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**The interrelation between ‘activation’ and social policy against exclusion
in Great Britain and France**

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Introduction

In recent years, concepts of social exclusion have been frequently used to analyse the “fringes of society” – both by academics and policy makers. At the same time, ideas of activation became more prominent within the field of labour market policies. While both aspects have gained a lot of academic and political attention, it is especially the interrelation between exclusion and activation that requires further investigation.

To better understand the interplay between labour market activation and social exclusion, it is certainly necessary to analyse the influence of social marginalization on the effectiveness of labour market insertion. But it also seems to be inevitable to take a closer look on the interaction between labour market policies based on the concept of activation on the one hand and other policy programmes against social exclusion on the other hand. As this paper focuses on the second issue, it will assess the social policy arrangements around activation policies in two selected countries in order to provide an analysis of their orientation and functioning. Among a large number of possible research questions, the following appear to be the most important:

How do labour market activation policies interact with specific policy programmes concerning social exclusion and with the social security system providing a minimum safety net? Is there coherence between different policies that try to change the situation of those living at the fringes of society?

What are the similarities and differences in the ideological and conceptual frameworks of inclusion policies in Great Britain¹ and France; to what extent ideas and social policies are consistent; do tendencies of convergence exist?

Although acknowledging the importance of welfare institutions and politics, the paper argues that the underlying concept and understanding of social exclusion plays a role in defining the social policy arrangement. Consequently, institutions and actors shall be taken as seriously as norms and ideas that emerge to some extent from historical experience and that influence the orientations of activation policies.

This paper is based on empirical research currently in progress: a comparative work on Great Britain and France, focusing on recent developments since 1997. These countries were selected given the central place of labour market activation policies within anti-exclusion programmes in both states.² Furthermore, these two case studies allow the aforementioned assessment of the role of underlying exclusion concepts and ideas in illuminating the following inconsistency: while policy programmes show a common focus on labour market activation, there are between-country differences in justifications and the conceptions of welfare production and society.

The paper contains three main parts:

In the first part three ideal typical concepts of social exclusion are differentiated and attributed to the dominant orientations of social policies in Great Britain and France. Partially based on Ruth Levitas (2005) differentiation of three discourses on social exclusion (redistributive, social integrationist and moral underclass discourse), these three concepts are: holistic, work-centred and focused on cumulative disadvantages.

The second part deals with the interaction between activation policies and other programmes related to social exclusion in each welfare state in a comparative approach.

¹ Given the differences in social policies, this paper refers to Great Britain instead of the United Kingdom. In case of further varieties, the presented facts and arguments refer to England.

² The fact that activation policies are less frequently highlighted in political discourses and debates in France should not obscure the political attention given to issues of employability and entrepreneurship.

Finally, the third part questions the impact of the European Union on tendencies of convergence between the analysed activation schemes and welfare systems.

As a start, two preliminary remarks appear to be necessary: this paper will mainly aim for drawing the ‘bigger picture’ instead of analysing in detail a selected section of the problem. Furthermore, to facilitate access on additional information for interested readers, the given references are primarily (as far it is reasonable) academic texts that are easily available instead of original policy documents.

I hope that these settings are helpful in providing a paper that can be connected to other contributions and that enables interesting discussions.³

1. Concepts of social exclusion in Great Britain and France

1.1 The diffusion of exclusion concepts, the differentiation of discourses

Supported by political actors especially on the European level, the notion of exclusion has slowly complemented the vocabulary for describing social problems in recent years. To some extent, it is even fair to say that the notion of exclusion was able to at least partially replace concepts such as poverty and inequality. Although it remains yet undecided if Germany follows this shift, one cannot deny that social exclusion figures among the dominant terms in social sciences and policies, especially in France, Great Britain and European institutions.

Originating from French academic debates, the concept was widely embraced and diffused throughout the European Union (EU). However, numerous changes in meaning and definition occurred during this process: in the 1970s, exclusion primarily referred to persons considered as ‘deviant’ (homeless persons, drug addicts or mentally ill persons) before the problem of long-term unemployment gained in importance and attention in the 1980s (Kronauer 2002: 40-41; Paugam 1996b: 10-11; Vleminckz/Berghman 2001).

Nowadays, exclusion is generally understood as a “metaphor of social transformation” (Katz 1993: 440 cit. in Kronauer 1997: 31) to describe the crisis of the Fordist model of welfare capitalism. Speaking of exclusion, to use a minimalist definition, implies speaking of an extreme form of inequality that weakens social integration and impedes participation and the exercise of individual rights.

Since policy makers and academics frequently use the notion of exclusion, its underlying ideas have been confronted with various forms of critical objections. This is not the appropriate place to assess these critical remarks and their validity. It should be sufficient to summarise the two main arguments brought against exclusion concepts.

Firstly, its detractors argue that ‘exclusion’ is nothing more than a simplistic catchword that tries to give a common name to a big variety of social situations and that therefore lacks in scientific value (among others Castel 2000: 13-14). Secondly, the critical power of exclusion concepts is questioned: if exclusion is the problem, inclusion seems to be the most adequate solution, while the causes for exclusion processes are ignored. In other words: instead of changing a given social order (one of the aims of ‘classical’ critical positions) the rather simple goal of re(integrating) people becomes a top priority while the responsibilities for social disadvantages tend to be individualised.

