

Wasted Lives – Shifting Concepts of Inclusion

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For years, unemployment has been one of the most controversial issues in Germany. A broad range of explanations are discussed. They vary from structural causes, like recession or globalization to political deficiencies, like weaknesses in the education system or too little support for the unemployed to individual causes of the problem. The recent structural reforms of the labour market and social policies carried out by the German government focus on inclusion of the unemployed into the labour market. The new line of thought underlying these reforms however leads to further exclusion: Concepts of “the redundant” and “the unemployed” are replaced by modern ones, which embrace different ideas e.g., on responsibility, usefulness and the subject’s interrelationship to the state.

In Germany there is at least one initiative on behalf of the unemployed in every city. The paper focuses on these civil society actors who speak on behalf of the excluded. My sample represents only a selection from this broad field of groups. I have concentrated on those actors who support the unemployed in their daily lives on a regular base; often offer recreational activities, consultation and represent the interest of unemployed people in politics and in the public sphere (Rein and Scherer 1993; Wolski-Prenger 1998). Other groups, like spontaneous groupings of activists regarding unemployment issues, leftist groups engaged on behalf of the unemployed along with other issues, are excluded from my sample. I investigate how unemployed initiatives attempt to influence the unemployment discourse.

I assume that the new dominant concepts regarding unemployment have created further obstacles for the initiatives on behalf of the unemployed: Many claims on behalf of the unemployed lose their justification and new accusations against welfare recipients arise. The actors analysed in this paper partially adapt to the new line of thought and create spaces for their claims. The claims of civil society for inclusion soon reach their limits. They often contradict dominant concepts of inclusion. This leads to the questions how successful the adaptation strategy of the unemployed initiatives can be in the future?

Access to public sphere and the arenas of decision making

There are only a few barriers to the arenas of political decision making in the German discourse on unemployment, like e.g. membership in expert groups. Access to these

arenas is mainly determined by appreciation of expertise, or election as representative of certain groups. If we are interested in the question which actors are influential in the discourse on unemployment, these barriers, however, are not the decisive ones. Apart from the restricted access to the arenas of political decision making influence on the discourse is unequally distributed. The German discourse on unemployment is dominated by a few powerful actors – most of them have privileged access to the arenas of decision making as well as to the media and are better integrated into networks. From a newspaper analysis and interviews taken for the research project UNEMPOL (Giugni and Statham 2002) we know that in many European states mainly actors from big political parties, state authorities, unions and employers' organisations take influence on the discourse on unemployment (Lahusen and Baumgarten 2010). These few powerful actors in Germany predominantly claim for cuts in the welfare state (Pappi, König and Knoke 1995). The unemployment initiatives face a restricted access to the arenas of political decision making and rarely appear in the media (Lahusen et al. 2010). They need to find alternative ways to represent the interests of the unemployed.

Access to the arenas as described above is one important part of the political opportunity structure (Gamson and Meyer 1996). Furthermore actors whose aim is to influence the discourse, it is significant that their claims will have a positive resonance in the public sphere and amongst other actors, particularly the political decision makers. Following Foucault (Foucault 2002) statements have to be structured according to specific rules – the discursive formations – in order to succeed in the discourse. Issues and objects have to be constructed in a certain specific context. There is a range of accepted ways to connect statements, issues and events. The dispositive is a bundle of laws, institutions and objects that build a room for possible statements (Foucault 1977). I conclude from these observations that a statement needs to fit to the dominant discourse in order to gain broad support. This is not easy for the unemployed initiatives and it has become even more difficult, because the dominant discourse has transformed to the unemployed's disadvantage.

The transformation of dominant concepts in the discourse on unemployment

The German discourse on unemployment is a good example to illustrate more general social trends. Reforms with regard to the labour market and the social welfare system were discussed vividly since the year 2001. In the year 2005 an extensive reform concerning (amongst other aspects) the rights and benefits of the unemployed was implemented by a social democratic government. Large cuts were accompanied by a shift towards activation policies (Lahusen and Baumgarten 2010). The reform caused strong protest in the years 2003 to 2005 (Baglioni et al. 2008). But these protest activities did only result in marginal alterations, because a vast majority in the German

Bundestag and also a great part of the public opinion agreed on some basic concepts. These concepts will be outlined in the following.

