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Mariely López-Santana (2015) *The New Governance of Welfare States in the United States and Europe: Between Decentralization and Centralization in the Activation Era*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 230 pages, \$85.00, hbk.

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During the last decade, the governance of active labour-market policies has received increasing attention in the social policy as well as public administration academic literature. This has enriched our knowledge of active welfare state reforms, that was traditionally focused mainly on the substance of these reforms, with insights in new ways of policy making and, specifically, policy delivery and public (or, at least, publicly financed) service provision. Mariely López-Santana's book, based on empirical research in a rather uncommon but certainly interesting group of five countries (the US, the UK, Spain, Italy and Germany), fits in this 'new tradition' of governance research. The core focus of the research is on processes of centralization and decentralization that are being framed throughout the book as reflecting a paradox of unity and flexibility: '... how to have sufficient subnational flexibility to bring social policies closer to local and individual circumstances, while also centrally regulating subnational systems to avoid fragmentation, disparities and promote coherent, nationwide policy approaches' (p. 1).

The author claims to make an original contribution to the area of governance research in two ways. First, she argues that the study compares nations' governance changes in labour-market policies in a more systematic way than has been done in most research up until now. On the one hand, it does so by making a distinction between political, administrative and fiscal processes of decentralization and centralization, a distinction that is further refined by focusing analysis on intergovernmental reforms (national/subnational levels of government), intragovernmental changes (levels within central organizations) and delegation (through the involvement in policy delivery of the private and third sector). On the other, centralization and decentralization are not treated as a dichotomy. Instead, the book focuses on how countries' reforms combine forms of centralization with forms of decentralization. Using this operationalization of the study's 'dependent variable', López-Santana reaches the conclusion that although all countries in the study have introduced active welfare state reforms, their institutional governance models did not converge. In other words, countries deal with the paradox of unity (or standardization) and flexibility in quite different ways: whereas some favour standardization, others have introduced reforms that strongly promote flexibility.

The second original contribution the study claims to make concerns the explanation of these non-convergent governance reform paths. López-Santana argues that contrary to what one might expect, welfare regimes are not a crucial factor in understanding governance reform paths: similar welfare regimes reveal very different governance reforms. She points at the institutionalization of what she calls 'the principle of interterritorial equivalency' as one of the main explanatory factors in interpreting divergent trajectories of change. Briefly summarized the author's argument is that the stronger countries have institutionalized and protect this principle, the more they favour reform trajectories based on unity and standardization through central regulation, rather than flexibility through decentralization.

In my view, López-Santana's claim to make an original contribution to studies of the governance of active welfare states is convincingly fulfilled. In addition, the book is very clearly structured, accessibly written and – as far as I can judge – complete in its review of the relevant academic literature. All in all, I would warmly recommend this book to scholars who are interested in governance reforms in active welfare states. Of course, the book also raises questions that require further debate and research. In this review, I will address two of those. First, it is not quite clear to me how processes of central regulation and deregulation fit in the conceptual distinction that is made between political, administrative and fiscal

(de)centralization. Countries that have introduced national active labour-market policies and programmes differ considerably in terms of the extent to which they centrally detail the nature of, and service provision models for, these policies and programmes. Whereas some countries' national policies regulate such diverse issues as the type of programmes that should be offered to the unemployed, procedures to assess unemployed people's labour-market distance, the nature of the programmes each target group is entitled to, and the frequency of client contacts, other countries leave these types of decisions to regional or local actors and agencies. Should we consider deregulation a form of political decentralization (which the book defines as the transfer of political powers to regions and municipalities) or administrative decentralization (defined as a downward transfer of responsibilities in implementation)? In the former case, I would argue that political decentralization may be more widespread than what is captured when we look at explicit transfers of political powers to subnational actors. In the latter case, it seems to me that the distinction between policy making and policy implementation becomes rather blurred. In addition, the book not always clearly distinguishes between passive and active labour-market policies, that is, between income protection schemes and services and programmes provided in the context of welfare-to-work or activation. In itself, this is understandable given the intricate ways in which both have become connected. At the same time, the distinction is relevant when we discuss the tensions between uniformity/standardization and flexibility. After all, advocates of flexibility and de-standardization of labour-market policies developed their argument in the context of individualizing (activating) services rather than (passive) income benefits. Therefore, I find the concluding statement in the book that decentralization may contribute to subnational differences and inequalities whereas centralization might hamper innovation somewhat disappointing, as it avoids the issue that I believe looms throughout the book: can national standards help to create a situation in which subnational variation and differences can be encouraged in order to provide flexible, individualised and tailor-made services without undermining solidarity and without leading to inequalities that are considered unacceptable?

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Ivan Harsløf and Rickard Ulmestig (eds.) (2013), *Changing Social Risks and Social Policy Responses in the Nordic Welfare States*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 295 pp., £71.00, hbk.

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The theme of this anthology is the so-called new social risks related to the socio-economic transformations that have brought post-industrial societies into existence. The stage is set by Chapter 2 (Harsløf *et al.*). Based on a comparative analysis it is suggested that the Nordic welfare states – more than elsewhere in Europe – exhibit the structural features associated in the literature with the emergence of new social risks. Young people, immigrants and single parents appear to be relatively exposed to employment problems and to the risk of poverty in the Nordic countries.

The book mirrors a critical narrative describing the Nordic welfare state as strongly influenced by neoliberal governance strategies, with widening gaps in employment, income and health, and characterised by processes of individualisation, segregation and polarisation. This view is not unfamiliar to a Nordic reader, but taking into account the frequent stressing in the international literature of the Nordic countries as 'heaven on earth' it is praiseworthy