That is why some scholars like Veit-Wilson assume that politicians and policy-makers use the notion of exclusion in order to obfuscate socio-economic reasons for social problems and to limit social policies on measures of insertion, preferably only into the labour market (Veit-

³ As the overall doctoral research work has not yet been finalised, the following arguments represent the current status of research. Thus, I would be grateful for any advice and critical comments. Furthermore, please do not refer to this text without the author’s permission.

Wilson cit. in Kronauer 2002: 144). Given the outline of activation policies, this assumption can hardly be ignored.

Though, despite the influence of the European inclusion agenda (see section 3), it would be mistaken to assume the existence of one commonly shared definition of social exclusion. National traditions continue to exist, even though they are subject to possible changes. Levitas (2005), analysing the discourses on exclusion of New Labour in Great Britain, concludes that three ideal types can be distinguished: firstly a redistributive discourse, which considers exclusion as a consequence of extreme social inequality and therefore calls for redistribution; secondly a social integrationist discourse that defines exclusion as a lack of inclusion in the social division of labour and consequently stipulates a dominance of labour market policies; and thirdly a moral underclass discourse understanding exclusion as a consequence of deviant behaviour patterns and welfare dependency, similar to ideas of a culture of poverty, which implies policies providing re-education, control as well as cuts in the provision of benefits.

As this differentiation appears to be convincing, it shall be used for the purpose of this paper. However, a minor modification is required: For Levitas, the social integrationist discourse focuses on labour market insertion and neglects other dimensions of integration. As this paper does not follow that narrow understanding of integration, it seems to be more coherent to rename this discourse as ‘work-centred’.

A second discourse, rather academic than political, could be called ‘integrationist’ or better, to avoid confusion with Levitas’ approach, ‘holistic’ or ‘multi-dimensional’. It is appropriate to herewith summarise understandings of exclusion that take into account a variety of dimensions such as labour market inclusion, the quality and quantity of social relationships, patterns of participation as well as civil, political and social rights.

Finally, a third primarily political discourse needs to be mentioned, although it is of no concern for this paper’s purpose: especially in Germany, where the use of exclusion concepts is not as wide-spread as in Great Britain or France, exclusion is sometimes defined as a cumulation of multiple disadvantages (Ludwig-Mayerhofer/Barlösius 2001: 45). Although similarly multi-dimensional as the holistic discourse, this understanding of exclusion concentrates on those at the margins of society without linking their situation to processes originating at the core of societies. It is therefore a concept of exclusion that does not share the process-related assumptions of current academic exclusion theories – which implies a significant lack of scientific surplus compared to more traditional concepts such as poverty or marginalisation.

1.2 Different notions of exclusion, varied social policy orientations

Revising different discourses on social exclusion is certainly an interesting scientific challenge, however, for this contribution, this short recall shall simply provide a framework for classifying social policy orientations in two specific countries:

Concerning the ideological and conceptual framework of New Labour in Great Britain, Levitas (2005) convincingly shows that the redistributive discourse, which dominated leftist assumptions about exclusion and poverty in the past, has been replaced by a social integrationist (or: work-centred) discourse combined with some elements of moral underclass conceptions.

The overall strategy to avoid exclusion is to ensure paid work for those who can and security (or as stated later: support) for those who cannot. This strategy is based on a rather simplistic understanding of social exclusion, which is finally constricted to exclusion from the labour market and which is far less complex than definitions of exclusion used by academics.

Even though it was New Labour⁴ that brought the notion of social exclusion on the policy agenda in 1997, there are long-term orientations, inherited from the past and former governments, which shape the British understanding of social exclusion. Putting issues of poverty and social exclusion on the political agenda represents without any doubts an important rupture with the conservative reign, marked by a considerable extent of obfuscation concerning social problems such as growing inequality and poverty. Especially the ambitious programmes against child poverty, unemployment and the introduction of a national minimum wage in 1999 illustrate risen concerns for social problems mainly ignored by the conservative governments.

However, there are elements of continuity in analysis and choice of remedies: the focus on supply-side labour market policies is maintained which leads to welfare reforms destined to assure that work pays off and that employability is improved (Gamble/Kelly 2001: 176). Furthermore, the problem of welfare dependency continues to be a top priority in social policies. Concerning issues of social integration, work-centred approaches represent the central tool against exclusion and poverty. Overall, it is fair to state that concepts of welfare-to-work have replaced classic ‘Old Labour’ ideas of redistribution in order to reduce social inequality, especially inequality of income and wealth.

This paper argues that New Labour has emphasized the welfare state’s role in providing social inclusion without profoundly challenging conservative assumptions on the nature of social problems like exclusion. However, it would be a mistake to attribute work-centred approaches to Thatcherism alone, as the importance of work in solving problems of poverty runs through poor policies from 1601 to 1834 (Metz (1985: 380) says that the idea behind the Poor Law from 1834 can be summarised as “every work is better than assistance”), from Beveridge to Thatcher.

The current weakness of the redistributive discourse throughout the whole political spectre and the predominance of welfare-to-work solutions may therefore be a sign for a larger consensus among Britain’s political parties – a consensus achieved by the Labour Party’s willingness to embrace conservative concepts.