The relationship between the state, the market and the subject

According to Bauman the state in our days cannot keep the welfare state's promise for protection anymore and the politicians did not continue to promise protection. Instead, they foresee a future of increased risk that calls for daring. Long-term career is increasingly difficult and mostly impossible. The politicians claim their voters should become more flexible (which means they should be prepared to face insecurities) and find their own individual solutions to the socially created problems.¹

The relationship between the state, the market and the subject in the German context has changed over the last decades. In the past the welfare state was responsible for the well-being of those subjects who could not care for themselves and for the regulation of the market in order to prevent it from harming the subject.

Today the market is conceptualised as vulnerable, but its functioning is assumed as essential for the society. State and subject are responsible for the market and need to shape their activities according to the functioning of the market (Gertenbach 2008; Krasmann 2003). People are obliged to care and to prevent for themselves, for example, old age insurance and health insurance are largely becoming privatised; there is the duty to educate oneself, and to live healthy (Rose 2000). Thus, responsibility has shifted from state and society towards the individual. Those people who have not prevented for themselves in the past are culpable for their miserable situation (Gertenbach 2008; Bröckling 2000). Unemployment moreover is no longer a private problem but a threat to economy and society, because the subject is measured as human capital (Bröckling 2000; Gertenbach 2008). The state is responsible for regulating the subject who is regarded as a possible threat to the market (Gertenbach 2008; Lessenich 2008). The activating welfare state is a new prominent concept in most European states that prefer to activate and to enable the subjects to care for themselves instead of providing just benefits. This means in practical terms a mix of threat and appeal: The unemployed is offered jobs and qualification measures and has to accept them in order not to face cuts in benefits (Lessenich 2008; Gertenbach 2008). Offers by the state, however, do not need to be generous, because the main responsible for getting a job is the subject. There have always been attempts to put the unemployed under pressure to find a job. The reforms increased this pressure, e.g. by the introduction of a contract between the unemployed and labour office. The unemployed has to take nearly every job or qualification measure offered by the labour officer in order to avoid severe cuts in benefits. And also the labour officer is put under pressure to reintegrate people into the labour market or at least get them out of the status as a benefit recipient (Legnaro 2006; Lessenich 2008).

¹ Own loose translation from (Bauman 2005: 127) [Original quote will follow].

As a consequence, the meaning of inclusion has shifted:

„In the process of exclusion, the excluded themselves are the agency, the active side. Being excluded is thus represented as an outcome of social suicide, not social execution. It is the fault of the excluded that they did not do enough, to escape exclusion; perhaps they even invited their fate, making the exclusion into a foregone conclusion“ (Bauman 1998: 107).

Accordingly the unemployed are the main responsible for their inclusion. They are to blame if inclusion fails. Furthermore inclusion is regarded as necessary because the excluded are seen as a danger for society and for the market.

Cutting benefits – a practical constraint

Prime responsibility for the reintegration of people into the labour market has shifted away from the state. In addition there is agreement on the fact that the state needs to save taxes and cut welfare state expenses (Bauman 1998: 55). Reforms to cut welfare state benefits were implemented by German national and federal governments since the 1980s (Pappi et al. 1995). In the public opinion and amongst the powerful actors (except the unions and the charity) they are largely agreed as a necessity. In order to keep the state globally competitive, it is expected to shift its expenses into those areas that ensure sustainability and to make investments for the future (Bandemer and Hilbert 1998). There is a large discussion on the decay of the welfare state and benefits are cut all over Europe. Four main reasons why the welfare state is not sustainable anymore are named: overtly generousness of the welfare state in the past, a high degree of abuse of benefits by the recipients, demographic change and global competition (Butterwegge 2007: 7).

