

Journal of Social Policy

<http://journals.cambridge.org/JSP>

Additional services for *Journal of Social Policy*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



Giuliano Bonoli (2013), *The Origins of Active Social Policy: Labour Market and Childcare Policies in a Comparative Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. £60.00, pp. 240, hbk.

RIK VAN BERKEL

Journal of Social Policy / Volume 44 / Issue 02 / April 2015, pp 401 - 402
DOI: 10.1017/S0047279414000932, Published online: 28 January 2015

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0047279414000932

How to cite this article:

RIK VAN BERKEL (2015). Journal of Social Policy, 44, pp 401-402 doi:10.1017/S0047279414000932

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

Giuliano Bonoli (2013), *The Origins of Active Social Policy: Labour Market and Childcare Policies in a Comparative Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. £60.00, pp. 240, hbk.

doi:[10.1017/S0047279414000932](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279414000932)

Social scientists interested in active social policies will no doubt be familiar with the work of Giuliano Bonoli. Bonoli is one of the most productive scholars in this social policy domain and, more importantly, has studied active social policies from various disciplinary perspectives, including social policy, public administration and political science. In his book *The Origins of Active Social Policy: Labour Market and Childcare in a Comparative Perspective*, the political science perspective is dominant. In this book, Bonoli sets himself the task to explain the shift from passive to active welfare states during the last decades. More specifically, three puzzles are distinguished: (1) the development of a new set of social policies in times of budgetary pressures; (2) the fact that these policies have been introduced in countries irrespective of their welfare regime background; although, and this constitutes the final puzzle, (3) Southern European countries have embraced the new active social policy paradigm less eagerly than most other countries.

In addressing these puzzles, the book uses a clear approach which makes the book very accessible. It starts with defining active social policies, followed by a chapter presenting data substantiating the starting point of the book, namely that welfare states have become more active. One of the interesting features of the book is that it pays attention to active labour market policies as well as childcare policies as 'tools' of active social policy. Then, hypotheses are developed concerning how to explain the reorientation in social policies towards the 'active' paradigm. Several political science theories of policy making are used to develop these hypotheses, including theories focusing on the new needs arising from post-industrialization, theories emphasizing political competition and credit-claiming processes and theories on institutional legacies and how these result in opportunities and obstacles for policy change. To test the hypotheses, a creative research strategy is developed in which two types of data are used. Firstly, narrative accounts of the development of active labour market policies and childcare policies in seven European countries are presented. Eastern European countries are not included: an omission that Bonoli defends by arguing that the political science theories used in the study are not well suited to the particular historical background of this group of countries. Secondly, statistical data are analysed, using expenditure on active labour market and childcare policies as dependent variables. The independent variables in this analysis are statistical indicators functioning as operationalisations of the factors that potentially explain the shift towards active social policies.

The relevance of this book for scholars interested in active social policies is evident. For although active welfare state reforms have been studied extensively, studies investigating and explaining the rise of active welfare states systematically, comparatively and empirically, as is the objective of Bonoli's book, are scarce. However, the book's relevance goes well beyond the specific policy domain of active policies. As Bonoli's book makes clear, active social policies are an interesting case for studying welfare state stability and change as well as the factors promoting and hindering welfare state transformations. Given the range of socio-economic, political and institutional explanations that are analyzed, the book provides a valuable contribution, theoretically as well as empirically, to the ongoing debate about the complex dynamics underlying policy change. Therefore, the book is recommended reading for scholars interested in policy reforms.

Bonoli's study also provides food for thought and debate. The very first sentence of the introduction is a perfect example: 'The twenty-first century has witnessed the rebirth of

consensus in social policy-making' (p. 1). Of course, this sentence may be interpreted as merely pointing out the fact that many welfare states have gone through the process of activating their social policies. But, while reading the book I came to the conclusion that there is more to it. It also reflects an interpretation of what active social policy is that emphasizes its enabling and supportive potential while dealing with its most contested characteristics in a somewhat untransparent way. This interpretation becomes rather explicit in the chapter in which active social policies are defined. Instead of placing active social policies in opposition to passive social policies with their emphasis on (income) protection, active social policies are defined as representing a kind of 'third way' in between passive policies and what is called neoliberal (re-)commodification. What I find problematic about this way of defining active social policies is that it puts the most criticized elements of active welfare reforms (retrenchment, workfare, deregulation) in a separate social policy category (re-commodification), restricting active social policies to what Peter Taylor-Gooby (2004) called 'positive activation' policies such as education programmes, childcare, job search support, etc. This also helps to explain why throughout the book, active social policies are characterized as prioritizing 'human capital investment and the removal of obstacles to labour market participation' (p. 19), as involving 'no obvious losers' (p. 20) and as providing 'win-win solutions to the social problems they are meant to address' (p. 171).

To be fair, the book is not fully neglecting the contested elements of active welfare reforms. When types of active labour market policies (together with childcare constituting the core tools of active social policies) are discussed, benefit reductions and conditionality *are* mentioned; and the conclusion states that 'activation is far from being perceived as an advantage by those who are receiving it' (p. 182). But this creates some unresolved conceptual tensions and frictions that sometimes raise the question: the origins of *what* exactly are being analyzed?

Future studies into the origins of active social policies could – and, in my opinion, should – pay more explicit attention to the mix of positive and negative activation policies that characterize most, if not all, active welfare state reforms. Researchers interested in investigating the origins of mixes of enabling and disciplining active social policies will certainly find plenty of inspiration in Bonoli's book.

Reference

Taylor-Gooby, P. (2004), 'New social risks in post-industrial society: some evidence on responses to active labour market policies from Eurobarometer', *International Social Security Review*, 57: 3, 45–64.

RIK VAN BERKEL
Utrecht University
r.vanberkel@uu.nl

Rik Van Berkel, Willibrord de Graaf and Tomáš Sirovátka (eds.) (2011), *The Governance of Active Welfare States in Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. £60.00, pp. 304, hbk.

doi:[10.1017/S0047279414000944](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279414000944)

The last few years have seen the adoption in Europe of a series of reforms that concern the way in which the delivery of welfare benefits and services is organised. In Germany, a new institution, located between local social assistance and the public employment services, has been created, the Jobcentre. France has merged the public employment service with the agency responsible for the delivery of unemployment benefit. In the UK, Jobcentre Plus now provides cash benefits and placement services to all working-age clients of social benefits. Switzerland has developed