Since the considerable rise of unemployment during the second half of the 1970s the French social system has been continuously questioned by politics as well as academics. While new concepts like social exclusion and debates on a “new social question” (Rosanvallon 1995) gained importance, the French welfare state underwent subsequent reforms that were intensively discussed.⁵

The concept of social exclusion, initially used to describe a marginalized minority of people with deviant behaviours, became the dominant theoretical tool to analyse the situation of all those who suffered from long-term unemployment, lacking social security protection and disadvantaged housing conditions.⁶

In the French conservative welfare regime with its variety of professional social insurance schemes (Batifoulier/Touzé 2000: 88), a growing number of persons with insufficient or

⁴ Assessments of New Labour usually relate to comparisons with so-called ‘Old Labour’ and/or the Conservative Party. Although the ideological rupture with concepts and programmes of former Labour governments is rather obvious, the relationship between New Labour and Thatcherism⁴ is strongly disputed: some argue that New Labour is simply a (at best softened) continuation of Thatcherite policies, others consider New Labour as a legitimate successor of ‘Old Labour’ and a third group of observers argues that a new ‘Third way’ has been taken (Ludlam 2006: 458).

⁵ Palier (2005) provides a brilliant and complete discussion of problems and subsequent reforms of the French welfare system; a representative variety of arguments for welfare reform are elaborated by Bourdelais *et al.* 1996; a broader historical and sociological analysis of the economic, social and political changes can be found in Castel 1995.

⁶ Paugam (1996) briefly outlines the history of the French exclusion debate; for a critical assessment of the scientific value of exclusion concepts see Karsz 2004.

without social protection (mainly due to incapacity for work and long-term unemployment) represented a serious problem that forced the state to establish a minimum safety net for all. After the subsequent introduction of social minima for different groups such as handicapped or lone parents, an almost universal protection system covering people in need has been established in 1988, the *Revenu minimum d'insertion (RMI)*.⁷

With the welfare state accepting its charge for those groups, the French welfare system (as well as the society itself) evolved to a dual structure: social security, governed by social partners, for those in work and social aid in different forms, provided by the state⁸, for persons without social insurance entitlements (Palier 2005: 331).

This change of the French welfare system was supported by a broad consensus among political parties: the introduction of the *RMI* was voted unanimously in 1988 (Palier 2005: 323) and in 1998 only a few deputies from right-wing parties voted against an ambitious law against exclusion – a law which was demanded by anti-exclusion non-profit organisations and has been already prepared by the conservative government before their loss of majority in the parliament in 1997 (Choffé 2001: 215).

Despite a major concern for labour market inclusion, exclusion is generally understood as a multi-dimensional concept and problem: the law of 1998 refers to fundamental rights (*ibid.*) while the National Observatory on Social Exclusion characterises exclusion by economic exclusion, non-recognition or lack of use of social, civil and political rights as well as deficits in social relationships (Choffé 2001: 207). Moreover, the use of the term ‘exclusion’ with its focus on excluding processes originating in the centre of society is set to avoid any stigmatisations of disadvantaged citizens and to take into account the socio-economic evolutions that lead to growing social problems like unemployment and poverty (Palier 2005: 309).

Using the analytical framework of section 1, French ideas of social inclusion mainly represent the holistic discourse: integration is not limited to labour market inclusion but contains various dimensions.

Nevertheless, reservations are necessary to avoid any inappropriate ‘glorification’: On the one hand, social policies combating exclusion in practice finally tend to concentrate on labour market inclusion – which is neither surprising nor inappropriate given the importance of labour for income, social contacts and self-esteem in European societies. On the other hand, concepts of activating labour market policies similar to those in liberal welfare regimes became more important during the 1990s. Former Keynesian inspired interpretations of unemployment were slowly substituted or at least complemented by neo-classical approaches underlining the disincentives caused by generous social benefits (Palier 2005: 228).

Elements of a moral underclass discourse are rare, even though the debate about insecurity especially in the urban outskirts (*banlieues*) has been figured prominently on the agenda for numerous years⁹ and despite signs of rising concern for the disincentives of social benefits (Noblet 2005: 101).

Overall, it seems that a certain change in principles and ideas has taken place in recent years – a change that reduced French specificities such as the “social treatment of unemployment” and that strengthened notions of activation and workfare.

⁷ The *RMI* provides a minimum income for people aged over 25, unable to work and establishes a structure for insertion measures such as training or subsidised jobs. A contract between social agency and recipients, listing rights and responsibilities, is signed. For an overview on the *RMI*, see Palier 2005: 322-330).

⁸ Although the central state remains an important actor in defining social policies and guaranteeing social rights and benefits, the implementation of programmes is in the hands of local authorities (*départements*), most notably since further decentralisations in 2003 (Palier 2005: 316). Moreover, local partnerships have recently developed, despite a remaining primacy of the state (Le Galès/Loncle-Moriceau 2001).

⁹ Castel (2007) delivers a convincing analysis of the socio-economic mechanisms that lead to the difficult situation in the *banlieues*, arguing that problems originate in the centre of society and are concentrated at their margins.

