesion and the State's legitimacy. I propose to distinguish three strands according to the degree the authors consider citizens' attitudes as indicators of the welfare states legitimacy.

Social inequality research is perhaps least explicitly coupled to questions of legitimacy as this (sociological) stream addresses specific social problems such as social exclusion and marginalisation in depth.[20] The focus is set on the citizens' life situations and individual strategies for dealing with social risks such as unemployment or social exclusion; moreover, these studies point to the processes of political constructions and definitions of social division (Dörre, Behr u.a. 2008; Bude/Lantermann 2006). More general findings have shown that the growing fear of unemployment is not linked to the objective

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[18] Obviously, the justification of sanctioning policies has aggravated in recent years. Whilst the economist argument of disincentive has always been present in the debate, the moral argument of misuse has been added to the discourse quite recently. It would be worth analysing the political discourse in terms of the rise of (discursive) mistrust.

[19] From a functionalist perspective, citizens are regarded as the objects of social policy intervention and their agreement or protest as confirming or questioning the legitimacy of state action. From a normative perspective, the citizens are viewed as legal subjects with needs and rights and so as a constituent component of a democratic political community.

[20] In this context I have to refer to the German situation and – being aware that the literature is abundant in this field of research - I will, of course be obliged to quote very selectively.

condition of being unemployed, but increasingly also affects the middle class (Böhnke 2006).[21] This strand of research reveals two important aspects: It first point out, that social policies affect people's lives in a much more complex way than policy makers or economists assume. Secondly it affirms our theoretical finding, that individual characteristics (self-respect, creativity and coherency, cf. section 2.1) represent relevant factors for coping with specific life situations such that they merit the support of social policy measures.[22] A *second* sociological strand of comparative welfare research considers the welfare state as a "moral institution that implements a social policy concept of fair distribution" and in which social transfer is based on the normative ideas of appropriateness and fairness" (Mau 2002: 354).[23] Here, welfare states are considered as 'reciprocity arrangements' that express a particular implicit normative contract between the citizens (Lessenich/Mau 2005). The nature and extent of reciprocity varies (culturally determined) between welfare states.[24] Under the concept of 'moral economy', authors analyse the citizens' sense of justice, which is considered significantly influenced by the social policy framework and discourse (for empirical comparative analyses cf. Mau, 2004; Kumlin 2004). Another more specific concept represents the 'deservingness' of social benefits which has been comparatively researched and shown that pension benefits enjoy higher acceptance than uneployment benefits in several European countries (Oorschot 2005), or - more generally - the social acceptance of social security schemes (see for tax-financed schemes e.g. Sachweh, Ullrich u.a. 2007).[25] The *third* strand of research is still closer to the subject of political legitimacy as it addresses directly the citizens' judgement of the States' performance in terms of political trust or the citizens' expectations towards the Welfare state. They indicate that a high level of social security provision correlates with high rates of trust in the State (see e.g. Larsen 2006) or that – at least in Germany - citizens display relatively stable expectations concerning the benefits provided by the welfare state (Roller 2002).

The findings of these studies are highly instructive to get a first impression of how citizens cope with social risks within a given national context or to what extent they are committed to the public authorities.

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21 Attempts at a comparative study of citizens' individual autonomy (Goodin 2001; van der Veen/Groot 2005) have resulted in few significant findings relative to our refined concept of individual autonomy due to the methodological problems associated with combining the general indicators of inequality research.

[22] Dörre et al. for example describe one type of recipients on basic allowance (unemployment benefit II) as wilful and unique individuals.

[23] This stands in contrast to Esping-Andersen's perspective in which the welfare state regime is perceived as a mechanism for the redistribution of society's wealth resulting from social negotiation processes.

[24] The typology of forms of reciprocity as suggested by Robert E. Goodins alongside three dimensions (conditionality, temporality and the "currency" of the exchanged goods) is a valuable tool for analysis (Goodin 2002: 583).

[25] A pluri-annual survey which has been commissioned by the German Federal Government, shows continuous high approval of social state benefits (Krömmelbein, Bieräugel u.a. 2007).

The advantage of this kind of research is, that it allows for international comparison or time series observation as most of these studies draw on quantitative data and research designs and rely on standardised representative surveys. The short coming of this methodology is however, that it does not allow to grasp incremental qualitative changes such as the perception of new risks or problems that are not represented by the pre-formulated categories.[26] In addition to that it remains difficult to distinguish whether the expressed attitudes merely represent a reflection of discourse transmitted by the media but do not convey the basic thinking of the citizen. Specific qualitative rather explorative, qualitative studies indicate that the institutions of the welfare state have a significant impact on the citizens' perceptions of social security and even on their behaviour (see cf. Dörre, Behr u.a. 2008).

3.2 The citizens' political maturity in the democratic social state

Secondly, the reflection on individual autonomy is linked to the general question of how (social) law can or should shape people's day-to-day lives, which has been prominently addressed by Jürgen Habermas' discursive theory of law (Habermas 1992). In this perspective, the transformation of socio-political claims into a legal framework is intended to unburden the individual from moral principles and the contingent principle of case-by-case decisions (Habermas 1992). However, This simultaneously carries the problem of norming and standardising individual and wilful behaviour as illustrated by the example of work obligations in activation strategies: Although gainful employment remains the primary means of integration, even in post-industrial society (Castel 2000: 337), under what conditions should the law then support and oblige people to generate their own incomes? To what extent should individual ideas or life plans be acknowledged? Or to pose a more general question: Is juridicial intervention at all compatible with respect for the citizens' basic right to self-determined life plans? The solution to this basic social policy dilemma is a matter of political and theoretical dispute, in which two positions can be schematically distinguished.

The left-liberal position essentially perceives social policy intervention critically in view of the individual's self-determination because it considers the creation of boundaries between private life and the public sphere difficult, if not impossible, and holds bureaucratic interference for an unavoidable side-effect of social policy intervention (see e.g. Sachße 1990). Essentially, politicised social needs are transformed into social policy requirements and as such depoliticised and – as demonstrated by historical experience – also used as a means of applying discipline. Because of the bureaucratic logic of the social state, gains in social policy freedom and security that can be achieved through social policy

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[26] The new representative panel survey "Labour Market and Social Security" (Promberger 2007) of the German Institute for labour market Research (IAB) has responded to this lack of specific subjective indicators by introducing subjective variables into the questionnaire that allow the analysis of people's perception of the new schemes (for first results cf. Achatz/Wenzig 2007).

always include an inherent danger of paternalistic dominance (for this criticism of the judicial, administrative, therapeutic (JAT) state apparatus, see also Fraser 1994: 237). Above all, public social services are always characterised by hierarchies so that state control and intervention systematically limit individual autonomy and develop a disciplinary effect (Ben-Ishai 2006). In addition, social policy intervention always rests on majority opinion and social power relationships and consequently, it is never neutral (Young 1990). Even in 'well-meaning' democratic societies, the phenomena of the oppression of individual abilities and idiosyncrasies or of the expression of individual needs and feelings can occur in day-to-day life, especially then, when the normative habits, symbols and implicit assumptions of institutional regulations remain unquestioned, and are rather perceived as neutral and universally applicable (Young 1990: 40ff). The paternalism of social policy intervention is thematised especially in the research of social work and services where community education services intervene directly in the 'client's' environment with the objective of educational behaviour change (Sachße 1986).[27] Correspondingly, concepts such as 'empowerment', which comes from US American social work research has been criticised as paternalistic because here implicit ethical values are linked to bureaucratic logic and efficiency criteria without according appropriate weight to the subjective perspective (Bröckling 2003: 337). Equally, on closer examination, the social policy demand for self-determination and the assumption of individual responsibility is revealed to be an ideologically charged project that does not aim at the actual emancipation of the individual, but much more presupposes their ability to determine their own actions.[28] The left-liberal criticism of the welfare state therefore warns against the expansion of paternalistic structures and demands recognition of the plurality of life situations and establishment of the citizens' capacity to contribute to the design of social policy solutions (Young 1990).

In contrast, the second - conservative-liberal - position limits itself to the essential rejection of intervention by the social state. It assumes that freedom and self-determination are derived from one's occupational activity and that in principle every individual is capable of earning an income. Here, the social state's offer of security is considered irreconcilable with the realisation of individual freedom. Above all, the compensatory strategy of benefits provided by the social state is said to limit the citizens' freedom through a system of enforced paternalistic regulations, and even leads to paralysis of the community's creation of social services (see also, Sachße 1990: 15). This usually involves assumptions about individual behaviour that reduces it to egocentric and economically-oriented action (cf. the

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[27] Analogous to this, confrontation with the implementation of activating strategies is currently generating an intensive and productive scientific debate on the effectiveness of placement and advisory services in labour market policy (Van Berkel/Valkenburg 2007).

[28] Theoretic analyses of the concept of individual responsibility have clearly demonstrated its inconsistency and incompatibility with normative theory (Nullmeier 2006).

criticism by Offe 1987; for an alternative perspective on motives of action cf. Nullmeier 2000). On the individual level, the mechanism of the 'poverty trap' is subject to the assumption that drawing social benefits has the effect of reducing motivation to use one's own initiative. Under this rationale, social policy solutions consist of the institutionalisation of (monetary) incentives, i.e. the reduction of 'disincentives' in order to increase the probability of movement into gainful employment. However, there is no empirical evidence to support the accuracy of this assumption to date (Vobruba 1999, 2003).[29] By all means, the conservative criticism of welfare benefits and the political strategies derived from them have had the effect of reversing the independence that citizens gained from private and family relationships through the legal institution of social claims, and neutralised the right to support, subjecting it to moralistic judgement (cf. also Offe 1987). As long as there is no evidence for the empirical relevance of this mechanism and if the position claims to describe majority practices, it must be viewed as an ideological project and as such dismissed as a legitimate scientific concern.[30] However, the problem of social law theory has become clear: Despite a relatively well developed body of discursive or economic-institutionalist perspectives on social law, the question of how law impacts people's lives or – on the contrary - respects their individuality, supports their self-reflection and creates or supports their 'sense of belonging' (Lister 2007) has not been resolved yet. Unfortunately, empirical research in the sociology of law has strangely remained uncoupled from social policy research.[31]

3.3 Social Citizenship as an Old and New Concept

The left-liberal criticism and references to the danger of paternalist or oppressive State intervention weigh heavily and have given rise to new theoretical considerations that address the relationship between the citizen and the State using concept of 'social citizenship'. The basis here is the normative idea that social rights are the premise of social and political participation (Marshall 1963). However, the new use of this concept is concerned not only with the analysis of a visible institutional framework but also with implicit normative structures. To put it briefly, a 'modernised' use of the concept of citizenship includes two particularly interesting enhancements. Firstly, the target categories of social and political participation have been further differentiated. The material security is no longer considered to be the only premise for social participation – rather, participation is considered a complex social phenomenon.

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[29] Empirical studies repeatedly show that the receipt of benefits does not influence the general willingness to accept work, but only the point in time of entry into employment (Leibfried 1995), and that it definitely creates better matching processes in terms of qualification (Gangl/Schmid 2002).

[30] By this, I do not mean that economically motivated action would cease to exist but that this represents a specific type of social action, which empirically is of secondary importance when compared to other grounds for action (cf. also Nullmeier 2000).

[31] There is however a growing number of studies focusing on the implementation of policy programmes by social and labour market services (see e.g. Valkenburg/Van Berkel 2007) or on the governance structure.

In this sense, the citizens' attitudes are one expression of a citizenship regime (Goul Andersen 2005), which may cover concepts like self esteem and ideas of empathic reciprocity through to political commitment to public authority – all of them being values as such.[32] Similarly, (political) participation is described as a multidimensional phenomenon whose activities are related not only to the vertical but also to the horizontal dimension of society. *Secondly,* it includes the assumption that social rights do not only, and directly, influence social behaviour but also exert influence on the definition of problems and the perception of social problems on a deeper level. Explicitly, the (social) 'citizenship regime' is considered to be

> "the institutional arrangements, rules and understandings that guide and shape concurrent policy decisions and expenditures of states, problem definitions by states and citizens, and claim-making by citizens. A key dimension of the citizenship regime is the expression of basic values about the responsibility mix" (Jenson/Saint-Martin 2003: 80).

