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Moral economies of the welfare state: A qualitative comparative study

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Peter Taylor-Gooby 

School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, United Kingdom

Bjørn Hvinden

NOVA Norwegian Social Research, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

Steffen Mau

Institut für Sozialwissenschaften, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany

Benjamin Leruth

University of Canberra, Australia

Mi Ah Schoyen

NOVA Norwegian Social Research, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

Adrienn Gyory

School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, United Kingdom

Abstract

This paper uses innovative democratic forums carried out in Germany, Norway, and the United Kingdom to examine people's ideas about welfare-state priorities and future prospects. We use a moral economy framework in the context of regime differences and the move towards neo-liberalism across Europe. Broadly speaking, attitudes reflect regime differences, with distinctive emphasis on reciprocity and the value of work in Germany, inclusion and equality in Norway, and individual responsibility and the work-ethic in the UK. Neo-liberal market-centred ideas appear to have made little headway in regard to popular attitudes, except in the already liberal-leaning UK. There is also a striking assumption by UK participants that welfare is threatened externally by immigrants who take jobs from established workers and internally by the work-shy who undermine the work-ethic. A key role of the welfare state is repressive rather than enabling: to protect against threats to well-being rather than provide

Corresponding Author:

Peter Taylor-Gooby, School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, Cornwallis North East, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NF, United Kingdom.

Email: p.f.taylor-gooby@kent.ac.uk

benefits for citizens. UK participants also anticipate major decline in state provision. In all three countries there is strong support for continuing and expanding social investment policies, but for different reasons: to enable contribution in Germany, to promote equality and mobility in Norway, and to facilitate self-responsibility in the UK.

Keywords

Attitudes, moral economy, welfare state, Europe, immigration, democratic forum, inequality, neo-liberalism

Introduction

Although there is broad societal support for state-organised welfare institutions (Svallfors 2012), there is also a continuing debate about how much state intervention is necessary and desirable and about priorities for welfare-state reform. Austerity measures and fiscal crisis, changes in the labour market and demographic structure, and the shift from ‘passive’ welfare to activation and social investment provoke vigorous debates about the future of welfare (for example, Pierson 2001; Hemerijk 2013; van Kersbergen and Vis 2014). A shift towards more neo-liberal economic and social policies has been underway in Europe at national and European-Union levels (Mau 2015). This involves a reduction in state intervention, tight constraints on spending, the expanded use of markets and of private services, and stronger emphasis on work-incentives in social security. Although the changes in the institutional architecture of the European welfare state have been studied in detail, much less is known about how people think about various policy options for the future. Issues of social acceptance are crucial for the stability of existing welfare institutions and for the political and social conflicts surrounding welfare-state restructuring.

A considerable literature demonstrates that attitudes to state welfare are influenced by self-interest and socio-economic group membership, but that social values and institutional frameworks also play a part (Fong 2001; Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003; Roosma et al. 2016; van Oorschot et al. 2017). We use the moral economy approach, which centres on the role of moral assumptions and justifications in the understanding of welfare interventions and posits a mixture of motives in which both self-interest and other normative concerns play their part (Booth 1994; Mau 2003; Sayer 2000; Sachweh 2012). We also use the regime approach to differentiate between institutional frameworks, and an innovative democratic forum methodology to generate data. We compare three national cases (United Kingdom, Germany, and Norway) that are representative of different welfare-state regimes.

The paper falls into five sections dealing with the theoretical background and research questions, methodology, the specific issues tackled in the research, our data, and discussion and conclusions.

The moral economy approach and the regime framework

The notion of moral economy was developed by EP Thomson (1971, 1991) to refer to ‘a traditional consensus on crowd rights’ (Götz 2015, 147) in the 17th century initially stemming from feudal rights and obligations. He argued that this was replaced by market principles of individual exchange as part of the transition to modernity, paralleling Polanyi’s account of the ‘Great Transformation’ (1944) and the displacement of an embedded morality governing economic relationships. More recent approaches challenge this dichotomous view of history and see moral principles as having a continuing influence, embedded within market transactions and influencing conceptions of interest and utility (Götz 2015; Bowles 2016). A number of scholars have applied the notion to analyse welfare-state attitudes (Booth 1994; Mau 2003; Svallfors 2006; Sayer 2000, Sachweh 2012). The question of ‘Who should get what?’ within the welfare-state context is closely related to commonly held ideas about fair distributions of burdens and benefits. The

central point is that it is not simply individual self-interest that shapes welfare-state attitudes but a range of moral principles and assumptions, including desert, merit, and rights based not simply on payment, equality, and need. Moral concerns provide an important motivational reference for individual actions and preferences and institutional settings act as mediators and facilitators for individual moral points of view (Rothstein 1998). The advantage of the approach is its breadth; it acknowledges the significance of normative frameworks, but accepts that these may vary in different contexts. This openness allows us to examine patterns of attitudes and their relationship to values in different welfare states and explore the way individual views on the welfare state relate to a moral foundation.

We start out from the welfare-state regime typology (Esping-Andersen 1990) in categorising western welfare states and investigate how far attitudes reflect regime type. The regime approach distinguishes conservative, social democratic and liberal ideal types, the first characterised by reciprocity and the assumption that contribution and entitlement should be governed by labour market status, the second by commitment to equal citizenship and the third by its greater emphasis on market principles. Neo-liberal discourses currently predominate in framing policy debates about welfare intervention and inequality across Europe. We take account of this shift by examining how far neo-liberal ideas have been taken up by the citizens in the three countries in question.

Neo-liberalism stresses, at a practical level, the value of markets as systems for sharing and using dispersed information (von Hayek 1973), and in ideology, the doctrine that self-interest governing market exchange is a full and sufficient ethic in itself (Harvey 2007). It has had the strongest effect on policy in the more liberal-leaning UK (Blyth 2013). The Thatcher government (1979–1990) consciously pursued a neo-liberal agenda, with major privatisations of social housing and top-up pensions, increased stringency in social spending, and the introduction of market systems in the health services, social care, and schooling (Crouch 2011). The Blair government pursued a market socialist ‘third way’ agenda, using the market throughout the state sector but seeking to develop activation and social investment in social security to expand individual opportunity. Since 2010, Conservative-led governments have pursued spending and tax cuts at the same time as a balanced budget and further expanded the role of the private commercial sector (Taylor-Gooby 2013).

The German welfare state, in contrast, did not experience such a harsh attack on its core institutions (for an overview see Heuer and Mau 2017). Although changes such as benefit reductions and increased co-payments were introduced in the 1980s and 1990s, the basic architecture of a corporatist status-maintenance-oriented welfare-state model remained intact. The government even introduced a new pillar, long-term care insurance in the mid-1990s. During the 2000s, however, the Red-Green government implemented major reforms. These included a voluntary but state-subsidized private pension scheme (‘Riester-Rente’), lower (future) replacement rates and a needs-based basic pension for those without sufficient entitlements. The so-called ‘Hartz-reforms’, a comprehensive package of labour market and unemployment benefit changes (Eichhorst and Marx 2011), led to fierce political conflict and great disappointment among left-leaning voters and SPD members. The reforms – very much in line with the market-liberal critique of Germany – facilitated the creation of a low income sector, lowered benefit levels, put greater pressure on the unemployed and moved Germany towards greater individual responsibility. Social investment and training measures have also been strengthened.

Despite its nature as a small, open European economy subject to international economic pressures, Norway retains a stable social democratic welfare state. Cost containment emerged in the late 1970s in response to pressures from international competition and population ageing, but did not involve a shift towards neo-liberalism. Instead, the general trend is toward restructuring rather than retrenchment (Sørvoll, 2015). The huge oil revenues have buffered against economic shocks (Andersen et al. 2017; Hippe and Berge 2013). A major public pension reform was implemented in 2011, incentivising later retirement and automatic benefit adjustments to limit costs as life-expectancy increases. Unlike Swedish reforms, the Norwegian programme did not transfer a substantial portion of risk to individuals, nor did it introduce compulsory private saving. Market-based solutions have been more prominent with regard to

services, especially in the use of private providers in early childcare and to some extent elderly care, although funding is mainly public. There is a strong belief across the political spectrum that health and care services should be universally accessible. In addition, social investment in education, vocational training and labour market activation continues to be heavily emphasised (Schoyen, 2016). Thus neo-liberalism has advanced further in the UK and has made considerable inroads in Germany and is evident in Norway but has made much less progress there.

Using a simple framework that distinguishes among desert, equality and need as distributional principles (Miller 1976), we suggest, following the regime approach, that attitudes will be embedded in a reciprocal value system that stresses desert earned by contribution in the corporatist case, and that equality in entitlement and in progressive taxation will predominate for the social democratic and basic need for liberal welfare states. Corresponding to these normative principles, we argue that the main threats giving rise to social tensions will be access to welfare through ability to pay rather than contribution in the corporatist system, departure from equal citizenship through the market or through privilege in social democracy, and gaining ‘something for nothing’ outside market exchange in the liberal system. Neo-liberalism imports a further normative framework, drawing on individualism and self-interest, and embeds this in institutional changes involving the extension of markets, the private sector, and state spending cuts. Quantitative survey analysis indicates that welfare-state attitudes are linked, but only loosely, to regime membership (Svallfors 1997; Arts and Gelissen 2001; Jæger, 2006). The regime framework gives us a starting point for examining the relationship among attitudes, normative framework and institutions, but one that does not predetermine the outcome. We anticipate that neo-liberal ideology will play a part in shaping attitudes, especially in the UK, and that there will be a tension between self-interested ideas and desert, equality, and need in our data.

This leads to the following research questions:

- How do underlying assumptions about basic principles of desert, equality, and need relate to public attitudes to benefits and services and to tax-payment and welfare-state finance?
- How does the spread of neo-liberalism affect people’s ideas and how does that differ between countries?
- How can future priorities be understood in terms of these assumptions?

Method: Democratic forums

We use democratic forums in the three welfare states to examine how people understand the issues, the problems they identify, and what they think should be done about them. So far as we know, this method has not previously been used in welfare-state attitude research. The democratic forum approach derives from concerns about the limitations of conventional social science methodology (Goerres and Prinzen 2012) and also from interest in more participative approaches in democratic theory (for example Dryzek 2010). In democratic forums, unlike structured surveys and focus groups, the discussion is primarily framed by participants, whereas researchers play a more passive role. The main objective is to allow people to express their concerns and views, facilitate debate, and encourage deliberation in an open and tolerant context and allow participants to wrestle with different policy options. There may be injections of relevant information, but these are on issues that the group requests and are provided by independent experts.

The approach is appropriate for our study because forums allow participants much greater control over the way in which issues are defined, discussed and linked than do other methods (Wakeford 2007; Narayan et al. 2009). In this, it parallels the openness to different normative frameworks of moral economy. It allows researchers to examine the concerns expressed by people, their framing of issues, and the justifications given more directly than do pre-formulated questions in a structured survey. The forums do not permit representative sampling, and so offer an imprecise guide to the distribution of opinions, but help us to identify patterns of reasoning. Although they cannot be directed to consider

specific aspects of an issue according to a researcher's system of priorities, they show how members of the public frame their opinions and link beliefs and values within groups that are large enough to include many of the political cleavages in the population (see Burchardt 2012 and Taylor-Gooby 2015 for more detail).

Our study is comparative and covers Germany, the UK, and Norway. In each country, we asked between 34 and 36 democratic forum participants to discuss the likely future development of the welfare state during the next 25 years and the policies that should be pursued to address the issues they identified. In our forums (perhaps best thought of as 'mini-publics' – Grönlund et al. 2014), we ensured that equal numbers of women and men, older and younger and higher- and lower-income people were included, and also a balance of ethnic minority and employed, self-employed, and unemployed people. We employed different research agencies (IPSOS-Mori in Germany, TNS in Norway, and the UK) to carry out recruitment and conduct the forums but attended as observers. The specifications for the forums (recruitment, setting, and so on) were largely standardized across all three cases. Participants were paid for attendance (100 Euros for day 1 and 180 Euros for day 2 in Germany, NOK 7000 for each day in Norway, and £75 in the UK). The fieldwork took place in September and October 2015 (in the UK crucially before the additional politicisation of immigration surrounding the Brexit vote).

The democratic forums consisted of a mix of plenary sessions and smaller group discussions (to facilitate participation) and extended over 2 days, with a 2-week break in between. On the first day the topic for discussion was defined in the opening plenary session: 'the main objective of this two-day forum is to discuss the priorities of the [country's] government in terms of benefits and services in 25 years' time, i.e. in 2040'. In the final session, participants were asked to generate a list of bullet points for a report to government on priorities for benefits and services in 2040. The requirement for the group to arrive at specific priorities was included to give participants a point to the discussion and promote engagement and movement towards positions on which people agreed. The participants determined the content of the report. Thus the final plenary was the stage of discussion at which a degree of consensus was reached or at which disagreements were made explicit.

All discussions were audio- and video-recorded and observers were present throughout. The sessions were transcribed and coded with a unified coding-system developed through repeated reading from the distribution and contribution principles we initially associated with the different regimes. The research generated a large volume of material in the 90 hours of discussion (four one-and-a-half hour plenaries and 12 two-hour break-out groups over two days) in each of three countries. We used NVivo to structure and organize the material and employed framework analysis (Ritchie et al. 2003). This is an iterative process of identifying the main attitudinal themes in relation to each topic and then examining their relationship in the discussion.

In the analysis we paid particular attention to data from the final plenary, because this is where participants summed up the outcome of their two days of discussion and moved towards consensus. Our analysis also draws on the minority views expressed in the group discussions and on disagreements within them. This approach enables us to focus on the participants' common understandings of how society works and their beliefs about the future after they had the opportunity to discuss and arrive at shared priorities.

The issues addressed in the research

In the opening plenary, the participants were asked to select five issues they perceived as the major challenges for the future of the welfare state, which would be further discussed in the breakout groups during the two days. After some deliberation participants in all three countries identified inequality (especially in the labour market), inter-generational issues (especially pensions), and immigration as major issues. In addition, participants mentioned the cost and finance of the welfare state and education. The participants were given the opportunity to request information, which we provided between days 1 and 2 using government statistics as a neutral source. This covered demographic trends, inequality,

immigration, welfare-state income and spending, and education and employment patterns. At the end of the second day we asked each of the break-out groups to present policy priorities for discussion at a final plenary session.

The priorities chosen in the different countries and the reasons given for them cast light on two kinds of issues: how people see their own society; the way in which it is developing and the problems that exist now or are likely to emerge; and also what they think should be done to address them. Underlying these priorities and their justification is the normative system that constitutes people's moral economy. We chose two areas in which public discussion is most vigorous – inequality and work, and immigration – for more detailed analysis. These are areas in which regime principles might be expected to generate different normative judgements on policy, but in which neo-liberal discourse implies a common movement towards acceptance of inequality and the work-ethic and also of open labour markets.

These areas are foci of expert and public debate. Many writers (for example Pierson 2001; Palier 2010) argue that most western welfare states face pressures in both inequality and work, and immigration, although Norway with its substantial oil revenues has been better able to address demands. Pressures in the world of work as a result of new technology, more intense international competition, and the decline of trade-union power is leading both to dualisation (especially in Germany (Emmenegger et al. 2012)) and moves to enhance flexibility (most notably in the UK, with sharp cut-backs in union rights, rapid growth of precarious employment, and a general weakening of state regulation of the labour market (Jessop 2002; Crouch and Streeck 2013, Ch. 1)). This is associated with growing income inequality, most marked in the UK (WID 2017). All three countries have experienced high immigration in recent years, especially Germany (OECD 2016a, 2016b). Inequality, compounded by austerity cutbacks (Farnsworth and Irving 2011), has been at the centre of public debate in Germany (Kuhn 2013) and in the UK, where there is a distinctive focus on income gaps between benefit claimers and workers rather than rich and poor (Larsen 2016). Anti-immigration politics is relevant in all three countries, perhaps most strongly in Germany (especially because of the decision to admit more than a million Middle Eastern refugees and asylum-seekers in 2015) with the rise of the 'Alternative for Germany' party. It is fuelled in the UK by repeated government pledges to reduce the annual rate from the 'hundreds to the tens of thousands' (Conservative Manifesto 2015) and contributed to the Brexit vote in 2016. In Norway, the populist right Progress Party, which advocates tougher migration controls, entered government in 2013.

We now move on to examine how participants in our democratic forums discussed these issues, focusing on the moral economy frameworks that inform discussions and on their influence on ideas about future priorities, following the research questions.

Findings

The area of clearest agreement across all three countries concerns work and inequality, identified as a major issue, particularly for young people. The most widely favoured policy response involves social investment, including training, education and childcare, to expand the workforce and improve its quality. It is noteworthy that German and Norwegian discussion of immigration focuses primarily on state-led integration whereas that in the UK centres on regulation and exclusion.

Inequality and work

In all the countries, democratic forum participants recognise problems in four areas: inequality at both top and bottom end; unfair treatment of some of the workers; lack of opportunity, especially at the bottom; and difficulties in regulating and taxing multi-national companies. The distinctive national features are that the Germany discourse includes greater normative emphasis on the dignity of work and concerns about an expanding low-income sector with more 'working poor': work should be rewarded appropriately. Norwegian comments also reflect this theme, but include repeated concerns

about equality and weakly regulated multi-national companies. In the UK, there is a strong normative concern with individual responsibility and a framing of unemployed people and immigrants as threats (the former because, as participants understood it, over-generous unemployment benefits undermine willingness to work; the latter because they either compete for jobs or live off state benefits). UK participants appear to have little awareness of the exceptional inequality in their country.

The stress on the value and dignity of work and the importance of reward according to reciprocity was evident in Germany. This statement from the spokeswoman for a discussion group in the final plenary attracted widespread agreement: ‘Our goal with regard to work and occupation was that work should always be worth it and achievement must also be worth it.’

During the group discussions, people expressed their dissatisfaction with recent developments at the labour market. Though people appreciated lower unemployment, they were concerned with questions of justice and precarity:

[...]the state should make sure everyone can live from the work they do...getting rid of these chain contracts or limited time contracts (man, self-employed, 55); minimum wage or equal pay for equal work... women receive significantly less pay for the same work (man, higher income, 24).

[...] the main problem is that there are people who work 40 hours a week and whose work is not really appreciated or rewarded (man, self-employed, 55)

There were also more general concerns about inequality. People complained about the growing rift between rich and poor:

For those who earn very little, they see it as unfair, and for those with a lot of money...’ (man, low-income, 48).

‘They also think it’s unfair.’ [laughter] (woman, high income, 24)

There was also a sense that globalisation and technological change disproportionately benefit higher status groups. However, a number of participants opposed higher taxes on wealth, as opposed to top-end incomes, and this policy did not command agreement at the final plenary. In contrast, there was strong support across the break-out groups for so-called social investment policies.

[...] I’d say it begins with education, so that’s most important. Qualification through education (man, higher income, 30)

‘Fair/equal educational opportunities’ was in fact the only proposal to command immediate and universal assent in the final plenary.

The inequality of educational opportunities is seen as a problem across all groups, and people expect the state to provide for good education for all.

In Norway, discussions about work and inequality focused on progressive taxation of the rich and lifting the wages of those at the bottom-end of the income distribution to reduce inequalities, and on social investment:

[...] my solution is the tax model to take away the high tops (woman, retired, 71)

[...] the low-paid should [...] have a wage increase if possible (woman, middle income, 39)

Education [...] leads to jobs [...] and perhaps less inequalities [...] it will even things out wage-wise (woman, higher income, 45)

We had many discussions, but what we all agreed on was that education is the cornerstone for future (man, high-income, 30; reporting group discussions at the final plenary)

There is also recognition (as in Germany) that how someone's work is treated shows how society values that person and their contribution: as one respondent put it: *'work and pay is a measure of value to society'*.

A minority of participants in the group discussions opposed progressive taxation because they wished to *'incentivize entrepreneurship'* (woman, middle income, 44) and *'because the motive power for innovation is inequality'* (man, middle income, 42), but these arguments for inequalities were not shared and not supported in the final plenary.

The striking feature of the UK forums was the way in which, although issues of opportunity and equality emerged, the discussion tended to be dominated by unemployment and immigration and the importance of individual responsibility in line with liberal market principles (plenary statements):

[... It is] not the responsibility of government, but the responsibility of the individual themselves [...] to get off their backsides and do something... (woman, low income, 26)

Instead of just getting jobseekers allowance, they should... work for their jobseekers (woman, housewife, 33)

[...] Reduce immigration [...] there will be more jobs to go 'round (man, high income, 50)

Conversely, some people saw immigrants as more likely to be a burden through unwillingness to work rather than as effective competitors for jobs:

[... There are] a lot more people out of work because... foreign people coming in... they're gonna go straight on the dole (woman, unemployed, 49).

Inequalities were entirely acceptable, justified by the market:

Yes, but I don't have a problem if somebody is going to work and they are earning the money and the company they're working for is prepared to pay them an extortionate amount of money, okay... why shouldn't they take that home? (woman, low income, 40);

But why then should they be paying a monstrous amount of tax? (man, higher income 43);

Exactly! It's their money (woman, low income, 40)

Overall the stress was on individual responsibility and work:

[...] people in work should always be on 25 per cent more than people on benefits (woman, low income, 39).

I've worked my way up... people who sit on their butts don't want to educate themselves (man, low income, retired);

Hear, hear. (woman, low income 45);

... and moan about the people who are getting richer (man, low income, retired).

This approach seems to be linked to a different way of thinking about work and inequality from that in Germany and Norway. As one participant in the final plenary summed it up to widespread agreement:

The divide isn't between the rich and the poor... the divide is between the working class and the benefits people. That's where the divide is (woman, 45–54, low income);

This view was not limited to those on low incomes:

It's literally . . . there's going to be a war soon among us in this country . . . I'm going out there working hard and someone is just sitting there, not doing anything, earning more than what I'm earning in my wages . . . (man, 45–54, higher income)

Nonetheless, there was widespread recognition of inequality, as shown by these comments from the opening plenary (speakers not identified):

. . . increasing daily I think, from what I see;

. . . the rich [are] getting richer and the poor [are] getting poorer;

. . . if you look at the gap [between rich and poor], the gap is huge

In the UK, most participants saw the fact that the incomes of claimants (they believed) were close to those of workers as more unfair than the rich/poor gap.

Some participants also voiced strong concerns about the lack of labour market opportunities for those prepared to work. This view gained ground through the two days. In the final plenary, the spokesperson for one discussion group argued, to general agreement, for:

More apprenticeships and education - applied qualifications (man, middle income, 36)

Another spokesperson pointed out that such social investment can contribute to economic progress as well as individual success:

So that's where our idea of . . . having more government funding and tax incentives to provide that apprenticeship so more higher skilled workers . . . one of the big issues with unemployment at the minute is, to get a job a lot of companies require experience, if you haven't got that experience then you can't get employed and you don't gain skills . . . (man high income, 49)

Thus the basic concerns were about individual responsibility to provide for oneself without using state benefits, with strong attacks on benefit scroungers and a fear that immigrants would displace natives who wished to work. People also saw an interventionist role for the state in preparing school-leavers for employment.

Although there are clear national differences in the conceptual frameworks surrounding work and inequality (that work as a social value should be respected in Germany, that there should be greater equality in Norway, and the primacy of the work-ethic in the UK), there are also commonalities in concern about inequality, about poor conditions of work for some groups and about footloose multinational companies. Social investment through training and education is also endorsed by almost all participants across the countries, but for rather different reasons, stressing qualifications and contribution in Germany, equality and social mobility in Norway, and individual opportunity in the UK. Again, overall patterns fit normative frameworks loosely linked to regime type rather than the pressures identified earlier, which might direct attention more to inequality and precarity in the UK. The emergence of a less secure group of low-paid workers in Germany may be reflected in the emphasis on the importance of valuing work as a contribution to society.

Immigration

There are major differences in the responses of participants in the different countries to immigration, with the least welcoming being the UK. Participants in all three countries distinguished refugees from economic migrants, and believed that the former group should be welcomed. Participants in Germany

valued humanitarian immigration (refugees, asylum seekers), but also stressed integration through work, language-training and education. In Norway, the debate centred on integration. In the UK, the main themes were entry restrictions and the curtailing of the rights of immigrants once they had entered.

In Germany, although a large majority sees (humanitarian) immigration as acceptable, a number of participants expressed concerns. On the one hand, some people were sceptical whether integration can be achieved, given the lack of skills of many immigrants, language problems and cultural differences; on the other, some lower-class people in particular were concerned about the pressure on jobs:

[T]here's no work for Germans anyway[,] so how are we supposed to have job positions for these people?- it will all fall apart (man, lower income, 70)

However, most participants emphasized the importance of integration through language, training and work, and this dominated the final plenary. People saw the government as responsible for providing better means for successful integration and invoked the norm of reciprocity in regard to migrants who are required to behave according to the rules and support themselves. A number of middle-class participants pointed at potential integration problems and repercussions on the native population, but saw these as mainly affecting lower classes.

A similar discussion was pursued in Norway, with greater emphasis on '*quicker integration*' (woman, middle income, 53) and a recognition of the value of immigration '*because we need manpower*' (man, higher income, 31, with approving responses). A number of those involved anticipated that immigration would rise even further in the future. Several participants criticised the barriers to immigration as evidence of racism in break-out groups:

In Norway we are a bunch of bloody racists, excuse me for saying (woman, higher income, 44)

Concerns about immigrants becoming a burden on welfare were raised in one break-out group:

Many people don't take jobs because the social benefits are so good that there is no need to work (woman, retired, 65+)

These concerns were only voiced by a small minority and did not figure in the final plenary.

Some participants also referred to the individual responsibility of immigrants to learn the language and make efforts to integrate themselves. The final plenary focused on measures to improve integration.

... important to integrate everyone regardless. For example, through language teaching, working life, Norwegian culture (woman, mid-income, 26)

UK attitudes were coloured by negative perceptions of immigration – that immigration is a threat to the employment of nationals (see earlier), is a burden on benefits and brings in new competitors for housing and other resources:

The amount of unemployment is going to increase [...] you've more unskilled, unemployable people coming in (woman, housewife, 33)

Why should someone who comes here get cash immediately? (man, middle income, 29)

Immigration was seen as a major source of social tension:

There's going to be a lot more people coming in, and there's going to be a lot more people getting annoyed... there's going to be a lot more riots... a lot more trouble and conflict (woman, full-time education, 24)

A final plenary spokesperson summed up the feeling to general approval:

Obviously, if we keep going on as we are now, there'll be a lack of housing and space to house people. [...] It puts a strain on the NHS. [...] We're not the Promised Land, you know (woman, retired, 68);

You allow immigration more and more and more, the Government have to spend more money on benefits for them instead of putting the money into education and social care and other kind of stuff (man, lower income, 32)

There was almost unanimous agreement on bullet points for the UK report for a low-immigration cap, a strict points system, and restrictions on access to benefits and social provision.

In Germany and Norway, the debate tends in practice to focus on integration following high rates of immigration, argued for in terms of reciprocity, through work contribution in Germany and through equal treatment and concern for racist discrimination (although this is in fact relatively low) in Norway. Relatively few people express anti-immigrant sentiments. There is also recognition of the value of immigrant workers and their potentially growing importance as a partial solution to the imbalance of population ageing. In the UK, the dominant theme is disquiet, and immigrants are seen primarily as threatening the interests of nationals although there is some recognition of the needs of refugees and sympathy for them. Immigrants are seen both as a burden on the benefit system (although their benefit rights are in fact already restricted, apart from European Union citizens in work) and as undercutting nationals in the labour market. A strong work commitment might fit the ethic of individual responsibility, but support for anti-immigrant sentiment appears to cut across the liberal ideology of the free market in labour. Attitudes in this area follow the anticipated national normative patterns but go beyond them, most notably in the UK.

Discussion and conclusions

We draw together the material from the forums in relation to our research questions about how underlying principles of desert, equality and needs and of self-interest can be understood in terms of moral economy, how this relates to priorities, and how the countries depart from ideal types and are influenced by neo-liberalism.

In some areas, the views expressed by the majority of the participants in each country, which form the basis for the consensus agreed in the final plenary, clearly rest on the desert, equality and needs framework associated with the various regimes. The neo-liberal values associated with inequality and market exchange also figure, but in practice gain little support in the way our participants understood social policy.

Although the trend towards greater inequality is recognised in all three countries, approaches differ. German forum members mostly argue that current inequalities damage the principle of appropriate reward for work and wish to see greater reciprocity in the relationship between wages and contribution. In Norway, the predominant suggestion is for higher progressive taxation and higher wages for low earners. The view that inequality provides incentives for greater effort is restricted to a small minority. The UK differs. Although participants are certainly aware of growing income inequality, their focus is much more on moral divisions between responsible workers and workshy benefit claimers. The outcome is a determination to counter these threats by imposing strict conditions on claimers, moving towards workfare, and by strict immigration controls. Thus, the neo-liberal values of inequality and individual responsibility do not seem to be heavily endorsed except in the more liberal-leaning UK.

In relation to immigration, German participants recognise the need for demographic rebalancing, although there are some minority concerns about competition for jobs and about cultural differences and tensions. The strongest view is that immigrants should be integrated through education, training and access to work so that they may contribute like other citizens. In Norway, integration is the leading theme and there are real concerns about inequality and discrimination. The UK again differs. Immigrants

are seen as both a burden on the economy and as hard-working competitors, ousting nationals from their jobs. Both views lead to strong demands to cut immigration to protect nationals.

These attitudes fit the moral economies posited above reasonably well. They also indicate that the shift toward neo-liberalism in political ideology and policy remains a top-down project and has not achieved substantial changes in popular attitudes except in the UK. German attitudes are underpinned by a normative system that stresses desert and reciprocity as the basis for contribution and entitlement although unpaid work (for example much of child and elder care) is not respected as earning desert. In Norway, equality is central to the debate. The UK is an outlier in this area as in much else, and follows the liberal market ideals of individual responsibility and limited state intervention focused strictly on need.

Attitudes depart from this framework in three ways.

First, a number of issues are recognised across all three states, in some cases calling for similar solutions and in others, for different ones. The growth in income inequality and precarity at the bottom, difficulties in controlling multi-national companies, demographic ageing, and the recent rise in immigration are all discussed. The first three items (income inequality, multi-national companies, and ageing of the population) suggest an awareness of the international context of neo-liberal policy-making. However many participants, especially in the UK, are ill-informed about the details of these developments and are misled by national media (see Larsen 2016). Participants in all three countries support greater restrictions on multi-national companies, cutting against the UK's market-centred logic. Similarly UK attitudes to immigration do not follow a market pattern, which would suggest an open labour market. It is a particular interpretation of the self-interest of nationals, especially those with lower skills, that leads people to wish to exclude immigrants.

Secondly, and following from this, the prioritisation of worker/benefit claimer divisions and immigration issues in the UK is unusual. In relation to the former, the cleavage between workers and workshy claimers rather than rich and poor leads to a focus on workfare. This fits the individual responsibility aspect of a liberal market approach, with only the harshest need recognised for state assistance and limits to state intervention, but does not include any recognition that benefit claimers might be claiming because appropriate jobs are simply unavailable, or that dependants are penalised by such cuts, or that wage support might be more effective than benefit cuts in maintaining a worker/claimant differential while tackling poverty. It also explains why relatively high levels of inequality are tolerated by most people. It follows the neo-liberal emphasis on inequality and on the market as determining rewards. The work-ethic informs policy ideas in Germany and Norway but is nuanced by values of reciprocity and equality and social cohesion.

And for immigration, the UK idea that immigrants are simultaneous burdens on the welfare state and competitors for jobs raises unacknowledged issues of contradiction. There is little discussion of immigrants' economic contribution. Finally, the determination by the majority to restrict immigration stringently seems at variance with the valuing of market freedom, which should respect the work commitment seen as characteristic of many immigrants. Immigrants are seen primarily as a threat to the self-interest of denizens, not as potential workers to be integrated.

Thirdly, ideas about what might be called state capability are also important. Whether or not government is seen as capable of implementing the necessary policies is relevant to policy priorities and judgements. The view that the UK government would be unable to provide worthwhile state pensions or even a National Health Service in a quarter-century, expressed by some UK participants to general assent, contrasts with the approach of the German and Norwegian groups. Although problems are recognised in these countries, the general consensus is that they can be tackled if appropriate measures are implemented. From one perspective, pessimism about state sustainability fits a neo-liberal free market/small state logic, but it conflicts with ideas about the potential effectiveness of government in relation to other challenges, such as immigration and benefit restrictions. However, most UK participants seem to see the unsustainability of the welfare state as to do with bad management, as more or less inevitable, and as regrettable, rather than as the freedom envisaged by neo-liberals like Friedman (1962).

Taken together, these points lead to four main conclusions.

Firstly, the democratic forum approach is an effective means of exploring welfare-state attitudes in Europe. Although the work produces findings that could be generated in different ways, it does bring out emphases in attitudes and allows researchers to examine attitude formations that might not be predicted by theory and hence investigated in pre-structured surveys.

Secondly, the pattern of attitudes fits loosely with the regime approach that is extensively used in welfare-state research. It also points to some of the ways in which the attitudes expressed differ from the regime ideal type as delineated above. Most participants respond to the expansion of neo-liberal approaches in European countries by emphasising the contrary values of desert and equality, whereas it is only in the UK that individual responsibility and inequality predominate. The drive towards neo-liberalism in policy ideas is not generally reflected in attitudes.


Thirdly, the work brings out the cultural differences between the UK and the other countries examined: liberal individualist ideology dominates to the extent that the benefit claimer/non-claimer distinction is seen as of greater moral importance than the rich/poor division (helping to explain why exceptional levels of inequality are tolerated). Shifts towards privatisation and means-testing across central areas of state welfare are accepted. The recent moves towards greater neo-liberalism are accepted.

Fourthly, the issue of state capability emerges onto the agenda. Most discussion of attitudes to the state simply assumes that governments are and will be able to manage the challenges that face them. The real issue is whether they can mobilise political support for their policies. In the UK, many people seem to believe that it is simply impossible for government to maintain pensions and health care at any decent level.

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ORCID iD

Peter Taylor-Gooby  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4825-1250>

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Author biographies

Peter Taylor-Gooby is a Professor of Social Policy at the University of Kent. His research focuses on attitudes to welfare and its politics, and the future of the welfare state in Europe. He writes also novels with social policy themes.

Bjørn Hvinden obtained a PhD in Sociology in 1992. He has been a Professor of Sociology since 1995. Currently, he is primarily directing research; his main research interests include European and comparative welfare, youth unemployment, disability, lifecourses, solidarity, and climate change.

Steffen Mau obtained a PhD from the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. Currently, he is a Professor of Macrosociology at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. His research focusses on social policy, Europeanisation, and border studies.

Benjamin Leruth is an Assistant Professor of Politics and Public Administration at the University of Canberra. His research focuses on comparative European politics, Euroscepticism, differentiated integration in the European Union, and public attitudes toward immigration and the European welfare state.

Mi Ah Schoyen is a researcher at NOVA Norwegian Social Research, Oslo Metropolitan University. She does comparative welfare-state research and is interested in the politics and socio-economic consequences of welfare reforms as well as questions of intergenerational solidarity and how to develop an ecologically sustainable welfare state.

Adrienn Gyory is a research student at the University of Kent. Her work centres on attitudes to immigration.