ARTICLE

THEORIES OF POWER IN *THE THREE WORLDS OF WELFARE CAPITALISM*

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Summary

Esping-Andersen's *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* has been very influential in comparative social policy because he develops a power analysis of welfare state formation. However, the analysis of political power that underpins his thesis has been widely misunderstood. In particular, the concept of *welfare regime* has lots its original conceptual meaning as a system of power stratification that upholds different types of welfare state. Instead it is widely misused merely to refer to particular types of welfare system.

Part of the responsibility for this must lie with the author himself. Esping-Andersen has failed to locate his theory of power within the existing political science and sociology of power literature. Most important has been the neglect of the debates that have raged between the proponents of labour movement theory and the proponents of corporatist theory. Esping-Andersen has implicitly reformulated both theories in such a way as to integrate them into a neo-Gramscian framework that was not present in his earlier, more narrowly Scandinavian, analysis.

Esping-Andersen thereby avoids the vexing question of whether Sweden has a classic corporatist power structure or not, and so bypasses the debates between the two rival theories of power. If comparative studies of welfare state formation are to move beyond Esping-Andersen's pathbreaking analysis, the shortcomings of his analysis of power needs to be centrally addressed, and more squarely located within the wider debates over theories of power.

Résumé

LES THÉORIES DU POUVOIR DANS 'LES TROIS MONDES DU CAPITALISM PROVIDENCE'

The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism *(Les Trois Mondes du Capitalism Providence) d'Esping-Andersen est un ouvrage qui a exercé une grande influence sur la politique sociale comparée, car il s'agit d'une analyse du pouvoir dans le contexte de la formation de l'Etat-providence. Cependant, l'analyse du pouvoir poltique qui étaie cette thèse a fréquemment été mal comprise. Le concept de 'régime de protection sociale' (welfare regime), notamment, a perdu sa signification conceptuelle initiale de système de stratification du pouvoir qui maintient différents types d'Etats-providence. Au lieu de cela, il est souvent utilisé à tort pour désigner les divers systèmes de protection sociale en tant que tel.*

Une partie de la responsabilité incombe à l'auteur lui-même. Esping-Andersen n'a pas situé sa théorie du pouvoir dans la littérature existante des sciences politiques et de la sociologie du pouvoir. Il a négligén alors que cela était très important, les débats qui faisaient rage entre les partisans de la théorie du mouvement travailliste et les partisans de la théorie corporatiste. Esping-Andersen a implicitement reformulé ces deux théories de manière à les intégrer dans un cadre néo-gramscien qui n'apparaissait pas dans ses analyses précédentes, de style plus scandinave.

Esping-Andersen évite ainsi la contrariante question de savoir si la structure de pouvoir de la Suède est corporatiste classique ou non, et contourne les débats entre les deux théories rivales du pouvoir. Pour permettre aux études comparées de la formation de l'Etat-providence de dépasser l'analyse innovatrice d'Esp-

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ing-Andersen, il faut aborder directement les défauts de cette analyse du pouvoir, et les situer plus fermement dans les débats élargis sur les théories du pouvoir.

Introduction

The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism (Esping-Andersen 1990) has become established as a major contribution to the literature on comparative welfare states. The strength of the book lies in the fact that it combines a threefold typology based on a large and complex body of empirical data and its thesis is anchored in an analysis of power. As might be expected, it has evoked considerable comment and criticism.

Criticism has tended to be of two kinds. The most far-reaching have been critiques of Esping-Andersen's male-centred definition of commodification. These critiques argue that he misinterprets and greatly understates the profound ways in which the patterning of gender inequalities underlies differences and similarities between welfare states (Taylor-Gooby 1991; Langan and Ostner 1991; Lewis 1992; O'Connor 1993; Cochrane and Clarke 1993: 10–11). This kind of critique rejects the typology as flawed in a conception as a result of misunderstanding the gendered nature of the commodification of labour and its implications for the structuring of welfare that underlies it.

Less fundamental critiques attempt to modify the framework in some way or another. Thus, for example, Leibfried (1991) adds a fourth type of welfare regime – Latin Rim – to three types that at least approximate to those of Esping-Andersen. Castles and Mitchell (1990) also posit four types of welfare systems, though based on different principles from those of Esping-Andersen. Kangas (1994) questions the stability of the typology over time.

However, neither kind of critique takes issue with the most important contribution of *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*: the attempt to develop a typology of welfare states that is based on an analysis of power. Esping-Andersen distinguishes between welfare *systems* and the welfare *regimes* that generate and uphold them. He is therefore centrally concerned to explain the power structures underlying different systems of welfare.