Sociological definitions add the aspect that social rights and norms are comprised not only of institutionalised rules but also include discourse and informal practices that unconsciously create a "sense of belonging" and influence day to day social practices, meanings and identities (Lister 2007: 51).[33] Here we find some of the aspects that are relevant for our concept of autonomy, the capacity of reciprocity and solidarity, which is basically regulated by the citizenship regime, as well as the sense of belonging, which is very similar to the aspect of affiliation. A methodological conclusion would be then, to look at all kinds of regulation that create distinctions between social groups rather than relying on the employment status as the only relevant category of group membership in welfare states.[34] A so enriched perspective points out that the sense of belonging as well as the rules of reciprocity are not first established through legally regulated activities (e.g. maintaining or accepting an employment), but is inherently expressed through agreement and identification with the dominant values.

3.4 Political recognition of different identities as the key to an equitable welfare state

There have been a few attempts to apply the concept of recognition to welfare state analysis (Fraser 1994; Nullmeier 2000), as well as feminist analyses that partly integrate the aspect of recognition into

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[32] Goul Andersen distinguishes between three sorts of orientation, the horizontal, which relates to the relationships between the citizens and vertical orientation, where the relationship between the State and the citizens is the central focus, and finally the attitude toward oneself (Goul Andersen 2005). Accordingly, self-esteem, attitudes of empathic reciprocity and the acceptance, i.e. agreement with State intervention, would be indicators of a good democratic arrangement.

[33] This suggests the idea of demanding a fourth group of social rights, namely those related to "recognition", i.e. positive appraisal of cultural and other differences (Offe 2001: 465)

[34] In principle, this is what the exclusion research project does (for detailed discussion, see Kronauer, 2001), whereby the mechanism for the exclusion of marginal groups is investigated, and less focus is placed on the definition of generally applicable and acknowledged standards, as in the citizenship perspective.

their concept for social policy analysis (Lister 2008). Like the social citizenship approach, they take a different perspective than approaches of the redistributive paradigm by considering that social recognition can be realised without an appropriation of material goods (Nullmeier 2000; Nullmeier 2003). There are however almost no systematic empirical analyses that illustrate the relevance of this approach to date.

Welfare state theory that explicitly builds on the political theory of recognition offer a fruitful theoretical perspective on how social policies can impact social relations. These approaches consider social esteem and recognition as expressions of typical comparative orientations that represent the core of welfare statehood (for a discussion of various perspectives, cf. Nullmeier 2003). Correspondingly, the welfare state is considered

> "an institutional mechanism that creates the subjective freedom to pursue all sorts of social comparative orientations, but in such a manner that the pursuit of each individual's social comparative lifestyle and actions is permitted to exist by all of the others. The social state secures the conditions for the universal compatibility of efforts that are directed toward social positioning." (Nullmeier 2003: 414).

Here, recognition refers to the horizontal, reciprocal recognition that exists between people. This is not only concerned with the legal integrity that is provided directly though (social) state or private civil intervention. The concept of recognition is a reference to the reciprocal recognition of the specific respective value system shared by the citizens, even if these values are not shared by all in every instance. The main interest of Frank Nullmeier's "Theory of the Social State" is to analyse social policies and welfare state change under the question of how policies shape social relations. The assumption here is that the individual's behaviour in a community is largely determined by social compensation and that the framework conditions of the (social) state significantly influence recognition between persons in all spheres (Nullmeier 2003: 414).[35] This approach thus focuses the very cultural basis of welfare societies.

