THE SOCIOLOGY OF WELFARE AND SOLIDARITY

Seminar organized by the Sociology Research Section

Time: Monday November 30 2009
Venue: Meeting room 1, Conference center, Build. 1421
Participation: Open and free to everyone, but limited places. Please register with lars@ps.au.dk before Nov 23

The development of the welfare state is often told as the story about a “social contract” of solidarity between citizens, a contract that bridges the differences between classes, sexes and generations. Solidarity can even be seen as being both the founding principle of the welfare state as well as its result. Some scholars point to the specific type of ‘organic solidarity’ institutionalized in entitlements and social rights, while others look for a cultural form of social cohesion. In any event, the embedded normative claim of solidarity is immense and requires a continuous reproduction of support.

The relationship between solidarity and the welfare state is contested, however, since the international literature on retrenchment and neoliberalism often refers to the welfare state in the past tense. While the changes of the Danish welfare state have clearly been less dramatic, it is nevertheless important to discuss the status of solidarity in the face of present challenges such as financial sustainability, a stable workforce, inclusion of immigrants and active citizenship. Do these challenges signal a possible dismantling of welfare state solidarity or are we simply always in the process of rewriting social contract of solidarity?

This research seminar brings together scholars who all have contributed to our understanding of welfare and solidarity in different ways. We thus hope to contribute to the discussions of both present and future dilemmas of welfare politics and how these problems can be properly understood within the context of sociological theory.
Welfare state scholarship assumes that in order for redistributive policies to be enacted, the citizenry must have a sense of solidarity. Yet scholarship has mostly focused on the institutional configurations that lead to welfare state policies, with little attention to how and why a sense of solidarity develops when it does, or even how to measure it other than through opinion surveys of support for specific policies. In this paper, I have three goals. First, I will try to define more precisely what we mean by solidarity as a political motivation and how it overlaps with and differs from altruism. Second, I will review explanations for why solidarity in European welfare states seems to be declining (without getting into the empirical question of whether it actually is declining). And third, I will sketch an argument that solidarity, like altruism, is not a fixed predisposition, but rather a motivation that is shaped by political discourse and by policy itself.

Discussant: Assistant Prof. Lars Thorup Larsen, Aarhus University

The lecture begins with a few observations on the concept of “solidarity”. They are linked to recent hypotheses on the relation between the dominance of Lutheranism – mirrored by the Danish state church – and the paradigm underlying the classical social democratic, universal Danish welfare state. If this hypothesis corresponds with reality, K.E. Løgstrup’s idea on “the ethical demand” can be politically interpreted as an idea of “solidarity” – even in a political sense. The lecture, therefore, argues that thinking parallel to Løgstrup’s was the normative, paradigmatic basis for the developing Danish welfare state of the 1950s and 60s.
This paradigm, however, was challenged during the 1970s witnessing a crisis of legitimacy for the welfare state gradually turned into a new semantic strategy of discourse. “The new paradigm” was voiced in terms of modernization by the bourgeois parties, and it was to some extent endorsed even by the social democratic parties. The result was a gradual development towards a “new Danish model”. The “new model” will be compared with the classical welfare state paradigm. The lecture is closed by a reflection on the question whether the genuine social democratic welfare state has to be seen as a parenthesis in history only, and it is concluded by some tentative views on “solidarity” as a phenomenon in Danish society of today.

Discussant: Associate Prof. Gorm Harste (AU)

12.00
Lunch

13.00
SOLIDARITY IN THE WELFARE STATE – SEEN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRACY
Assistant Prof. Marie Østergaard Møller (AU)

Solidarity is a multifaceted mechanism creating an identity between what is collective and what is individual. This is also the case at the street-level bureaucracy where, for example, bonds between citizens seeking public assistance and the state are created when social workers make decisions about eligibility or sanctions and benefits. This presentation will discuss and display the relation between the social workers solidarity perceptions, the policy intentions embedded in the welfare program of sickness benefits and social welfare and discuss how these perceptions are used as arguments for putting assistance-seeking citizens into different benefitting and non-benefitting categories.

Discussant: Assistant Prof. Michael Bang Petersen (AU)

Coffee break
Since Marshall, citizenship has been considered an ideal of the solidarity of the welfare state. But what does it exactly mean? To what extent has it been realized in the past? What is the impact of current societal changes on citizenship (e.g. the impact of globalization and changes on the labour market, immigration etc.)? And what is the impact of welfare reforms?

Discussant: Associate Prof. Jørn Loftager (AU)