In 1995 Evans/Paugam/Préris argued that, according to historical traditions, different conceptual views concerning poverty, exclusion and social welfare existed between Great Britain and France: Priority of economic performance over social cohesion in Britain whereas in France cohesion is “perceived as fundamental to social and economic well-being” (Evans/Paugam/Préris 1995: 33); different assumptions about the role of the social system (*ibid.*); a French perception of work that goes beyond British conceptions of work as “a simple commodity with a price determined by supply and demand” (Evans/Paugam/Préris 1995: 34) and a stronger theoretical tradition of French social policy and economics instead of the British concern for applied analysis (Evans/Paugam/Préris 1995: 36-37).

Furthermore, elements of the moral underclass discourse can rarely be found in France, despite some recent changes, whereas this kind of discourse plays a non-negligible role in Great Britain.

These differences in conceptions and ideas continue to shape the national understandings of social exclusion. However, despite path dependencies, tendencies of convergence cannot be ignored:

On the one hand, the dualisation of the French social security system created a field of social policies where concepts of workfare, activation and minimal social benefits prevail. Social policy programmes are territorialized and targeted (Palier 2005: 310-317), the insertion in the labour market gains in importance and a residual base of social security is solidified.

On the other hand, social integrationist Durkheimian approaches of society have inspired the British discourse on exclusion. Thereby, older concepts of exclusion that concentrated on issues of redistribution or individual social rights (Merrien 1996: 422) have been weakened.

For the moment, it remains unclear how far these harmonisations will or can go and to what extent path dependent national patterns are likely to persist. Furthermore, this paper does not question the reasons for this convergence, notwithstanding section 3’s attempt to formulate some hypotheses concerning the effects of the European inclusion agenda and its harmonising consequences.

2. Labour market activation in the context of broader anti-exclusion policies

Madsen/Munch-Madsen (2001), in a comparison of national employment policy regimes in the EU, conclude that Great Britain and France represent, along with Ireland, an Anglo-French cluster where employability and entrepreneurship as well as activation are the main tools for the reduction of unemployment and therefore of exclusion risks (Madsen/Munch-Madsen 2001: 271-272).

Given this dominance of activating social policies and their influence on other programmes, it seems to be a rather difficult task to differentiate explicitly activating policy measures from the broader framework of anti-exclusion policies. However, according to this paper’s aims, the following section will comprise two parts: firstly on outline of policies directly inspired by the activation paradigm, secondly an overview on the broader context of inclusion policies in both countries.

2.1 Converging activation policies in Great Britain and France

As already mentioned, New Labour’s policies combating exclusion have the aim of ensuring paid work for those who can, security (or later: support) for those who cannot. Quite obviously, work is seen as the main remedy to poverty and social exclusion. Therefore, (re-) integration into the labour market is at the core of social policy concerns. This is proven by

the targeting of specific groups with high risks of unemployment and/or poverty such as lone parents, long-term unemployed, older people and people entering the labour market after school via the New Deal programmes (which have been introduced in 1998, initially for young unemployed)¹⁰. The guiding principle of the New Deal programmes is that after a gateway period with intense support from a personal adviser, still unemployed persons have to choose between full-time education or training, a job in the voluntary sector or a subsidised job. Hopefully, these insertion measures lead to permanent work, if not the circle recommences (Purdy 2000: 183-189).

Those activating New Deal welfare-to-work schemes are accompanied and completed by programmes that aim for “improving employability through permanent up-skilling and retraining, known as Lifelong Learning” (Annesley 2001: 209).

There are, of course, limits to this approach which are well documented and criticised and which can be interpreted as a consequence of a work-centred understanding of exclusion and finally of activating social policies:

Firstly, there is a danger of competition of all New Deal groups on entry-grade jobs, which could cause a driving down of wages (Gray 2001: 204).

Secondly, contrary to the official discourse, activation programmes for qualification and training represent only a small share of expenditures for employment policies; the focus is on the administration in Jobcentres (work-focused interviews etc) to allow efficient guidance and employment service.

Thirdly, there is a gap between world of work and world of education that can barely be closed by New Deal measures to improve employability (Kleinman 1998).

And finally, training measures for life-long learning are often limited to those in secure jobs, not to those who change often their employment and would therefore be in bigger need for such programmes (Arulampalam/Booth 1998)

Overall, the aim of decommodification (Esping-Andersen 1990) seems to have been abandoned, as social policy is concentrated on preparing individuals for the labour market. However, the intervention in fields of education and qualification is limited. The widely used tax credit system can be interpreted as a definitive institutionalisation of the separation between the social and economic spheres. Insufficient wages (despite the minimum wage) are topped up, the enterprises exclusively follow imperatives of effectiveness, profitability and competitiveness (Rosanvallon 1995: 108-110).

Despite the introduction of a national minimum wage and programmes on fairness at work, the qualitative aspects of work are neglected: every job is better than no job. While the employment status is consequently not assured after unemployment, poverty in work remains a pressing problem although tax credits like Working Family Tax Credits (now Working Tax Credit) increase the income of poor employees. When it comes to social protection, benefits are generally not sufficient to cross the poverty line, which considerably affects the combat against poverty.

These deficits illustrate the limits of social policy approaches that primarily focus on paid work to ensure social integration. As they neglect the multi-dimensional character of exclusion processes, they tend to be insufficient responses to existing social problems.

