

new orientations for democracy in europe

NODE-GOTHERGLO

Governance, Territoriality and Europeanisation – Whither Welfare Regimes in Europe?

Thematic Area

Democratic Governance

1. Objectives

The purpose of the project is to improve understanding of the *reshaping of contemporary democracy* in view of the shifting of boundaries and open questions with regard to the scale of democracy, the scope of state involvement in policy regulation and the mode of government of democratic systems.

With scale of democracy we refer to the level at which democracy can function. Historically the nation-state has been the repository and guarantor of democracy, this would appear to no longer be the case. Scope taps on the extent of involvement of the state in the provision of services traditionally thought as relevant – directly or indirectly – for basic citizen rights. Mode of government refers to the way in which democratic systems operate in terms of procedures for decision-making, policy implementation and accountability and the positioning (fixed or flexible) of relevant actors.

Many practical policy issues are directly affected by consideration of the level at which agendas could or should be set, decisions made, and choices implemented; the extent to which decision procedures can or should frame policy; and the ways in which democracy can be operationalised in particular cases.

It is at least arguable that not just power and authority, but democracy itself, are leaking from the nation-state. Such an argument is one of the factors contributing to scepticism about European political integration, and specifically to the familiar criticisms of the opaqueness and lack of accountability in the EU. The 2001 White Paper on European Governance recognises the validity of many of these criticisms, and indeed in underlining, correctly, that the defects of the European polity lie equally at the level of the member states, it actually enhances their significance. Similarly the trends often summarised by the phrase “globalisation” encounter widespread hostility less because of their tangible impact than because of the fear that they are uncontrolled and uncontrollable.

The fear is understandable, and indeed the diagnosis is basically correct. The consequences of such fear, however, could be

hugely detrimental – not so much to globalisation, as to democracy. To improve understanding, in theoretical and empirical terms, of the “scaling” of democracy therefore throws light on some urgent practical concerns.

2. Core questions of Research

The key question of the project is whether the leaking of power and authority from the nation-state may be said to erode democracy. This is a hot debate in both public and academic terms, but it is one that tends to be framed in misleading terms: as primarily a matter either of economic management or of national identity. The theoretical framework adopted here suggests rather to focus on the *institutions and practices* that embody membership of a society organized as a political community and which, at least for practical medium-term purposes, operate at the level of the state.

Two sets of institutions and practices are of particular significance in understanding the comparatively anaemic character of democracy at local and European levels (to say nothing of the global). First, the political field itself: the modes of party organization and competition, of political participation and debate, of interaction between the media and politics, of mobilization and contestation. Secondly, the range of institutions and practices that combine to make up social policy or the welfare state.

3. Project Goals

To establish a link between citizenship and the welfare state is a post-Marshallian commonplace. However, the welfare state is often treated as if it were reducible to a set of abstract rights, or even to an ethos of solidarity. In fact, what best characterizes contemporary welfare systems is rather their extreme institutional “thickness” and their historically constituted national specificity. A better – i.e. a *thicker* – understanding of what it is to be a citizen is one of the keys to a better understanding of the ways in which democracy is adapting, or could adapt, to the contemporary dynamics of scale and scope. In this project we propose to look specifically at the dynamics of welfare systems from this perspective. What makes welfare particularly interesting from the perspective of the project as a whole is that it involves issues of scale (at which level should welfare systems be defined and managed?), scope (to what extent should welfare be privatized?) and mode (how should welfare systems be run to the extent that they remain publicly funded?). The current situation, where the EU is increasingly a focus for the legal definition of social rights, but has no competence or influence on policy debates or implementation (and is not, except marginally the focus of political mobilization) is obviously of particular interest in this respect.

The general objective of the project will be to examine which social welfare objectives should be pursued in and by the European Union, and what constitutional framework and political culture are necessary to achieve them.

4. Theory and Methods Applied

The practical implementation of the democratic idea raises complex issues of *scale* and *scope*. In so far as democracy involves reference to a “people” – and in so far as one dismisses naturalised or deterministic conceptions of this notion –, its human and territorial dimensions are *prima facie* indeterminate. Furthermore, even the purest models of democracy attach to politics at least some component of collective problem solving which, depending on the kinds of problems presumed to be relevant, cuts across human and geographical scaling in complex and unstable ways. Political organization thus suffers from indeterminacies both of scope and of scale. It is a commonplace of contemporary political and academic debate to combine the general theoretical points just summarized with more specific empirical claims in order to show that conventional models of political scope and scale – which refer, above all, to the nation-state – are threatened or even obsolete. Both power and authority, it is claimed, are “leaking” from the nation-state *upwards* (to the continental level, especially the European Union, and to an emerging global or cosmopolitical level), *sideways* (to a range of non-state entities including in particular multinational corporations and NGOs) and *downwards* (to provinces and cities).

A wide range of solutions have been offered, proposing either some kind of postnational template [for example, Jürgen Habermas (1996, 1998), David Held (1995, 1999), Jean-Marc Ferry (2000)]; the reconceptualisation and revitalisation of the nation-state [for example, David Miller (2000), Anthony Giddens (1998), Dominique Schnapper (1994)]; or a model of some kind of post-statist politics, often based on social movement theories [for example, Ulrich Beck (1993), Alberto Melucci (1996)] or on strong interpretations of multiculturalism (for example, Iris Young (1990), Bhikhu Parekh (2000)]. While there are significant divergences among the proponents of this broad diagnosis, there are also genuine convergences among some at least, as, in particular, the collaboration of Held, Giddens, and Beck, illustrates. At least at a first level of analysis, it makes sense to talk in this respect of a generic argument about the supposed contemporary crisis of political scope and scale, to which even theorists outside the strictly postnational paradigm subscribe.

The theoretical implication – which also raises practical institutional issues – is that democracy needs to be rethought in light of fundamental complexities of scale and scope. It is equally important to clarify the nature of exercise of political authority – what we here call the mode of government in democratic systems. This is relevant not alone with regard to the vertical dispersion of authority captured by the notion of subsidiarity (Føllesdal, 1998; Marks, Hooghe, and Blank, 1996) but also with regard to horizontal dispersion in the form of extensive involvement on non-political actors or the civil society in the decision process and in this the strength of the public sphere (Börzel and Risse, 2000; Crowley, 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2001). Vertical and horizontal dispersion respond to different normative arguments for participation, and raise different normative challenges concerning such issues as representativity, transparency and accountability. The multi-level governance literature relates to the above issues but often tends to confound the vertical and horizontal dispersion of political power and, in that, the nature of contestation.

The focus of the proposed project on the way in which welfare regimes are responding to the above challenges is interesting not as a case study alone or even primarily. As noted in the previous section, welfare regimes are strongly embedded in national institutional arrangements and at the same time mediate (national) citizenship as guardians of social rights, taking care of the redistribution aspect of fair societies. Fairness or justice is the second core or fundamental principle of liberal democracies besides individual autonomy. This explains why thinkers like Habermas or Giddens, even if disagreeing on the more likely or desired outcome of the contemporary crisis of the (national) political system, agree that transformation would involve in some important way also the transformation of welfare regimes.

Following the project's general conceptual framework, the project will adopt the following sub-goals.

1. To compare, contrast and assess some normative theories concerning reasons for welfare implicit in the public political cultures of Member States of the Union today. Starting points are the ideological platforms of political parties, regarding what solidarity among equals entails in terms of allocation of goods and political power within a domestic political order.
2. These normative political theories, charitably reconstructed, will be employed to assess some proposed institutional arrangements for implementing solidarity in the European Union:
 - a) A Constitutionally required Egalitarianism – a European *Finanzausgleich*, along the lines of the German Constitution (*Grundgesetz* art 72 (2) 3), or the Canadian version;
 - b) A European Basic Income, securing an unconditional income without means test or work requirement.
 - c) Open Method of Coordination, a largely inter-governmental arrangement, whereby the Member States agree to common objectives but are free to create and implement their own action plans.
3. These theories and their preferred institutional arrangements are employed to explore some central issues of the substantive content of a European Constitution, particularly concerning the splitting and sharing of competences, limits to democratic contestation in the form of constitutionally entrenched objectives of the Union, the scope for majority and QMV decisions, and rights-constraints e.g. in the form of social rights in a (modified) Charter on Fundamental Rights.

The work will be carried out by means of textual research and analysis of the platforms of political parties in Europe; and by bringing normative models and institutional and constitutional alternatives to bear on these findings. Particular attention will be paid to the place of welfare debates within national and European politics. National debates to be examined in depth will include besides Austria, Germany, France, UK and Norway.

5. Innovation, anticipated results

The scientific benefits of the project lie primarily in addressing certain inadequacies of the existing literature on the contemporary reconfigurations of democracy. Many of the key concepts deployed in the literature – especially “governance” and “globalisation” – remain loose, difficult to operationalise, and tangled up with unexamined normative presuppositions. The empirical work within the project, and the opportunities for common theoretical work that it will offer, will permit better specification of what is at stake in contemporary debates, what concepts might assist in clarifying them, and how such concepts might be operationalised for empirical purposes. Furthermore, the empirical basis of contemporary discussions often remains highly speculative, partly because of the aforementioned normative presuppositions. A direct benefit of the project will be the production of detailed empirical information on certain important aspects of processes within and at the margins of contemporary democracies. Such information will be transferable in the sense that it can be used both for theoretical purposes within and beyond the project and for future research design on related topics. The methodological approach adopted by the project will, in particular, be the basis for transferable and generalisable scientific know-how.

The policy relevance of the project derives both from the priorities of the Call itself and from the broader context of the White Paper on European Governance. The problematic nature of contemporary democracy with regard to scale, scope and governance is the key issue of the first research theme of the NODE Research Programme on ‘Democratic Governance’ (and especially sub-theme 3 ‘Governance at the national, regional and local level and the links to the EU level’). The research programme explicitly mentions the issue of subsidiarity, the interface between different levels of government, the involvement of the civil society in the decision process, as well as the trends towards liberalisation and privatisation and how they affect our understanding of governance. These are all questions covered by the proposed project. The programme is critical of the White Paper on European Governance as being too limited in its perspective, focusing on the European level rather than the interfaces between different levels. The purpose of the proposed project is explicitly to promote such understanding with respect to the reconfiguration of democracy.

The project is specifically designed to produce the improved knowledge and understanding called for in the Programme, and it will reflect very directly on how the five “principles of good governance” relate to each other – including the possible conflicts between them, which are played down in the White Paper – and how specific reforms might contribute to any or all of them.

6. Networking, application of results, science communication

The project will generate a workshop, a series of interim reports or working papers, leading to an edited volume of critical perspectives on the challenges and opportunities for welfare regimes in Europe that respects the shared values and expectations of Europeans. The project will also include a report identifying central recommendations for the Convention and for European civil society organisations, using established contacts. Such a systematic analysis and extension of ideologies of welfare will aid Europeans, and their parties, in deliberation about what the shared commitment to equal respect amounts to in the emerging European political order, a topic hitherto beyond the ambit of normative political theory. Such contributions may thus assist in reducing the gap between European voters' views on politics and elections for European Parliament and for EU policies. The findings will shed light on important challenges concerning opportunities and risks connected to shared welfare regimes in the European Union, of high relevance during the constitutional process.

In order to carry out the proposed project collaboration is planned with researchers in the following institutions: Le Centre Interdisciplinaire pour la Recherche Comparative en Sciences Sociales (CIR-Paris) (Elise Feron); University of Oslo, (Andreas Føllesdal), Christine Stelzer-Orthofer (University of Linz).

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