

Employable subjects, economic habitus and negative individualism

A study on the subjective impact of activating labour market policy, using the example of underprivileged young people in a pilot scheme

Dennis Eversberg, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena

dennis.eversberg@uni-jena.de

My dissertation project aims to shed some light on the subjective impact of activating labour market policy – an issue seldom investigated so far. Taking as an example participants of a pilot scheme for the integration of long-term unemployed youth in three German regions, I am investigating whether the practice associated with this kind of policy can live up to its proponents' main claim: That it is possible to intentionally alter the attitudes and orientations of unemployed persons in such a way as to promote their employability. The scheme surveyed combines temporary agency work, modularized short-term vocational training and intensive personal assistance (coaching) in an effort to integrate unemployed young persons into the labour market as quickly as possible. The main body of data evaluated consists of 54 problem-centered qualitative interviews with participants, which are interpreted using a theoretical approach that draws on concepts and notions from both Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. In conceiving 'the labour market' as a space of power relations and making these the object of a detailed analysis, a novel, more subject-centered and genuinely sociological perspective on (un)employment can be established.

a) Activating labour market policy and the question of its subjective impact

Through the so-called “Hartz reforms”, the programme of an “activating labour market policy” has been introduced into the German administrative context, marking an extraordinarily sharp break with policy approaches preceding it. Gaining popularity since the early 1990s, the notion of “*activation*” stands for a paradigm shift in the way that 'unemployment' as a social problem is being perceived and treated by political actors and institutions. Setting itself apart from both a 'passive' policy of financial alimention and a merely 'active' one relying on instruments like qualification, subsidized employment and integration allowances, 'activation' stresses the individual responsibility of the unemployed. Its subjects are called on to perceive their surroundings as a *market* in which they, as 'entrepreneurs of their own employability', are to offer, market and sell their skills and competen-

cies. 'Activating labour market policy' diagnoses a lack of this kind of effort among the unemployed and mainly aims at bringing it about – by way of support (“Fördern”) or coercion (“Fordern”).

To what extent are these objectives being attained by the way “activation” is being implemented in Germany? Although the outcome of the reform is well documented in regard to the institutional factors of the process and the quantitatively measurable indicators of success, little is known about the impact on the subjects affected and the ways of coping with a changing practice of labour market administration: Does “activation” succeed in altering the attitudes of unemployed persons deemed passive and in disposing them to actively develop their own 'employability'? This is the question I am tackling in my dissertation project by examining the subjective impact of a pilot scheme that operates in the area of intersection between labour administration and precarious employment and aims at 'activating' unemployed youth.

c) The empirical object: A pilot scheme for disadvantaged youth

The scheme examined is a so-called 'public private partnership' between the Federal Employment Agency (BA) and one of the leading international temporary employment agencies. It was aimed at persons under the age of 25 whose placement was inhibited by multiple restraints but who were motivated and willing to work. Participation was thus to be voluntary. The enterprise was to give them a work contract for an unlimited period and to deploy them to customer firms. When not deployed, they were to participate in modularized vocational qualification and to be personally assisted by a “coach”.

Through these three core elements – temporary agency work, qualification, coaching – the scheme aimed at “*raising employability*” and skill levels of participants, at augmenting their motivation by granting them “*real work*” as well as at “*activating*” them and supporting their transition into “*long-term employment*”¹. Sociologically speaking, the scheme's goal was that participants should abandon their dispositions toward an “*economic habitus*” (Bourdieu) intent on establishing a basis for long-term planning in their working life. Instead, they should start conceiving themselves as active, quasi-entrepreneurial *employable subjects*. This aim, as well as the means employed to achieve it and the way they are being combined, make this scheme a prime example of activating labour market policy.

When assessing the implementation of the scheme it quickly becomes clear that the actual practice in the five pilot regions significantly differed from the ideal process described: The

1 Quotes from the scheme's agenda

previously defined criteria for selection of participants were softened, participation was being made mandatory and – most gravely – the intended synergies between working spells and training modules seldom actually came about. The absolute primacy that the temp agency granted to working spells often led to training being reduced to a residual effect. In one East German region the scheme failed altogether due to conflicts between public and private actors as well as collective resistance from the participants' side. In all regions, the high initial hopes for placement successes could not be met. After one year of funding, a majority either remained with the temp agency or went back into unemployment. Taking all this into account, it is not feasible to assume that participation in an activation scheme of this kind will substantially improve the chances for placement into regular employment in more than a small fraction of cases.