Furthermore cutting benefits is a consequence of a certain concept of the unemployed. It is not only believed that the state cannot provide too much spending: Moreover the state in the opinion of a majority should not spend in large amounts on the unemployed (Ullrich 2005). The unemployed are conceptualised as utility maximisers (Gertenbach 2008). They are assumed to be lazy and accused for not trying hard enough to find a job. As a consequence in this line of thought, social benefits should be kept low so working is more attractive than being unemployed. To cut benefits is said to motivate the unemployed to try harder to find a job or to accept any job. This hegemonial position is mainly propagated by the government, the conservative parties and the employers associations.

The necessity to have resources in order to integrate into society is not neglected. But responsibility has shifted. The state is no longer obliged to provide resources, like financial benefits, qualification or consultation for those out of work. Apart from some exceptions for groups that are not able to work, benefits are distributed on the provision that people are actively trying to find a job. Those who do not agree on that

provision will be excluded more easily than in former times. According to the mainstream discourse they exclude themselves.

A new understanding of social justice

Concepts of social justice are central to the discourse on social welfare and are often used to justify claims (Rosa and Corsten 2005). Social justice has different meanings for different actors. In this paper, I distinguish three concepts of social justice that are relevant for the discourse on social welfare: social justice can be conceptualised as *equality of outcomes*, *equality of chances* or based on *achievement*. The concept of equality of outcomes assumes that there are a limited number of goods to be distributed and that these goods need to be distributed equally. The concept based on achievement assumes that people put different efforts in achieving their goals and that the hardworking should have greater outcomes than those who work less. The concept based on equality of chances is a kind of compromise between the latter two: hardworking should pay off but everybody should have equal chances for success: inequality is welcome (Meulemann 1996: 277). In their practical consequences the concept of social justice is contrary to the concept of equality of outcomes (Liebig and Lippel 2005). All three concepts described are ideal types. In practice we always find them in combination.

In Western societies work has a high value. There is the divine commandment to work. Laziness is a sin and is only accepted for the old, the ill and for children. The right to work is a main idea of the discourse on unemployment since the beginning of the last century and has always been connected with the obligation to work (Zimmermann 2006: 235). Alternative ideas in regard to unemployment that are not primarily based on paid work are broadly disregarded.² Questions about the quality of work are of secondary importance in the mainstream discourse. In 2001, for example, the creation of the so-called mini-jobs was celebrated by the Social Democrats: low-skilled, part-time jobs with an income below a certain line are excepted from the duty to insurance and tax-reduced.

The high value of work prevents the state from the use of concepts of distribution dominated by equality of outcomes. The classical welfare state nevertheless in practice tended more towards equality of outcomes than the reformed welfare state. Since the 1980s we observe a shift towards the other two concepts (Butterwegge 2007: 8–10). The concept of equality of outcomes is challenged by the welfare state reformers (Barlösius

2 The idea of a basic income, for instance, is raised in Germany from time to time. There are actors in all political parties represented in the Bundestag who promote different ideas on basic income. The conservative parties are attracted by saving administrative expense. There are concerns in regard to work ethics raised by most of the political parties. The obligation to work is explicitly included in the Liberals model. The political parties, however, have not yet discussed seriously about a basic income in the Bundestag.

2005: 21): Benefit recipients should not be lazy and wait for the benefits to be redistributed; people should work for their success and insure themselves against all kinds of threats instead of being a burden for the hardworking (Neckel 2008: 145). Equality of chances has become more prominent in the German discourse on the welfare state and in the public opinion (Meulemann 1996: 78). Especially the German Social Democrats, who initiated the biggest welfare state reforms during their time in power, stressed the concept of equality of chances (Nachtwey 2009).

A further shift in the discourse regards the meaning of success. The principle of effort has partly lost its importance in our times: While working hard even without having success was enough in the past to count as an adequate member of society, today it is important to be successful (Neckel 2008: 4). Therefore the unemployed's argument that they try to find a job does not count too much anymore. They are guilty for not having enough success.