In spite of the radical nature of Esping-Andersen's thesis, it has not received evaluation that does justice to its theoretical and conceptual importance. Gender critiques, because they focus on differences between countries in patterns of female labour commodification, have little to say about theories of political and societal power. It is symptomatic of the general neglect of the power dimension in both gendered and ungendered analyses that critics of Esping-Andersen typically either refer to *welfare regime* when they really mean *welfare system* or they are unclear about the distinction and use the concepts interchangeably.

In this paper I will argue that the conceptual framework for *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* cannot be understood outside the context of the debates over the nature of Scandinavian social democracy during the 1980s, and in the concurrent debates over theories of power to explain this, especially corporatist theory versus labour movement theory. This has two far-reaching consequences. In the first place, the framework is overly dependent on the analysis of Scandinavia, which is elevated into one of the 'Three Worlds'. Equally important, Esping-Anderson has evaded the theoretical debates on power by segregating corporatism from labour movement theory to apply to different 'Worlds'.

At the same time, a clearer explication of Esping-Andersen's class analysis suggests the beginnings of a neo-Gramscian framework that casts his analysis in a more interesting light than either he or his critics have in general recognized. I will argue that a theoretically founded approach to power and ideology is central to the further development of comparative welfare research beyond that which has

been achieved in *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism.*

Welfare systems and welfare regimes

The tradition of comparative social policy has, since its inception in the 1960s, been closely associated with evolutionary and convergence perspectives on welfare. The main emphasis has therefore been upon quantifying public expenditure on statistical indices of welfare and ranking societies in terms of how well developed their welfare states are (Aaron 1967; Cutright 1965; Galenson 1968; Gorgon 1963; Pryor 1968; Wilensky and Lebaux 1958; Wilensky 1971). Although this tradition continues (Amenta 1993), the general tendency has been for the emphasis to shift from ranking societies in terms of 'leaders and laggards' in developing the welfare state (Wilensky 1975) to attempting to explain differences in terms of power (Castles 1982, 1985; Wilensky 1976).

The shift of emphasis away from quantifying welfare to distinguishing between different types of welfare systems underpinned by different welfare regimes is Esping-Andersen's most important contribution, and can be summarized briefly. Residual welfare systems tend to be associated with countries possessing *liberal* welfare regimes, comprehensive welfare systems with *social democratic* welfare regimes, and conservative welfare systems with *corporatist* welfare regimes.

The ideological principles underlying welfare systems reflect patterns of class power. Thus, the residual system of welfare is the product of a liberal philosophy of minimal state intervention that both reflects and sustains large class differences in terms of commodification. The conservative system of welfare is based on a corporatist power structure in which major vested interests are concerted by means of a strong central state, to generate a welfare system in which benefits are distributed in such a way as to reflect the relative power of the parties involved. The result is a segmented welfare system. Finally, the comprehensive system is the product of a power structure in which a strong labour movement has ensured that socialist principles are well entrenched in the welfare system and in which equality in the distribution of decommodified benefits is well-developed.

The concept of *welfare regime* is central to Esping-Andersen's schema. A welfare regime can be described as a system of social security stratification that is the product of a particular constellation of power in society. Esping-Andersen argues that the emergence of diverse types of welfare regime is the product of different outcomes in terms of what he terms *class mobilization.* He argues that the balance of power between different classes in society – and the political coalitions that are formed out of this – structures systems of welfare. This differential structuring of power relationships between classes in modern societies is a political and policy-making process that makes it possible to distinguish between different types of welfare regimes.

Esping-Andersen's thesis is therefore much more than a descriptive typology of welfare states. It is ultimately founded on an analysis of power relationships between social classes. I will return to this crucial point later in this article. For now I wish to restrict my comments to the significance of the concept of welfare regimes.

For Esping-Andersen, the structuring of welfare comprises one of the central class conflicts – if not *the* central class conflict – of modern society. The coalitions of interest, and the mobilization of bias that are required in order to structure particular kinds of welfare regimes, constitute the primary focus of the exercise of power by classes. The structuring of welfare according to particular principles has become the primary battleground between vested interests in a modern society.

The distinction between the principles according to which a system of welfare is organized –residual, conservative and comprehensive – and the welfare regimes that sustain

such systems – liberal, coporatist, and social democratic – has been largely lost in the critiques of Esping-Andersen. Much of the literature has unthinkingly adopted the concept of 'welfare regimes' when what is really meant is merely a system of welfare as distinct from the power structures that sustain it.

This confusion is, of course, a reflection of the fact that Esping-Andersen's contribution to locating welfare in a power analysis has been overlooked. However, it is also a reflection of the author's own lack of clarity over this point. Esping-Andersen sometimes elides the distinction between regime and system and at some points is quite unclear about it. This is particularly so concerning the conservative system that is generated by the corporatist regime.

It is worth noting that this threefold classification does not make a complete break with the traditional 'quantification' approach of earlier perspectives on welfare. Countries with comprehensive and residual welfare systems include many of the same countries as those which Wilensky described as 'leaders' and 'laggards', respectively. