

The “Activating Welfare State” – a Political and Social History of German Social Policy, 1979-2017

Since the 1990s, the “activating welfare state” has become the new paradigm of social policy in Germany and large parts of Europe. The public debate in Germany has focused on the reforms of the Agenda 2010 and particularly on “Hartz IV” (a reform of unemployment benefits). While the socio-economic causes of this change (especially oil crises, mass unemployment, government debt, demographic trends) have already been well researched, social and international factors have so far been largely ignored. However, focusing solely on the socioeconomic situation is not enough to comprehensively explain this transformation.

Rather than understanding the “activating welfare state” as a sum of social policy laws, the interdisciplinary Junior Research Group will define the concept much broader as a socio-political reaction to a fundamental, long-term societal change and the transformation of international welfare paradigms since the late 1970s. The former includes, among other things, processes of individualization, pluralization (especially through migration) and the popularization of the principle of “promote and demand” (“Foerdern und Fordern”). The latter refers to the transnational reception of new welfare paradigms (Thatcherism, Workfare, “New Labour”, Flexicurity).

The junior research group consists of Wanda Schwarze-Wippert, Christof Wittmaack and Dr. Nikolas Dörr. Divided into three subprojects, the group will focus on the influence of a) international transfers of ideas and policies in the field of social policy since 1979, b) changes in attitudes towards social policy (caused, among other things, by the asylum debates since the 1980s and the different welfare state socializations in West and East Germany), and c) changes in the public and media discourse on social policy and its influence on the policy decision-making process.