Inclusion is equated with inclusion into the labour market. Those who do not work are responsible for their exclusion. They should adapt to a normal life and integrate into society. Other concepts of inclusion, like those based on equality of access to material and cultural resources, have lost their importance.

Communicative strategies of the initiatives on behalf of the unemployed³

The unemployed initiatives investigated in my study try to gain attention and support. Because of their marginal position in the discourse they try to take influence by cooperation with powerful actors. In their claims they are rather reform orientated. They shape their frames to be resonant with the dominant discourse instead of being radical.⁴ The strategy to avoid radicalism is explained by various factors. Their target group is a very large and diverse group of people whose large majority does not welcome radicalism. Their main potential supporters are reform oriented established actors, like the unions and the churches and some of their resources come from the state. Their primary aim is gaining broad support (Baumgarten 2010).

Existing law is an important resource for the unemployed initiatives. A lot of struggles on behalf of the unemployed are successfully preceded via filing a suit against state agencies or employers. The initiatives support and consult unemployed people in regard to law. For them, however, just making use of the existing laws is not enough. A lot of laws are changed to the detriment of the unemployed. Thus the unemployed

3 Data for this chapter are taken from my study on websites of initiatives on behalf of the unemployed (Baumgarten 2010).

4 Regarding the framing of claims, radicalism is here defined independent from action forms. Referring to Ferree: "resonance is defined as the mutually affirming interaction of a frame with a discursive opportunity structure supportive of the terms of its argument, while radicalism is similarly defined as a mutually contradictory relationship between this structure and a frame" (Ferree 2003: 310).

initiatives at the moment mainly engage in protest against changes or claim for the cancellation of current reforms.

Unemployment initiatives take the positions of possible alliances and joint adversaries into consideration. They raise issues that concern groups beyond the unemployed. They explicitly point out common interests with other actors and name common enemies. On their website for instance an initiative claims:

“The employers do not want to abolish unemployment. They want to cut wages and social benefits. In Germany and at the European level they pressure the governments to cut unemployment assistance. [...] They aim at creating a low income sector where labour law and collective bargaining law do not apply anymore.”⁵

The unemployed initiatives put much effort into presenting the unemployed as good citizens who are willing to work. Blame is put on the state and the market. In their claims against the primacy of work they, for example, raise issues like exploitation of workers and free choice of career. This image of the unemployed is important for the initiatives in order to be meant for a respected speaker on the issue of unemployment and to attract broad support for the unemployed. To gain credibility for themselves and for their claims these initiatives refer to scientific studies and recognized experts.

The unemployed initiatives do not have the power to set up new issues. They rather react to events created by powerful actors. Established frames from debates on social rights, poverty, and exclusion are strategically included. Prominent core values like social justice, democracy and truth are referred to.

If the initiatives direct their statements to the broader public, these core values are mostly used in a very broad sense. Social justice, for example is often used as a slogan without further explication of the concepts behind the term. Directed towards possible alliances the unemployed initiatives use this term in a more narrow sense. Their understanding of social justice is based on equality of outcomes. They, however, strategically use the concept of equality of chances claiming for instance equal chances for poor children. They also transform the frame of equality of chances (Snow et al. 1986): Equality of chances is used to claim for an unconditional basic income – a claim that is usually connected to equality of outcomes:

“The unconditional basic income will contribute to a better organisation of the workspace, to more solidarity in society: Unemployed people will no longer be forced to take any job and can thus declare solidarity with the employed. The employed can relinquish their jobs for some time and thus contribute to a just distribution of jobs and show solidarity with the unemployed. Qualification, care for children and old

5 “Den Unternehmern geht es gar nicht um die Beseitigung der Erwerbslosigkeit, sondern um die Senkung der Löhne und Sozialleistungen. Bundesweit und auf europäischer Ebene machen sie Druck auf die Regierungen, die Arbeitslosenhilfe perspektivisch zu streichen. [...] Ziel ist, einen Billiglohnsektor zu schaffen, der nicht mehr dem Arbeits- und Tarifrecht unterliegt“ (KO6 7).

family members, civil, political and cultural engagement by women and men will be possible in a secured livelihood.”⁶

Their claims are related to the old concepts of the welfare state: responsibility is attributed to state actors and politicians. The state and the economy are regarded as morally obliged to take care of the unemployed. Inequality and social exclusion are negatively connoted because of their harmful consequences for the subject affected and not because of their consequences for the society. The unemployed initiatives argue that there is not enough work for all people available. They claim for alternatives that ensure integration into society apart from work-based models.