¹⁰ Since the New Labour government started to implement its set of programmes in order to combat exclusion and poverty, a large number of evaluation reports and reviews have been produced. Because it won't be helpful to try a bibliographic listing of those texts, only a few thoughtfully selected references are indicated: Hills/Stewart (2005) certainly is an almost complete introduction to New Labour's policies regarding social exclusion; Carmichael 2001a provides a short overview; German readers will embrace the well structured analysis (a comparison with Germany) by Mohr 2007 or could refer to Davy's (2000) short overview on New Labour's welfare reforms; concerning the state of poverty and exclusion in Britain, the most complete and thrilling survey is probably Pantazis/Gordon/Levitas 2006.

The main feature of the French welfare system is its dual nature: social security insurances for those in work on the one hand, a state financed and regulated minimum safety net for those who never earned entitlements for social insurance or who are not (any longer) covered by one of the sectoral regimes on the other hand.

When it comes to policies against social exclusion, the latter is obviously more important. The used instruments are similar to those employed in Great Britain: “lowered labour costs” through subsidies, “individualised guidance” for unemployed, targeted programmes for groups with special needs and qualification or training (Choffé 2001: 221).¹¹

It seems that ideas of activation as part of supply-side labour market policies inspire the choice of policy instruments according to the work-centred discourse. As in Great Britain, the limitations of these insertion policies are discussed: not only in Britain but also in France the long-term effectiveness of those instruments is over-shadowed by possible revolving-door-effects. Castel argues that these programmes create a zone of insertion between the ‘real’ integration in the labour market and social assistance, where citizens remain in a permanent transitory state (Castel 1995: 700). Land/Willisch (2006) call this intermediate stage “secondary integration”.

If one looked closely on the multitude of specific programmes such as *Prime pour l’emploi*, *Contrat Emploi-Solidarité* or *emplois-jeunes*, a detailed comparison with British social policy arrangements could be prepared. Such a comparison would undoubtedly allow interesting insights into slightest differences. But as such an approach would be extremely technical and given the purpose of this paper, it shall be sufficient to state that these instruments for labour market inclusion follow similar ideas and logics as in Britain.

However, there are French particularities: the implementation of contracts on rights and responsibilities between agencies and unemployed individuals is rather loose. In some areas not even the half of *RMI* recipients have signed the obligatory insertion contract defining their duties and responsibilities or had personal interviews (Choffé 2001: 221).

Another aspect is far more important for this paper’s attempt: due to the changes in the structure of the French social system following the introduction of minimum safety nets such as the *RMI*, interventions for the sake of those at the margins of society obey to different logics than interventions within the framework of social insurances. Affirmative actions and targeting replace the ideal of universalism; specific, territorial adapted benefits replace uniform ones; decentralised programmes are implemented instead of centralised social security policies. Moreover, the system of social minima deals with all possible problems of concerned persons, while the social security system is divided according to the insured social risks such as age, accident or illness (Palier 2005: 311-312).

Because of the coexistence of both systems, an unequal treatment of recipients is inevitable and the impression of individual decline can be amplified by the risk of being pushed into the minimum safety net. Therefore, the conservative nature of the French welfare regime with its capacities in maintaining the social status reveals its ambiguous face: on the one hand, when social risks like unemployment occur in the life of a working person, a certain status maintenance rests assured, at least for a limited time span; on the other hand, the division of social protection systems implies a separation between different categories of recipients – categories that are unequally judged and treated.

Clasen/Clegg (2003) have shown that the current distinction between ‘activation in Great Britain’ and ‘solidarity in France’ lost its appeal as a consequence of growing importance of activation policies in France, even though differences continue to exist.

The arguments of this paper also contribute, despite all limitations, to the conclusion that policies of workfare represent main instruments for the reduction of unemployment and the

¹¹ See Noblet 2005 for a critical analysis of those insertion policies.

combat against social exclusion in both countries. The dominance of the work-centred discourse and its ideas in Great Britain and France seems to induce tendencies of convergence.

However, it would be a mistake to underestimate the weight of path dependencies and national idiosyncrasies, relating to concepts and ideas as well as to policy arrangements. Moreover, the importance of workfare oriented activation policies does not automatically imply a change of regime in France: while ‘liberal’ concepts and programmes occupy a central place in social policies at the margins of society, the status conserving insurance system continues to exist – even though the effects of the transformed policy agenda contribute to an alteration of the whole social security regime and to an expansion of the “zone of vulnerability” (Castel 1995).

Finally, a working hypothesis (which however requires further examination) can be formulated: the implementation of workfare policies is more stringent in Great Britain than in France, with a higher degree of compulsion and a broader coverage. As the successes of the New Labour model coincided with a period of economic well-being, it is still difficult to assess the impact of reformed social policies on the reduction of exclusion and poverty. If there is a positive relation, one could assume that these results are partially due to efficient and strict implementation, even though this means a higher degree of control and surveillance with all its negative effects concerning individual liberties and rights. If there is not, all those observers, who question the blessings of activating workfare approaches or who at least are concerned by their deficits and limits, will see their arguments reinforced.

2.2 A different framework of inclusion policies due to different national ideas?

When it comes to the broader framework of anti-exclusion policies on the fringes of society, the comparison between Great Britain and France leads to more considerable differences:

Activation in Great Britain is embedded in New Labour’s overall economic policies focusing on supply-side reforms: next to welfare-to-work and lifelong learning the government concentrates on stimulating investments in technology and infrastructure, combined with measures providing macro-economic stability (low inflation, sound public finances) in order to overcome supply-side barriers to economic growth (Gamble/Kelly 2001: 173-177). While programmes of redistribution are modest, an activist approach concerned with an improvement of the skills of the British work force is chosen, rather coherent with conservative policy orientations (Moran/Alexander 2000: 119-120).

Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to conclude that political efforts are reduced to measures that intend to assure best possible conditions for economic well-being and growth as well as reduced unemployment. Problems of exclusion are tackled in more direct ways by an array of specific programmes combating school truancy, drug use or rough sleeping (Green Paper 1998: 64).

However, these programmes are generally restricted to people with extreme disadvantages and represent last resort help for a minor fraction of the population. As important it is to provide patterns of support for these social groups, it is barely sufficient as a general response to social exclusion processes. Furthermore, it illustrates a change in definition and perception of social exclusion: at the beginning of New Labour’s reign, it is understood as an overall problem, as a paradigm that describes the social question at the end of the industrial period. In the 2006 Reaching Out-Report (HM Government 2006: 10-11), exclusion is understood as a residual problem of „adults leading a chaotic live“ (2,5%) who face a multiplication of problems like bad behaviour, low skills, unemployment. The latter use has a high potential for stigmatisation and individualisation of responsibility, especially when the positive outcomes of governmental social policies for the ‘deserving poor’ are underlined.

Moreover, social policies against exclusion are influenced by elements of a moral underclass discourse:

Firstly, there are continuous concerns about welfare dependency, disincentives, poverty and unemployment traps (Annesley 2000: 209). “Making work pay” therefore becomes a central pillar of social policies by establishing a system of tax credits in addition to the minimum wage and sticks and carrots tools in the frame of the New Deals.

Secondly, one observes a close connection between issues of social exclusion and crime or social disorder. Blair made it clear during an interview in 1991 that fighting poverty is not only necessary out of compassion, but because the existence of an underclass of deprived and poor disturbs the social which is necessary for the functioning of the society (Coates 2000: 10). Traces of these concerns can be found in strategies for deprived areas in which living standards are considerably lowered by poverty, unemployment, bad environment and crime (Lupton/Power 2005: 119-142). Although the interrelation of these problems is evident, it seems as if Georg Simmel was right when he argued that poor policies are not destined to help the poor but to preserve social order (Simmel 1992: 516-518).

In addition, targeting and selectivity is useful and effective in medium term to ameliorate the income of poor people, but in the longer term it can extend the poverty trap (Piachaud/Sutherland 2000) and can also favour stigmatisation.

Finally, numerous policy programmes and governmental reviews on policies against poverty focus on questions of the right method. A good example is the Reaching Out Report 2006 (HM Government 2006) where a lot of attention is given to 5 guiding principles (better identification + early intervention, identifying what works, multi agency working, personalisation + rights and responsibilities, supporting achievement and managing underperformance). As important these issues are, there is a significant lack of reflection on underlying structural causes of social exclusion, vulnerability and inequality.

However, one cannot assess New Labour’s policies against exclusion without paying attention to the ambitious programmes combating child poverty. Piachaud/Sutherland (2001) divide three categories of measures: firstly, direct financial support; secondly, the promotion of paid work for parents; and thirdly, the tackling of long-term disadvantages (Piachaud/Sutherland 2001: 97). Among the latter category, measures against teenage conception and school truancy as well as a National Childcare Strategy and Sure Start programmes for children up to the age of four living in deprived areas (Piachaud/Sutherland 2001: 111) are indicators for the government’s will to reduce children poverty and exclusion. But despite the importance of those programmes and of increases in benefit levels, the main focus lies on the promotion of paid work, even though this concentration on employment strategies does not help those who are unable to work (Piachaud/Sutherland 2001: 107).

Overall, rising employability and activating those who are inactive are the primary aims of New Labour’s social policies. Combined with concerns for social order and disincentives, these policy orientations are not restricted to labour market policies but coherently guide the bigger variety of measures and programmes against social exclusion – exclusion that is indeed understood in its work-centred way.

Furthermore, the formulation and implementation of specific programmes for extremely disadvantaged persons underlines the residual nature of the British welfare system, which mainly provides a minimum safety net for those who failed in self-help.

In any case, inclusion via activation means individual activation whereas the improvement of institutional and structural circumstances for a sustainable integration is blanked out.

As shown in section 1, French social policy programmes on the fringes of society follow a slightly different understanding of exclusion – at least in theory.

First of all, economic policies in recent years, especially during the Jospin government between 1997 and 2002, have not been fully guided by supply-side orientations. Although

concerns for investment, employability and activation occupy a central place on the policy agenda and despite slowly abandoning Keynesian economics, the leftist government has pursued the reduction of working hours. Aiming for a restriction of the regular working time on 35 hours per week, the French parliament voted two major laws in 1998 and 2000 in order to create employment possibilities and stimulate economic growth (for an overview, see Pélisse 2008). Even though the outcomes of this policy remain ambiguous and despite recurrent attempts to undermine its legal basis, this approach clearly represents a different path than British programmes for employment.

A second difference concerns the *RMI* as one of the main tools of inclusion. The law of 1988 stipulates the aim of social and professional insertion, which finally led to the establishment of two different registers of integration: while professional insertion is seen as the essential base for integration in the division of labour with all its constraints and guarantees, the social insertion refers to a modus of inclusion for those unable to permanently (re)-enter the labour market (Castel 1995: 696-697). Furthermore, in addition to its virtues for labour market inclusion via activation, the *RMI* is considered as a legitimate safety net assuring a certain dignity for long-term unemployed persons (Batifoulier/Touzé 2000: 83). Combined with the rather lax use of its coercive instruments, the French minimum safety system appears to be less focused on employment than the British – even though both aim for labour market inclusion.

Without a more detailed evaluation and further normative considerations, it is impossible to decide which system is preferable. However, it can be assumed that the French welfare state is less inclined in pushing work-centred approaches to their limits. This may possibly affect its effectiveness, but it also implies a lower degree of coercion and control of welfare recipients. Concerning further facets of the governmental agenda preventing and combating exclusion, housing policy including the supply of social housing (Choffé 2001: 222-223; Noblet 2005: 139-162) is as important as the numerous programmes for urban development (Castel 1995: 687-694) or the introduction of a universal health coverage. Generally similar to British programmes, two differences can be observed: firstly, according to different traditions, the implication of state actors is more pronounced in France than in Great Britain; secondly the institutional setting of these social policies is influenced by the already described dual structure of the French welfare system.

To summarise previous arguments: Inspired by a holistic understanding of social exclusion, policy programmes in France are more inclined to tackle the multi-dimensional aspects of exclusion processes than their British counterparts. Even though activating labour market policies represent the core of the inclusion agenda, work-centred approaches are modestly restricted.

In Great Britain, despite the existence of a vast variety of additional programmes, workfare constitutes the main element of governmental attempts to reduce exclusion risks. Furthermore, the paradigm of activation strongly influences programmes without direct link to labour market policies. Therefore, measures against exclusion more coherently follow the imperatives of activation as they are defined in work-centred concepts of exclusion.

In France, such coherence is missing: activating labour market inclusion contrasts with a more ambitious notion of social integration which is extremely difficult to achieve by the given social policy arrangement.

3. The European inclusion agenda: arguments concerning its impact on national policies

3.1 An outline of the European anti-exclusion agenda

The “combating of exclusion” (Article 136, Treaty establishing the European Communities) has figured among the official policy aims of the European Union (EU) since the ratification of the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997. However, the concept of social exclusion has been a central part of European social policy programmes since the 1980s. In fact, it is mainly because of European institutions that the French term ‘exclusion’ was spread throughout the EU and has nowadays replaced concepts like poverty or inequality within the official European discourse.¹² Main tools in assuring ‘social cohesion’ are activating labour market policies as well as an economic policy that supports growth and competitiveness. The overall policy orientation becomes visible in the Lisbon strategy, although specific programmes for inclusion exist (for an introduction on the European inclusion agenda, see Carmichael 2001b). The Lisbon strategy is in the first instance a programme to encourage investment, entrepreneurship and employment in order to create a more competitive knowledge-based economy in the EU. Despite its considerable rise in importance during the last decade (Middleton *et al.* 2003: 1-2), the promotion of social inclusion and the combat against poverty are only secondary – not only in the Lisbon declaration itself, but also in related papers, directives and declarations (Reuter 2006: 3-6). Despite the modifications of the Amsterdam Treaty and the integration of the objective to fight social exclusion in the EC-Treaty (Heady/Room 2003: 170-171), the combat against exclusion and measures for social integration remain primarily a competence of national or local decision makers.

This reflects a general inferiority of European integration in politics and social questions compared to the degree of economic integration. The European construction has been first of all a history of economic harmonisation and the creation of the European single market. Till now the elaboration of a framework for European social policies has not considerably advanced, the only way of achieving social advantages seems to be a possible indirect fall-out of a powerful and successful economy that benefits from European integration.

Consequently, it seems to be adequate to doubt about the harmonizing effects of Lisbon strategy and related programmes combating exclusion and to underline the remaining strong national differences. Sapir even states that “labour market and social policy reforms are a matter for Member States alone” while the EU should focus on completing the single market (Sapir 2005: 1-2).

However, there are some good reasons to not underestimate the EU's impact on national social policies and especially reform programmes. A lack of European competences and the existence of different national socio-economic models do not automatically mean a lack of influence.

3.2 Influences on national reform programmes¹³

The objective of this section is to question how EU policy in the domain of inclusion and social safety shapes or tries to shape the national reform agendas and social policies of European states. For a satisfying answer it would be necessary to analyse and compare a bigger number of EU member states. That aim being by far too vast for this paper, some general considerations are undertaken.

While direct decision-making in the field of social policies against poverty and social exclusion is not possible, the EU concentrates on influencing and harmonising the political

¹² Some observers object that European actors prefer the rather vague concept of exclusion in order to individualise social problems and consequently to obfuscate their socio-structural causes (Veit-Wilson, cit. in Kronauer 2002: 144). European institutions indeed use exclusion concepts that mainly focus on labour market integration through improvement of employability without taking into account the excluding effects of institutions in the core of society.

¹³ The following arguments are developed in a more detailed way in Reuter 2006.

philosophies of member states. Therefore, instruments like the “Community programme for employment and solidarity PROGRESS 2007-2013” are used.

Its aims are “organising exchanges on policies and processes and promoting mutual learning in the context of the social protection and inclusion strategy”, “raising awareness, disseminating information and promoting debate” and “improving understanding of poverty issues and social protection and inclusion policies” (EU legislation 2004). In these programmes, particular attention is accorded to the promotion of “participation in the labour market” and to the fight against “poverty and exclusion among the most marginalised groups” (EU legislation 2005).

This focus on employment as main modus of integration as well as on activating social policy via empowerment and investment in human capital and the targeting of people who are multiply deprived and excluded can not only be found in official EU documents, but also in national reform programmes that are considerably streamlined. To illustrate that point, a brief look in the British NAP for the Lisbon strategy should be interesting.

In the UK plan of 2005, a central aim is the development of a “modern and flexible welfare state that provides security for people when they need it and provides strong incentives to work” and of an “enterprising and flexible business sector” (HM treasury 2005: 1). Higher skill levels for workers are of prime importance (HM treasury 2005: 2).

This ideal of an activating welfare regime that “makes work pay” by enabling and encouraging people and that assures only a minimum safety net is seen as counterpart to “a culture of welfare dependency” (HM treasury 2005: 37). Herewith, the UK government follows the welfarization-thesis usually defended by conservative critics of welfare systems in the USA.

By the way, the case of Germany also fits in EU's 'philosophy' of social policies. Central objectives of the German NAP are improving the framework for entrepreneurship (Federal government Germany 2005: 2), higher investments in education to provide chances to citizens (Federal government Germany 2005: 7), lifelong learning (Federal government Germany 2005: 11) and a reduction of non-labour costs (Federal government Germany 2005: 32). Concerning labour market reforms, the activating welfare state figures as leitmotif, which means higher incentives to work and a strengthening of individual responsibility (Federal government Germany 2005: 42-43). Employment shall be encouraged by the expansion of low-income jobs, especially in simple services (Federal government Germany 2005: 49).

Behning (2005) has shown how Germany's 'Agenda 2010' was influenced and shaped by the European 'philosophy' of “make work pay”. By explaining how the principals of human capital investment and activating social policy define the German reform programme, Behning demonstrates the large impact of European discourses about combating poverty and exclusion on the national orientation of reforms.

Finally, despite their lack of direct decision-making competences, the European institutions influence the dominating discourse and political 'philosophy' of social policies relative to poverty and social exclusion.

Between European and national programmes a considerable similarity can be realised despite different socio-economic models. Of course, given the interdependences in the multi-level-governance system of the EU, European institutions cannot be described as fully independent actors that put national governments under pressure. The new 'philosophy' of welfare systems has its origin in a complex network of decision makers on national and European levels.

Nevertheless, by harmonising social policy programmes of its member states via exchange, evaluation and common objectives, the European institutions, especially the Commission, are important actors in the transformation of welfare regimes in Europe.

This transformation stabilises the subordination of social protection objectives under the imperatives of economic performances: competitiveness seems to be the cornerstone of

European economic and social policies since 1986 while welfare systems are judged as a burden (Husson 2003: 73-74).

In addition to the impact on the European discourse, it should not be forgotten that the European integration process also shapes and has shaped the framework for national social policies. As for example monetary policy is not any longer a national domain in the euro zone and as important aspects of the European economy are legislated by the Commission, economic and social policies of EU member states have to be in conformity to European rules concerning the common currency or the single market.

Conclusion

To conclude this paper, I will try to give summarising answers to the questions raised in the introductory section:

Firstly, concerning the policy arrangement for combating exclusion, both welfare systems resort to activating labour market policies and welfare-to-work instruments in order to achieve social integration and reduce unemployment. While patterns of labour market inclusion show a lot of similarities, the broader policy agenda relating to exclusion differs between both countries. The impact of the activation paradigm is bigger in Great Britain than in France.

Secondly, it was shown that conceptions and ideas of exclusion considerably differ in Great Britain and France – usually surpassing party cleavages to represent between-country differences. However, tendencies of convergence appeared in recent years. It is probable that these developments are supported by the harmonising impact of the European inclusion agenda.

Consequently, it seems that the consistency of ideas and policies in France is weaker than in Great Britain: both countries follow the work-centred recommendations of a social integrationist discourse although the French ideological framework is aiming for a broader, multi-dimensional approach and a stronger concern for socio-economic causes of exclusion processes.

However, if integration is understood in a different way, taking into consideration issues of social, civil and political rights, the picture changes. Under these circumstances, it is the French welfare system that more convincingly searches for integrative patterns going beyond labour market inclusion – although its successes are limited. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that a conservative, to some extent status-maintaining superstructure complements the liberal or residual features of the French system. So, in spite of similarities and recent tendencies of convergence, it would be a bold statement to regard Great Britain and France as twins linked by a common use of activation policies.

Overall, despite the importance of institutional and socio-economic factors, it appears that ideas and concepts do matter. It is uncertain whether ideas influence policy decisions or if they are simply used as *ex post* justifications. Probably, the truth lies between the two extreme positions.

In any case, the use and development of scientific concepts that allow critical assessments of social policies and their ideological justifications are required. Academic debates about social exclusion facilitate the elaboration of definitions and conceptions that can contrast with sometimes misleading or obfuscating understandings embedded in the official policy discourses.

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