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# Culture and social policy: a developing field of study

van Oorschot W. Culture and social policy: a developing field of study  
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This article takes the increased interest in the relation between culture and social policy as a starting point, and discusses how this increasing attention can be understood as the result of contextual factors such as economic, social and academic trends. It discusses these matters and at the same time reviews briefly some of the main findings of studies that contain a cultural perspective in analysing social policy. A second issue concerns the specific character of cultural perspectives in such analyses. Thus far, most studies in the field have been guided by a notion of culture as consisting of the values, norms and beliefs of welfare state actors. Recently, this notion has been questioned by advocates of the so-called 'cultural turn', who suggest that a radical change in the cultural analysis of social policy is required. The article concludes with a discussion of their claims.

## Wim van Oorschot

Tilburg University, The Netherlands

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Wim van Oorschot, Professor of Sociology, Department of Social and Cultural Studies, Tilburg University, P.O. Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg University, The Netherlands  
E-mail: w.v.oorschot@uvt.nl

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## Introduction

Some colleagues deny that paying attention to cultural factors contributes to our understanding of social policy. The idea that moral ideas and debates would have a significant influence on the design of social policies has been equated with the idea that the party and gossip on deck would determine the course of the ship (Schoor, 1984, in Deacon, 2002). Baldock (1999) has argued that culture, as a set of common values, norms and attitudes shared by the majority of a national population, is not a missing variable in understanding social policy.<sup>1</sup>

However, those who deny any significant relation between culture and social policy take a lonely position. Much more often than not one can read opposite views expressed in the literature. It is, for instance, a broadly accepted view that the early development of Western welfare states can partially be understood as resulting

from industrial and economic growth (Wilensky, 1975), or from a power struggle between the interests of classes and risk categories (Baldwin, 1990), but partly also from a struggle between various ideologies such as conservatism, liberalism and socialism (Chatterjee, 1996; Fitzpatrick, 2001; George & Page, 1995). In addition, it is acknowledged that Catholic and Protestant religious cultures have had their influence on the formation and design of European welfare states (Hornsby-Smith, 1999; Van Kersbergen, 1995), and that a political culture of neo-liberalism has been steering the restructuring of Western welfare states during the last two decades (Bonoli, George & Taylor-Gooby, 2000; Deacon, 2002; Powell & Hewitt, 2002). Recently, it has even been posited that the process of globalisation, which urges many welfare states all over the world to adapt, is essentially a cultural process of rationalisation (Rieger & Leibfried, 2003).

Many more examples could be given to illustrate that relations between culture and social policy do exist. They exist not only at the macro level, but also, for instance, at the level of the interaction between administrators and their clients; and not only when culture influences social policy, but also the other way round, as is claimed, for instance, by studies of the effects of welfare benefits on the work ethic and civic morality.

All this does not mean that the relation between culture and social policy at present has developed into an adequately theorised, coherent field of study. On the

<sup>1</sup> Strong positions on the irrelevance of the cultural factor are most often based on a strict and limited conception of culture, as in Baldock's work, where culture is seen as a common set of values, norms and attitudes shared by the majority of a national population. This, combined with his opinion that a small intellectual elite always designs social policy, is the basis for his views on the role of cultural factors. Other, less restricted conceptions of culture exist that leave room for a cultural analysis of social policy, although they are not strictly necessary to refute Baldock's thesis when it is realised that intellectual elites are themselves also (partly) driven by values and norms.

contrary, in recent years quite a few complaints have been expressed about the underdeveloped state of the cultural analysis of social policy and about the fact that it lags behind economic and political analyses (see, e.g., Aaron, Mann & Taylor, 1994; Chamberlayne, Cooper, Freeman & Rustin, 1999; Clarke, 2002; Lockhart, 2001; Pfau-Effinger, 2002; Schmidt, 2000). Although pessimistic in tone, these recent complaints do indicate, however, that the interest in culture and social policy is growing. Why would one otherwise be bothered? But what is more, in most cases the complaints are expressed in the introductions to theoretical and/or empirical studies that look into the various relationships between culture and social policy.

In this article I take the increased interest in the relation between culture and social policy as a starting point. What interests me, firstly, is how it can be understood that this relation has attracted increasing attention. In my view, this has to do with economic and social trends, as well as with specific academic developments. I will discuss these matters and at the same time try to review very briefly some of the main findings of studies on the relation between cultural factors and social policy. A second issue concerns the character of cultural perspectives in social policy analysis. In the literature, two main perspectives can be distinguished which differ in their basic perception of what culture is. Thus far, most studies in the field have been guided by a notion of culture as consisting of the values, norms and beliefs of welfare state actors, such as policy-makers, administrators, interest groups, clients and taxpayers. This broad and general notion of culture includes normative worldviews, such as political ideologies and religious beliefs, as well as particularistic normative ideas, such as people's perceptions of just desert and merit, their family values, their work ethic and so on. Recently, this notion of culture has been questioned by advocates of the so-called 'cultural turn', who suggest that a radical change in the cultural analysis of social policy is required. I will conclude the article with a discussion of their claims.

### Background of the increased interest in the relations between culture and social policy

Reviewing the literature on the relationship between social policy and culture, it seems that there have been a number of contextual factors that have contributed to the interest in this field of study. Important here are ideas of a real or alleged welfare state crisis due to specific economic and social trends, as well as specific academic developments related to an increase in the demand for and possibilities of international comparative research.

#### Welfare crisis and moral debates

In the Western world the oil price-related crisis that hit the international economy at the end of the 1970s

ignited a process of welfare state restructuring which has not yet come to an end, although at present the pressures that welfare states are experiencing are of a different and more diverse character (Sainsbury, 2001). Given the new scarcity created by the initial fiscal crisis, the basic moral welfare question of 'who should get what, and why?' has come to the fore again. In particular, there has been a rise in debates on the moral aspects of poverty and welfare dependency, as well as on the moral effects of welfare.

*(New) poverty and morals.* One of the direct consequences of the economic crisis was the rise of the number of households living below the poverty line. The so-called 'new' poverty attracted many scholars to study its extent, social distribution, determinants and dynamics in a large number of quantitative and qualitative studies. But it also put the relation between social policy, on the one hand, and normative images of the poor and perceptions of the causes of poverty, on the other, back on the research agenda.

That such relations exist has long been acknowledged. Already in 1908, George Simmel argued in his essay, 'Der Arme', that the generosity of poor relief generally depends on the degree to which the poor are blamed for their own misery (Simmel, 1908). And the American saying that 'programmes for the poor, tend to be poor programmes' is based on the experience that the quality of services and benefits tends to be worse if their target groups have a negative image in society (Dale Tussing, 1974; Rainwater, 1982).<sup>2</sup> A historical perspective shows more broadly how social policies and images of the poor are related. The alms and charity-based poor relief of the Middle Ages was based on a positive image of the poor as followers of the life style of Jesus (Geremek, 1997).<sup>3</sup> But from the 16th century onwards, related to the economic crises of that time, which generated ever-larger numbers of poor, and related to the rise of Protestantism, with its strong work ethic and its aversion to the practice of alms and indulgence, the image of the poor turned negative. They were no longer seen as children

<sup>2</sup> Different mechanisms may account for this relationship. It may be due to the fact that social policies are reflections of dominant moral systems and thus try to control, discipline and even punish the deviant poor (Handler & Hasenfeld, 1991). According to Schneider and Ingram (1993), it may also stem from the fact that social policy is designed by politicians who want to be re-elected. As a result, in their decisions on the allocation of resources they would take the political power and the societal image of target groups into account, and be less generous to the 'deviants' in society, that is, the groups with least power and a strong negative public image, such as the poor.

<sup>3</sup> Geremek (1997: 24) stipulates that the moral value of the poor was attributed most to the *pauperes cum Petro*, the voluntarily poor who deliberately renounced worldly goods, but that the *pauperes cum Lazaro*, the involuntarily ordinary poor, benefited from this positive image too.

of God, but increasingly as idle and immoral beings who had to be disciplined and put under control. The deserving poor with disabilities were minimally supported on a 'less eligibility' basis, but for the able-bodied, undeserving poor the workhouse was the only option. With the rise of capitalism, its first periodic crises and the deep misery that resulted from it, the understanding arose that poverty was not only a matter of individual blame. Economic and social processes came to be seen as playing a role, as well (Piven & Cloward, 1971).

However, this does not mean that today the negative stereotyping of the poor has vanished completely. Nor is it the case that they are no longer individually blamed. Especially in North America the moral aspects of the poor and of anti-poverty policy continue to be the topic of sharp debates. One of the leading themes has been the question whether poverty is the result of a 'culture of poverty' among the poor, as it is claimed by, for example, Auletta, 1982; Mead, 1986; Niskanen, 1997 and J. Wilson, 1994, or that it finds its base in the, in many ways backward structural position of the poor (Katz, 1989; Wilson, 1987). The individual-blaming culture of poverty theory has deeply influenced the welfare policies under several US presidencies (Handler, 2002; Rein, 2001), and it has entered the European debate with Clinton's and Blair's communitarian ideas on the moral responsibility of dependent citizens (Deacon, 2002; Dean & Taylor-Gooby, 1992).

Despite the latter, opinion surveys show that in Europe the social blame perspective is still most dominant among members of the public, while the victim-blaming view is most popular among Americans (van Oorschot & Halman, 2000).<sup>4</sup> Some claim that the relative underdevelopment of the American welfare state and its lesser generosity compared with that of Western European welfare states finds its ultimate cause in this culturally based difference in public beliefs (see, e.g. Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lockhart, 2001). However, this is not to say that Europeans do not differentiate between groups of needy people. On the contrary, as is shown by public opinion data on deservingness criteria, people tend to support welfare more strongly if it is targeted at needy people who cannot be blamed for their neediness, who culturally 'belong to us', and who can reciprocate in future or have contributed to society in the past (van

Oorschot, 2000). It is on the basis of these popular criteria of blame, identity and reciprocity that it is easy to understand why people in all Western welfare states support welfare for elderly and sick people and those with disabilities more strongly than welfare for unemployed people, let alone for needy immigrants. This 'deservingness rank order' (van Oorschot, 2006) or 'universal dimension of support' (Coughlin, 1980) and its underlying criteria are so fundamental a cultural pattern that in most European welfare states that it has led to clearly distinguishable differences in the rights and obligations of various groups of beneficiaries. It is usually the case that elderly people and people with disabilities can rely more strongly on less stigmatising benefits than, for instance, unemployed people. In many European countries widows are usually better protected by national benefit schemes than divorced women; core workers can generally rely on more generous and comprehensive social insurance schemes than peripheral workers can and job-seeking obligations attached to benefit receipt are usually more relaxed for older people and single parents. This common European deservingness culture may have a long history in that the deservingness dimension coincides strongly with the chronological order in which different types of schemes have been introduced in these welfare states from the end of the 19th century onwards. First were the schemes for the most deserving categories of old, sick and disabled people, then family benefits and unemployment compensation, and lastly (if at all) social assistance for the 'least deserving' (Kangas, 2000).

It should be noted that in Europe studies on the relation between the social images of target groups and the social policies directed at them have been focused more on unemployed people than on the poor, as in the USA.<sup>5</sup> In European societies less favourable images of unemployed people also exist (De Goede & Maassen, 1980; Fridberg & Ploug, 2000; Furaker & Blomsterberg, 2002; Golding & Middleton, 1982; Larsen, 2002). There are doubts about their willingness to work, but they are also seen on average as irresponsible and unreliable, less intelligent and less persevering. The social image of young unemployed people is more negative than that of older unemployed people, but this might be due to the fact that generally older people have a more positive social image than younger people (Dekker & Ester, 1993). Studies have shown that differences in the degree of negative imaging of unemployed people depend on personal characteristics: more negative, for instance, are rightist people, authoritarian people and conservatives

<sup>4</sup> It has been claimed that the victim-blaming view of Americans is based on their ethic of individualism (Gilens, 1996; Kluegel, Mason & Wegener, 1995), and on their work and success ethic (Rainwater, 1982), which makes them believe generally that poor people are to blame and do not deserve support. Opinion survey-based studies into the question why Americans hate welfare have shown that there is an important racial component: a majority of the Americans believe that it is mainly Blacks who benefit from welfare, while at the same time a majority believes that Blacks are more lazy than Whites (Gilens, 1996; Quadagno, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> This seems to demonstrate that poverty is seen as the more or less inevitable outcome of the residual American welfare model, while unemployment tends to be seen as a result of the more generous and institutionalised European social model (see, e.g., OECD, 1994).



(Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Ester & Dekker, 1986; Fridberg & Ploug, 2000). But economic and social conditions also play a role, since there is less negative imaging in times of high unemployment, presumably because under such conditions the public has a clearer eye for the structural causes of poverty (Eardley & Matheson, 1999; Gallie & Paugam, 2002), and there is a higher probability that one is personally confronted with unemployment, either directly or indirectly through the unemployment of relatives and friends (Bryson, 1997). Remarkably, negative images of unemployed people are not fewer among people from lower income and occupational categories, whose risk of unemployment is usually higher than average. The contrary, even, appears to be true, which might be due to their internalisation of prevalent stereotypes (Schneider & Ingram, 1993), to a psychological coping strategy of distinguishing themselves from the stereotyped group (Golding & Middleton, 1982), or to feelings of resentment towards those groups one is most directly competing with for status, jobs and benefits (Eardley & Matheson, 1999).

#### The moral effects of social policy

The moral questions that have come to the fore in the last two decades have not been confined to the behaviour and character of poor and unemployed people. More generally, a critique of the welfare state that arose accused it of creating social problems, instead of helping to solve them, by undermining its own constituting virtues of solidarity and community spirit. In the literature a number of the (alleged) moral effects of social policies have been discussed and listed (see, e.g., Deacon, 2002; Engbersen, 1986; Yankelovich, 1994). According to this, citizens have developed a calculating attitude towards benefits, leading to their abuse and misuse and to permanent welfare dependency (Engbersen, Schuyt, Timmer & Van Waarden, 1993; Murray, 1984). In the framework of the encompassing welfare state, citizens have developed an 'immoralistic ethic' (Zijderveld, 1999) characterised by a hedonistic and consumerist attitude in private and public relations, as a result of which the solidarity necessary for the survival of the welfare state have been undermined and the demand for welfare grown beyond control (see also Spieker, 1986). Citizens have lost their sense of self-responsibility and social commitment, leading to an erosion of civil society and neighbourhood- or family-based social support systems (Etzioni, 1995; Wolfe, 1989). And citizens are mainly preoccupied with their social rights and systematically neglect the (work) obligations that go with them (Mead, 1986).

Most of this critique, however, is highly normative and based on theoretical conjectures, anecdotal evidence and *ad hoc* interpretations. It is rarely systematically and fully tested against reality. This is not to say that

empirical studies on the moral and behavioural effects of social policy do not exist. On the contrary, there have been quite a few of these since the early 1980s. What they mostly show is quite another, less pessimistic picture. Review studies show, for example, that (higher) unemployment benefits do not corrupt the work ethic (Bryson, 1997; Gallie & Alm, 2000; Jehoel-Gijsbers, Scholten, Vissers & Heuvel, 1995), nor do they prevent unemployed people from looking for a job or from accepting one if it is offered (Atkinson, 1989; Barr, 1992). Social expenditures targeted at elderly people do not undermine intra-family and inter-generational solidaristic feelings and behaviour (Attias-Donfut & Arber, 2000; Kohli, 1999); there is not less voluntary work in well-developed welfare states than in others. On the contrary, as Kuhnle & Selle (1990), as well as Rothstein (2001) argue, while a 23-country European comparative analysis of the empirical relationship between people's trust in welfare state institutions, civic morality and social networks (van Oorschot & Arts, 2005) has shown that these aspects of social capital are positively, not negatively, related to welfare state comprehensiveness and social spending. In addition, in a well-developed welfare state such as The Netherlands, repeated surveys show that over a period from 1960 onwards no consumerist ethic has developed (Ester & Halman, 1994), nor have citizens become more calculating and selfish, nor have pro-social attitudes, trust in other people and supportive behaviour in families and neighbourhoods declined (Dekker & De Hart, 2000). It is true that data from the European values survey have shown that the public's concern about the living conditions of needy groups such as the elderly, the sick and people with disabilities, the unemployed and immigrants tends to be less in the more encompassing Northern European welfare states than in, for instance, the UK and the Mediterranean countries. However, this substitution of informal by formal solidarity seems not to be related to worsened moral values, but is probably the result of a crowding-out effect. Where formal solidarity seriously takes over social protection responsibilities towards needy groups, there is no longer a need for individual citizens to be concerned with them (Arts, Halman & van Oorschot, 2003).

The negative perspective on the relation between moral and social policy mainly dates back to the 1980s, but it has not disappeared fully. At present, it is manifest in communitarianism, the 'third way' between a too liberal and a too collectivistic welfare state, with its emphasis on social cohesion, a community spirit and family and marriage values. Civil society and the family should take over part of the welfare responsibilities from the state, for which a moral revival among citizens is necessary, but social policy can also help to achieve such a revival. Communitarians readily acknowledge that social policy (also) has the aim of moral change (Deacon,

2002). Influenced by communitarian ideas there is now an international trend towards greater emphasis on the family and the children in it as the target groups of social policy (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Goldson et al., 2002; Kaufmann, Kuijsten, Schulze & Strohmeijer, 2002), and there is also (the beginning) of a trend of using social policy as an instrument for strengthening family and marriage values (Barlow & Duncan, 2000; Duerr-Berrick, 2002; Head, 2002; Rein, 2001).