Conclusion

The discourse on unemployment has never been favourable for the unemployment initiatives. Nevertheless, they could make use of a few political opportunities by following a resonant strategy. Due to changes in the public discourse, it has become more difficult for them to justify their claims. Claims against inequality and poverty, for example, have lost their persuasiveness because responsibility has been largely shifted towards the unemployed, who have always been regarded as lazy and utility maximising by the public opinion, the political decision makers and other actors in the discourse on unemployment.

The main claims of the initiatives on behalf of the unemployed regard benefits and obligations for the unemployed. Here, to argue with the mainstream discourse mostly means arguing against the interests of the initiatives' target groups. These groups have a natural interest in high benefits and fewer obligations. The gap between the unemployed initiatives' claims and the mainstream discourse has become wider due to the shifts in the discourse. There are only a few examples where claims of the unemployed organisations resonate with the mainstream discourse. Children of unemployed people for instance are not held responsible for their parents' unemployment, thus it can be argued that they should have the same starting chances as other children. Claims that blame a reform to be more cost intensive than the status quo are most likely successful. These examples are exceptional cases. For most of the other cases the strategy of avoiding radicalism seems to loose prospects of success. The question whether a strategy of becoming more radical would be more promising to succeed remains open. One has to keep in mind that the question of radicalism is not a black-and-white mindset and that the representation of interests of unemployed

6 “Das Mindesteinkommen führt zu einer besseren Gestaltung von Arbeitsplätzen, zu einer solidarischen Gesellschaft und zu mehr Chancengerechtigkeit: Weil Erwerbslose nicht mehr dem Zwang unterliegen, jede Erwerbsarbeit annehmen zu müssen und sich somit gegenüber den Erwerbstätigen unsolidarisch zu verhalten. Weil es Erwerbstätigen ermöglicht, mit einem zeitweiligen Verzicht auf einen Arbeitsplatz die gerechte Verteilung von Erwerbsarbeit zu befördern, sich also solidarisch mit Erwerbslosen zu zeigen. Weil Bildung, familiale Erziehungs- und Sorgearbeit sowie bürgerschaftliches, politisches und kulturelles Engagement von Frauen und Männern existenzgesichert und für alle möglich ist“ (AL9 25).

people is not restricted to the initiatives on behalf of the unemployed. A shift towards more radical claims and action forms is a very probable result of the changed opportunity structures. I assume that further research will also provide evidence on a raising number of more radical, less integrated groups on behalf of the unemployed. Regarding potential support for the claims of the unemployed initiatives, the shifts in the discourse also create new political opportunities: Many people now perceive contradictions between the premises and obligations that are discussed in the public on the one hand and their own everyday experiences on the other hand (Neckel 2008: 90). There are also a higher percentage of excluded people resulting from new policies on inclusion. These perceived contradictions possibly lead to new support for claims by the unemployed initiatives. But there is a contrary development to this expectation: the lack of an actor who can be claimed responsible and called to action. Besides, many do not believe in the option to change their fate by changing social circumstances anymore (Bauman 2005: 12). In order to attract support the claims of the unemployed initiatives should focus on the contradictions mentioned above. A more confrontational position towards the mainstream discourse would be helpful: To shift the main responsibility for prevention and for unemployment from the subject to another actor is necessary to address claims and thereby also challenge the actual concepts of integration. This confrontational position will be supported by some powerful actors – like the unions – who also suffer from the shifts in the discourse.

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