Using this idea as a starting point, five complex comparative orientations for action can be identified: egocentric, rational, oriented towards a specific field or particular person, and cooperative patterns of behaviour. The different aspects of each motivational complex can be combined to a multitude of concrete motivations that influence individual action (Nullmeier 2000: 307ff.).[36] Correspondingly, the

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[35] Here there is also a difference to Honneth, who separates the spheres of accordance and recognition and so places the entire scope of family and emotional relationships in the 'private' sphere, which is presumably 'free' from state intervention (for critical comment, see Nullmeier 2003).

[36] Examples of positional (field related) orientation include, e.g. the attempt to maximise one's own position, but also the aspiration to be different. Under the 'alter-focused' orientation', we find among others, the aim of maximising the use of another person (including: good will, love, altruism, affection), but also the attempt to avoid the extremely low level of another person, (including: compassion) or the aim that another person reaches a specific level of usefulness (Nullmeier 2000: 309ff.).

dominant focus on economic motives for behaviour often found in social policy research is dismissed as an unacceptably limited approach that systematically blends out social esteem as a motivation for action. An important reference point that allow us to connect the concept of individual autonomy is the assumption that the citizen's entire subjective needs and wishes, their very existence, develop through recognition (i.e. respect for their specific identity). Social recognition is not first created in a situation of social action, but rather is accorded the citizen as an essential characteristic and is ideally protected and strengthened by social policy intervention.

However, here lies the challenge: How can "both legal institutional and discursive conditions be created that ensure the broadest possible spectrum of free development of personal (comparative) orientations for action while at the same time assuring mutual respect?" (ibid. 415). Or in other terms, how can different social identities, i.e. differences within the framework of an agreed social security system be guaranteed? If one takes the reference to social comparison as the constitutive moment of the social state seriously, it becomes clear once again that the concept of (material) social rights à la Marshall falls too short to adequately take into account the subjective aspects of security. And not only this: The recognition theory perspective of the social state makes it clear that activating strategies thwart the logic of social policy action in and for itself: Over a differentiated system of regulations, performance incentives, protective measures and institutionalised reciprocal relationships, a new control strategy is being introduced that aims to directly influence the individual's behaviour[37], without consideration for 'established' and generally applicable normative values. As such the activation reforms – at least in Germany – are not only problematic from the perspective of regulating performance. The 'deeper effects' of this reform strategy lie much more in that they defy the implicit rules of the (social-)political culture and therefore create uncertainty, which affects not only the recipients of benefits but also the entire labour force.

4. Bringing the subject in – possible paths to empirical research on individual autonomy

A first and very general conclusion is that conceptual and empirical research on individual autonomy would require a non-redistributive perspective on welfare statehood. The conceptual and methodological reflections on how our concept of individual autonomy can be connected to existing strands of social policy and welfare state research are summarized in table 1. The presented strands of research alle refer to a cultural perspective on welfare statehood. Especially the approaches inspired by the theory of recognition represent promising and innovative alternative approaches to mainstream

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[37] It was possible to show that in several European countries, changes in access to unemployment benefits meant that benefits were granted on the basis of performance rather than status (Clasen/Clegg 2006). At least in the German social security system, this was a clear break away from its basic principles.

research which is based on the redistributive paradigm. To date, however, there is few empirical evidence that would support he recognition approach.

But as our overview has shown, we could meanwhile draw on empirical and methodological findings that have been elaborated by other strands of research. Research into the 'moral economy' of welfare states have, on the basis of representative survey data, provided substantial findings on the stability or vanishing of peoples' trust in and commitment to the state or the evaluation of deservingness of social security benefits we should take into account. But although we can observe a relative stability of collective expectations and acceptance of social security schemes or a growing share of people who feel insecure, there are very few findings that allow us to clearly qualify the *impact of social policy reforms* on the individual's perception of security and autonomy. Here, we would need more specific surveys or qualitative data in order to attain a "thick description" of peoples' feelings of security and the related *specific* institutional settings.