## Migration

Recently, a new notion of the welfare crisis has entered the debate, which has led to an increased focus on the relationship between culture and social policy. This is related to the increased influx of migrants into European welfare states. Although from a demographic perspective some have pointed to the positive effects of larger numbers of immigrants in European countries, there seems to be a rather dominant concern that, in the longer run, immigration seriously threatens the sustainability of the European social model and its national varieties. American scholars who draw a parallel with the American situation articulate strong warnings in this respect (Alesina & Glaeser, 2004; Freeman, 1986).

If, in European countries, they argue, immigrants eventually form the largest part of welfare users, and immigrants as a group are subjected to negative images and related perceptions of undeservingness – two conditions both of which are met regarding African-American and Hispanic people in North America – then the societal legitimacy of welfare arrangements as a whole may diminish quickly. Some European colleagues agree with this rather pessimistic view (Wolfe & Klausen, 1997). They argue that immigration and the cultural diversity that goes with it could endanger the legitimacy of welfare in Europe because it might fragment the sense of a common community, divide working-class coalitions that traditionally sustained the welfare state, and complicate the formation of new alliances due to competition for resources and welfare chauvinism. The empirical question, however, whether it is true that diversity is related to lesser welfare support and spending, has not yet been completely answered. Empirical studies do suggest that there is a negative relation between diversity and welfare spending if one compares countries on a global scale, including countries from South America and Asia (Alesina & Glaeser, 2004). There is also a negative relationship within the group of American states (Hero & Tolbert, 1996). However, within the group of European countries there is no relation at all (Taylor-Gooby, 2005). Thus far, empirical evidence seems to suggest that the European social model is able to cope with cultural diversity, especially due to the influence of social-democratic politics (Taylor-Gooby, 2005).

## International comparison

### Policy demand

The economic crisis and resulting unemployment, as well as an increased influx of migrants, has been only one of the developments that European welfare states have commonly been faced with. The globalisation and Europeanisation processes more broadly, the ageing of the population, an increasing female labour market participation and the need for a more active approach in providing work and welfare are other common processes which have induced governments, international non-governmental organisations such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and, not least, the European Commission, to commission international comparative research on problems, policy practices and outcomes. The increase in such comparative research has contributed significantly to the awareness that cultural factors may be significant for explaining differences between countries. Such factors operate at the level of policy elites, manifested, for example, in the fact that UK policy-makers before the Blair period saw the eradication of poverty as the ultimate goal of social policy, while the actions of their French colleagues were focused on fighting and preventing social exclusion. The difference in these perspectives can historically be traced back to different conceptions of society (a market versus a moral community), of the individual (atomistic versus socially embedded), and of the relations between them (see, e.g., Room, 1997). But cultural factors also play a role at the level of citizens. It has been found, for instance, that European differences in the degree to which children (mostly daughters) care for elderly people is related not only to their labour market participation and the presence of leave schemes, but also to differences in family culture (Dallinger, 2001). It is also now known that differences in the take up of parental leave schemes is less determined by variations in types of schemes than by differences in motherhood culture, which is strong in The Netherlands and Germany compared with the Nordic countries (Den Dulk, Van Doorne-Huiskes & Schippers, 1999; Pfau-Effinger, 2000). In other words, increased international comparison has thrown light on culture as a missing variable.

International comparisons and an eye for cultural factors have not only increased in consequence of certain policy demands. The methodological possibilities of comparing cultures in Europe have been strongly extended, with several national and comparative surveys entering the scene from the 1980s onwards, while Esping-Andersen's comparative regime approach stimulated the search for cultural factors as explanations for differences in welfare state design and functioning.

## Public opinion surveys

Since the 1980s a number of European comparative public opinion surveys have entered the scene. There are the European Values Survey (EVS), the International Social Survey Project (ISSP), the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), the Eurobarometer Surveys and, most recently, the European Social Survey (ESS). In part, these costly, large-scale surveys find their origin in a wish to understand cultural trends in European countries (such as is mainly the case regarding, for example, the EVS). In part they have been established in order to monitor trends in the social perceptions of Europeans (such as the ISSP, Eurobarometers and ESS). The importance of these surveys lies in the fact that they have facilitated and stimulated comparative studies on welfare-related values and beliefs. In the main, they have shown, firstly, that contrary to what theories on the legitimacy crisis of the welfare state predicted, there is a widespread support for welfare all over Europe (Ferrera, 1993; Pettersen, 1995; Ploug, 1996; Ringen, 1987). More relevant here, however, is that such crisis theories have assumed that basically welfare support is class related and reflects considerations of perceived personal interest. The assumption was that the middle and higher classes would oppose welfare, because they were the ones who had to pay for it and they would perceive that they get little in return. Rose and Peters (1978), for instance, claimed that the 'abused taxpayer' would ultimately refuse to contribute (but see also Crozier, Huntington & Watanuki (1975) and Wilensky (1975)). Even in the 1990s Galbraith (1992) argued that the middle-class based 'comfortable majority' would be reluctant to extend the welfare it had gained for itself to the minority of the poor. Putting these theories to the test, however, national and Europe-wide surveys showed that people's support for welfare is based on a mixture of personal and group interests on the one hand, and on value- and ideology-related considerations regarding social equality, social justice, solidarity, mutual obligation, state responsibility and so on, on the other hand (for instance, Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003; Bowles & Gintis, 2000; Kohli & Kuenemund, 2001; Pettersen, 1995; van Oorschot, 2002). In some studies, class-related variables were found to have no influence on welfare attitudes. For instance, Ploug (1996: 6) found in his data on a variety of Danish opinions on the welfare state that 'there was very little variation in the answers given by different age and socioeconomic groups'; Taylor-Gooby (1983) found that social division variables did not influence opinions on welfare spending in Britain; Aguilar and Gustafsson (1988) did not find a relation between socioeconomic background variables and Swedish opinions about social assistance levels and van Oorschot (2000) found little or no relation between class variables and Dutch people's conditionality regarding

support for needy people. Not rarely, it is found that the effects of values and ideologies, or cultural factors, is larger than that of measures of interest and class. It is people's political stance that has an especially strong effect on welfare attitudes: compared with rightist people, leftist people are more positive towards welfare programmes, they endorse social spending more and have a more pro-social attitude to benefit recipients and unemployed people (Coughlin, 1980; Papadakis & Bean, 1993; Pettersen, 1995; Taylor-Gooby, 1983; Whiteley, 1981).

Although there is widespread class- and culture-based support for welfare, the European public makes a distinction when it comes to the deservingness of various groups of needy people. As we have seen, all over Europe the public is most in favour of social protection for old people, closely followed by protection for the sick and people with disabilities, while it offers less support for schemes for needy families with children, even less support for schemes for unemployed people and the least support for social assistance schemes. This deservingness ranking order is found in cross-sectional opinion data from a variety of European countries (Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003; Pettersen, 1995; van Oorschot, Arts & Halman, 2005), as well as in data from single countries, as for instance the UK (Hills, 2002; Taylor-Gooby, 1985), Finland (Forma, 1997), Denmark (Larsen, 2002), The Netherlands (van Oorschot, 1998), Belgium (Debusscher & Elchardus, 2003) and the Czech Republic (Rabusic & Sirovatka, 1999). In some recent studies, support for the social protection of immigrants has also been analysed and found to be at the bottom end of the support dimension (Appelbaum, 2002; van Oorschot, 2006).

In addition to contributing to a deeper insight to welfare support and its structural and cultural determinants, European comparative surveys have also shown differences in national cultures with regard to issues relevant to social policy. As yet, there are still only a few studies, such as Lueck and Hofaecker's (2003) which show how European women's orientations to jobs, but especially those to family obligations, differ quite strongly among European countries and depend on the country's social structure and institutional design but also on its cultural tradition. The study by van Oorschot and Halman (2000) shows that, in the UK and in Eastern European countries, the public blames the poor more strongly than in other European countries, where poverty is seen predominantly as being produced by social factors.

Although welfare opinions can be studied in more detail thanks to the increased availability of data, it should be mentioned that the relation between public values and attitudes, on the one hand, and social policy, on the other, is a controversial matter. The basic question here is whether public opinion has any policy relevance,

either ex-ante as a causal factor in the process of policy making, or ex-post as a legitimacy base for policies. That public opinion can have an influence on government policies generally and on social policy in particular has quite frequently been demonstrated with American examples (for reviews see Childs, 1964; Page & Shapiro, 1983), but the debate continues. This is because the conditions under which the effects occur are rather complex and depend strongly on the issue under consideration and the time and place, which makes it difficult to prove direct causal links between opinions and policy decisions. It is clear that the argument of democratic theory, positing that democratic leaders will listen to the public's opinions and act accordingly, is too simple. Policy-makers not only act with a view to the opinions of their citizens, but they also reckon with their own preferences and interests; their decisions are bound by legal rules and guidelines and they might be more sensitive to the opinions of small lobby groups than to public opinion at large. Furthermore, with regard to many issues there is no clear and stable public opinion that could guide them; and, according to one of the major arguments, policy-makers influence public opinion rather than the other way round (Burstein, 1998; Kuran, 1995; Taylor-Gooby, 1983). However, in cases where such effects are found, these are generally stronger to the degree that an issue has a high salience for the public if there is time for societal debate and when policy options are not too complicated (Burstein, 1998). The way in which public opinion exerts its influence can vary, however. It can put issues on the political agenda and it can limit the available policy options, but it can also express lack of societal support and function as an ex-post control. Public opinion's influence is mostly indirect, operating through, for instance, a median voter mechanism, media debates, demonstrations and lobby group activities (Burstein, 1998; Childs, 1964; Coughlin, 1980; Jacobs, 1995; Whiteley, 1981).