In a similar vein, the participants' motivation – whose enhancement had been the scheme's second central aim – developed in a variety of ways, some of them not at all positive. This points to the much broader subjective orientations and strategies of action that motivation is but a symptom of: The dispositions of *habitus* that are at the same time the target of restructuring intervention by activation programmes like the scheme analysed here. Thus, the rarely touched-upon question that the main part of my dissertation will be concerned with is this: Where and why does friction occur between these previously incorporated social structures and the demands for their change articulated by an “activating labour market policy”, to what degree and in what way do they actually change?

Answering this question in a genuinely sociological way in my view requires operating inside a grammar of social *forces*. It implies conceiving 'labour market policy' as a set of forces that influence the practices and daily lives of the subjects affected. At the same time, the behaviour of labour market subjects is to be understood as a multitude of forces in their own right – forces that may counteract, strengthen, annul or multiply the effects of those forces imposed by labour market institutions. In short, the endeavour pursued here requires viewing the social reality usually referred to as 'the labour market' as a complex space of *power* relations.

b) The approach: Investigating the labour market in terms of power

Now, how can these relations of power be understood and explained? When trying to examine the mutual effects between the participants' incorporated dispositions on the one and the behavioural requirements arising from their situation on the other hand, we first need to specify what these “requirements” actually consist in. For answering this question,

I draw on some concepts coined by Michel Foucault in his work on the genealogy of modern forms of political rule. These concepts enable us to reconstruct how governmental intentions from the sphere of political discourse – the programme of labour market policy that provided the basic ideas for the scheme investigated – inscribe themselves in institutional practice in the process of implementation to produce power effects that the participants are confronted with in their everyday life.

The first step of the analysis focuses on the *level of discourse*. Methodically departing from Foucault's analyses of the *governmentality*² of modern societies' ordering principles and political rationalities, this part consists of an analysis of the programmatic ideas intended to design and to legitimate the structure of the scheme under investigation. Here, I aim to demonstrate how these ideas – concentrated in a small number of policy documents – conceive the modes of conduct and self-conduct to be employed in its context and what ideal picture of man the subjects constituting themselves in this way should comply with. In short, the question is: What *technologies* does the scheme employ in order to alter the habitus of unemployed young people?

This, however, touches only on a purely theoretical ideal functioning of this project – it doesn't yet tell us anything about the much more complex forms that it actually assumes in the process of implementation and the forces it practically exerts on the young persons taking part in it. Thus, a second step of analysis has to be centered on the *level of implementation*. My leading paradigm for this step is Foucault notion of *dispositif*, which he defines as “*a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the dispositif. The dispositif itself is a system of relations that can be established between these elements.*”³ With this concept, Foucault transgressed his previous understanding of discursive power, aiming to include elements not mediated through language into the context of his analytics of the ways power is being exerted. What he tried to grasp by the word “*dispositif*” was the technical dimension of *how* power is exerted in flexible and ever-changing modes of operation in modern societies. “*Dispositif*” – literally best translated as “assemblage” or “arrangement” – describes a formation contingently assembled from various elements that may be reconfigured or disassembled altogether – an analogy Foucault deemed more adequate for constellations of

2 Stemming from the French “gouvernemental”, “governmentality” should here be read as ‘an order that has *government* as its central principle’ – as opposed to its historical predecessor, *sovereignty*.

3 Slightly altered quote from Michel Foucault: “*The Confession of the Flesh*” (1977 interview). In *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (ed Colin Gordon), 1980: pp. 194-228.

power than the then popular monolithic concept of “apparatus”.

Using this notion of *dispositif*, I intend to show how, in the process of implementation, the discursive programme previously analysed is articulated with other discourses, institutions, social technologies and technologies of the self (that the participants are supposed to employ) as well as with the relations between institutions, the individuals responsible and the participants. Depending on the specific conditions in each pilot region, the scheme (understood as a *dispositif* as suggested) assumes different concrete shapes. In describing these, it must be considered what (personal or institutional) *interests* are decisive for each respective constellation, and how these translate into practices of conduct and self-conduct. This, however, cannot be done from a foucauldian perspective alone, since interests, as motives for restructuring the *dispositif* that are not necessarily discursive (e.g. the breaking of the intended frame of practices and discourses by the actors involved in one of the regions), cannot be described and examined in its theoretical vocabulary. Also, the actual, transdiscursive *practice* of power relations and its material effects remain a blind spot. In order to adequately account for these, we must proceed from the analysis of the *dispositif* to that of the relations of force or power relations between individual and institutional actors interlinked in it. This step must be undertaken on a very concrete level and in close regard to the differing local contexts, using the vocabulary of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice. What is called for is a description of the structure of the *field* of conditions for implementation of the programme in each region, the *positions* that actors occupy in it in effect of their respective means for exerting power (*capital*) and their *habitus*, the symbolic and material *stakes* (money, respectability, entrepreneurial reputation, political success) of the struggles between these actors, and the *strategies* that they pursue. It is these complex and diverse conditions that explain the discrepancies between the programme and its implementation. The analysis can demonstrate how and why the technologies of habitus that actually take effect differ from those originally intended – sometimes directly counteracting the intentions of policy makers – thus showing how the abstract concepts of “activation” and “temporary agency work” materialise as specific social realities in disadvantaged young people's lives.