A growing number of sociological analyses open the black box of the public employment service on the basis of qualitative research or institutional analysis in order to show to what extent peoples' capacity of judgement and development of self-determined life-plans is respected in the implementation processes of labour market reforms or social policy instruments. These studies identify typical patterns of interaction between the individuals and public authorities or different types of clients as well as individual or typical coping strategies; but, by their nature, their scope is limited to particular social groups: the services' clients. The same is true for another major strand of research: Social exclusion research has shown how people cope with difficult periods within their life courses and what conditions – e.g. social networks - they may need to reintegrate into standard life course patterns or regain a standard level of living. Thanks to this literature we know today, that poverty and social exclusion are complex phenomena that require broad and sustainable policy strategies – such as educational support in early childhood – that go beyond the mere transfer of benefit. But again, just a small (albeit growing) faction of the population of Western European Welfare states is addressed here, while processes of disintegration or insecurisation of growing parts of the middle class remain a blind spot of social policy research.

Our overview has shown that obviously affiliation (of particular groups) and social commitment (operationalised mainly in quite general terms) display a great interest of empirical research in terms of social exclusion or moral economy research while our third, the reflexivity criteria, has solely been subject of conceptual and theoretical work so far. This imbalance may be due to two reasons. Firstly collective commitment and acceptance as well as the effectiveness of poverty avoidance represent a strategic resource as they generate legitimacy of public action. Research on this topic is therefore driven by a functionalist interest and general political support. Indeed, quite a lot of surveys are organised or

financed by public political institutions like the European Commission or national governments. Secondly, moral economy research is dominated by deductive quantitative research design and based on existing large comparative surveys. As the data is restricted to a set of relatively simple indicators, this body of research is easily accessible. Of course, it does not allow for an in-depth and specified analysis of what people think and feel relative to their specific (national, cultural and maybe regional) context, such that new phenomena of how people perceive the 'risks' of modernisation or feel their individual autonomy constrained or enhanced by public action cannot be identified by this kind of research. If we define reflexivity as the individual's capacity of finding their own place in society in relation to their environment and consider this aspect as a crucial element of individual autonomy and relevant for measuring the impact of social policy, we need a new perspective and new categories for empirical research. Parts of the social citizenship research and sociology of law have provided interesting arguments for the research into the regulation of mutual recognition and respect of the individual's autonomy. But the theory of recognition, if applied to the welfare state, as it addresses the very orientations of people, represents the most interesting approach as it is closely related to our reflexivity criteria. Its conceptualisation of comparative orientations helps us to understand the richness of the possible scope of the individual's perception of its own role in society - beyond the economist perspective on social action.

But how can we measure affiliation, the degree of self-reflection and commitment to a society as indicators of the impact of social policy change? As I cannot yet provide a satisfying answer, the following questions will show, that it is nevertheless crucial to learn more about the people's collective conception of individual autonomy: Why e.g. are the French apparently much quicker and deeper concerned by social policy reforms than the German if we consider political tensions and protest as indicators for political concern expressed by a population? Or why do the Danish - at least the majority of the population - apparently do not have problems with the Danish labour market reforms? To what extent have the German labour market reforms contributed to the disruption of the German party system and the continued loss of weight of the German social democratic party? Overall, to what extent do social policy reforms affect people's all day political and social life at all? I think that there might be two possible answers. On the one hand, national social policy reforms may link with existing normative structures by respecting implicit and institutional norms and searching for a maximum of normative fit with the given setting (Offe 2001) – this could have been the case in Denmark. On the other hand, the individual perception of the extent of retrenchment – or the constrained autonomy - might be quite different. In other words, French may feel their individual autonomy encroached upon much quicker than the Danish. In both cases, in order to get a better understanding of the political dimension of social policy change, we need to know, what people understand as core elements which represent and

guarantee individual (political or social) autonomy *and* how the implicit guarantee of affiliation, possibility of self-reflection and commitment is institutionalised. In order to be able to identify the depth and scope of present political change, we need more empirical findings on the ideational and cultural dimension of the state-citizen nexus. I have suggested individual autonomy here as a core concept of research into peoples' perception of social security as well as into the structure of social law as formal representation of social security. Whether this concept turns out to be adequate and sustainable in terms of straightforward methodological specification and insightful findings, will have to be proved by future empirical research.

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