### Welfare models

Perhaps one of the most significant academic developments in the field of social policy has been the increased attention given to the ideal-typical welfare regime or welfare model approach, as advocated by Esping-Andersen (1990), who distinguishes between liberal, conservative-corporatist and social-democratic welfare states. This typology basically assumes that each type has a different ideological or cultural base. Liberal views on personal responsibility and freedom, with a related reluctance to accept state intervention and a concomitant valuing of market-led social organisation, underlie the liberal welfare state. Conservatism, with its emphasis on society as an organic whole of hierarchical inter- and intra-group relations, cherishing professional,

communal and family bonds in particular, underlies the type of conservative-corporatist welfare state; and the social-democratic values of social equality and mutual responsibility underlie the social-democratic welfare state. This explicit linking of broader ideological perspectives to welfare state types by Esping-Andersen (for another example see Lockhart, 2001) has introduced a line of debate and research which further emphasised the role of the cultural factor in welfare state development. Scholars have become engaged in the question of what effects religion and confessional parties have had on the development of European welfare states, and more recently the question has been raised of what are the cultural particularities of non-Western welfare states.

With respect to the first question, it has been shown that in countries such as Italy, Portugal, France, Belgium and Austria, Catholicism and its emphasis on social harmony and traditional social ties has led to a relatively better social protection of families with children, to a more pronounced role of social partners in the design and implementation of social security, and to a wider application of the instrument of social insurances as a means of maintaining status and class hierarchies in society (Hornsby-Smith, 1999; Van Kersbergen, 1995). As for the influence of Protestantism, a recent study suggests that a distinction has to be made between countries with a Lutheran state-church, such as the Scandinavian countries and Germany, and countries with a Calvinist Protestant culture, such as the UK, Switzerland and the USA (Manow, 2002). Calvinism has inhibited welfare state development because of its emphasis on 'sovereignty in one's own circles' and the related anti-statism, whereas Lutheranism has had a positive effect on the introduction of state welfare. This latter point is stressed by Soerensen (1998) who argues that the universalistic and generous character of the Scandinavian welfare states is not the result of a 20th century social-democratic solution of the conflict between labour and capital (as Esping-Andersen suggests), but of a typical Lutheran perspective on the relation between central authority and citizens. In this perspective, communal and state authority have the duty to take good care of their citizens, who in turn subject themselves wilfully to this authority and its demand for contributions to the common good. In the generous 18th-century Copenhagen Poor Law, Soerensen recognises the cradle of the modern universalistic welfare states of Scandinavia.

More recently, the question has been raised as to whether there exists something like a non-Western type of welfare state; more particularly, is there a typical Asian welfare state? Countries such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore have a high level of wealth and productivity but a residual degree of state welfare. This fact is at odds with the 'logic of industrialisation' and it cannot be easily explained as the result of class struggle (Esping-Andersen, 1997; Lin, 1999). Instead,



some point to the influence of Confucianism and talk of a Confucian model or regime type (Esping-Andersen, 1997; Goodman & Peng, 1996; Jones, 1993). Generally, what is regarded as characteristic of the Confucian worldview is that individuals are seen primarily as subordinated members of groups. Related to this, authority and paternalism are easily accepted; there is a strong work ethic aimed at contributing to the group's welfare, and a meritocratic attitude ensures rewards for those who contribute most. Typical also is a degree of fatalism, which makes people accept the facts of life, and prevents them from claiming help from others. In such a culture, as Lin (1999) claims, a residual degree of state-regulated social protection is easily legitimated.

### **Discussion: contesting perspectives on culture?**

Most of the studies discussed here have been guided by a notion of culture as consisting of the values, norms and beliefs of welfare state actors, like policy-makers, administrators, interest groups, churches, clients and taxpayers. What they were interested in were either the effects of values, norms and beliefs on the design of welfare systems, benefit schemes and services, or on the reverse effects, those that social policies and institutions have on people's moral attitudes and behaviour. Clearly, there are no studies that confine the notion of culture to artistic and intellectual aspects only, nor are there studies that broaden the concept to encompass the totality of values, practices, institutions and relationships, as it is advocated in disciplines such as anthropology (Geertz, 1977). The former, the 'high culture' approach, would perhaps result in studies that were very interesting, but certainly would have a very narrow scope. The latter, the 'thick description' approach, would not lead to meaningful studies at all, since it would not distinguish between explanandum and explanans (if everything is culture, culture can explain nothing) (see also Harrison & Huntington, 2000).

However, the notion of culture from which most studies have departed has been questioned lately and an alternative has been suggested. What is this critique, and does it make a different type of cultural analysis necessary? The critique has been formulated most clearly by John Clarke (2002, 2004), who distinguishes between 'culture as property' and 'culture as practice' to characterise the issue. In the first approach, culture is seen as a property, that is, as a feature of people related to their membership in a certain group. In this perspective, people's behaviour and thinking are steered by the relatively coherent, static and coercive cultural patterns of their group. The reproach is that this a deterministic concept of culture which sees individuals more or less as robots who act on internalised cultural programmes (see also Eagleton, 2000). A cultural analysis of social policy from this perspective treats culture as

an objective variable exerting its influence alongside political, economic and institutional factors. An example of this approach is to examine whether the presence of a Catholic or a Protestant culture leads to a different development in welfare institutions. But it would also be involved in the quest to see whether the neo-liberal values of policy-makers shape social policies, or whether different justice and solidarity values among populations from different countries are related to welfare regime types.

The 'culture as practice' approach recognises explicitly that culture is not homogenous, but is differentiated into various subcultures. More importantly, it denies that culture is a supra-individual, closed and static system of values and norms. Instead, culture is manipulated, produced and reproduced actively by people in their daily lives. This social construction of reality is subjected to relations of power: some people or groups are more powerful in manifesting and enforcing their reality, than others. A cultural analysis of social policy from this perspective is interested more than anything else in the effects of social policy on cultures and daily practices. Typical questions are: what type of images and normative categories do policies and policy-makers produce; how do such images legitimise inequalities and differential welfare treatment; how do social policies influence people's life world; to what degree do the cultural ideas and practices of policy-makers, administrators and clients match; what possibilities do clients have to get their worldviews and practices accepted? In this approach there is a strong tendency to see social policy as an instrument for the production of meaning in the hands of a policy elite, while the function of the cultural analysis of social policy primarily is to deconstruct and unmask the reality thus created.

In addition to Clarke, also other authors have pointed at a shift towards a 'cultural turn' in the analysis of social policy (e.g. Chamberlayne, Cooper, Freeman et al., 1999; Edgar & Russell, 1998). In its weakest interpretation, the cultural turns means a shift towards the view that any analysis and explanation of the developments in social policy and its outcomes falls short if it does not pay attention to the values of the actors involved, the meaning they give to the situation they are in, and the symbolic codes they use and exchange (Freeman & Rustin, 1999). In its strongest interpretation, however, the 'cultural turn' is seen as a new, critical approach, aiming at the emancipation and empowerment of vulnerable groups in society by deconstructing the reality created by elites.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Advocates of the cultural turn in the analysis of social policy refer to a cultural turn that took place in the social sciences earlier. The strong interpretation of the cultural turn builds upon Habermas' critique of the welfare state as colonising people's life worlds, as well as upon Foucault's critique on the policing and oppressive character of modern bureaucratic administrations (Rustin, 1999).

In my view the difference between the ‘property’ and ‘practice’ approaches to studying the relationships between culture and social policy should not be exaggerated. Firstly, this is because the weak interpretation of the cultural turn is fully compatible with the essence of the property approach, which is to analyse the relationships between (the outcomes of) policies and the values, norms and beliefs of the various actors involved. Secondly, in real life, culture is external and enforcing to a degree, but is not a totalitarian force. It is open for manipulation, negotiation, variety and change as well. Thus seen, both approaches are not in competition, but are complementary to each other. Thirdly, the ‘practice’ approach is not as new as it is sometimes claimed. This certainly is true for its weaker interpretation, but there are examples of earlier studies (like Golding & Middleton, 1982) that had a deconstructive approach too. What perhaps is the unique character of the strong interpretation of the cultural turn is that it rejects scientific analysis as a politically indifferent undertaking. Doing research, and particularly the results of it, should foster and improve the wellbeing and power of vulnerable groups in society. Or, as Freeman, Chamberlayne, Cooper & Rustin. (1999: 278) describe the starting point of the cultural turn approach: ‘subjects and citizens must have a voice’.

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