Up to this point, the analysis is concerned almost exclusively with what the participants are subjected to. The most important and most strongly empirical part of my dissertation, however, is about the ways they deal with these realities and the strategies they develop to cope with them. It will be based on the 54 problem-centered interviews (approx. 45 minutes in length on average) conducted in 2007 and 2008 in the context of the qualitative

part of the pilot scheme's official evaluation. A detailed analysis of their statements can expose the dispositions decisive for their behaviour towards labour market institutions and the temporary work agency as well as their view of their own situation, and it can show to what extent these dispositions are being influenced by certain elements of the scheme. As a methodical principle, this analysis relies on the procedure of "habitus hermeneutics" developed in the context of social structure analysis at the University of Hannover. Using this method, the structures and determining biographical factors of the participants' habitus can be reconstructed in such a way as to explain their practical strategies of action as a result of the mutual effects between external and incorporated social structures. The previous analysis of the intended and actual structure of the scheme in the terms of Foucault is meant to specify what kind of modification of habitus it is that we are looking for, in order to account for a difficulty resulting from the hysteresis (inertia) of habitus assumed by Bourdieu: Since habitus changes only very slowly and gradually, conducting interrogations in a short period of time only tends to evoke the impression that it doesn't change at all.

When systematically describing the relations between participants and groups of participants in terms of their resources and strategies, it becomes clear that they are acting inside a common frame of reference, a space of social relations that can be described according to Bourdieu's principles as a *field*, and that their strategies relate to the structures and processes in that field.

Empirically, the first preliminary analyses support the hypothesis of a wide variety of different strategies, strongly influenced by the social background of each individual participants. Because of the enormous diversity of conditions influencing the scheme's impact on the individuals, we appear to be confronted with a multitude of effects that can only be understood and explained on an individual level. However, stopping at this conclusion is not satisfactory, as we find that – however irreducible each individual instance of the relation between the subject and its situation may be to all the others – there are similarities and regularities that cannot be traced back to factors like the region and the time of entry alone. These common attributes stand for certain shared previous experiences in the biographies of participants accounted for by their analogous social positions, they represent the systematic differences of collectively shared mentalities that Bourdieu calls "class habitus". Given this assertion, my hypothesis is that there is only a small group among the participants for whom the development of an "activated" self-concept as an "employable subject" works out even on a basic level. For a second, larger group, the dispositions of an "*economic habitus*" intent on material security and long-term planning ability and thus

neither willing nor able to deal with the insecurities caused by deregulation and flexibilisation of employment conditions remain effective. A third fraction does not possess the resources required to process the expectations associated with 'activation' in any positive and future-oriented way, thus being reduced to a passive, only seemingly 'flexible' endurance of an administrative practice that appears to them as a series of unreasonable claims and imputations from above that they themselves can do nothing about – a situation described by Robert Castel as “*negative individualism*”. In exceptional cases it also seems to be possible for some participants to develop strategies of solidarity against the expectations of institutional actors, mobilising their dispositions in what may be called a *positive collectivism*.

d) To what avail?

So far, little is known about the effects of the local practice of reformed labour market policy on the work-related attitudes, the images of the future and the practical strategies of action of the people affected. The existing results suggest that the modification of behaviour intended to “activate” and to promote “employability” that is both hoped for and often implicitly assumed to be possible without further ado is hardly being accomplished. My project aims at further elucidating this matter and providing empirical insights into the complex interrelation between the discourses of labour market policy, the processes of its implementation and its effects.

Furthermore, the combination of theoretical perspectives drawing on Foucault and Bourdieu may prove to be fruitful for further research in contributing to a novel, genuinely sociological perspective on phenomena that are as yet being studied predominantly with statistical means and with reference to mostly economic paradigms. My aim is to conceive of 'labour market' not primarily as a *market*, in which relations of power play a certain role, but vice versa as a space of social relations (that always have a power component) whose special feature it is to be organised as a market, in order to make these relations amenable to being examined in their proper logic, without reference to economic determinisms. Such an approach can contribute to a deeper understanding of how social inequality is being produced and reproduced through mechanisms of the labour market, and of why attempts at regulation geared to a market logic tend to fail in the face of social reality.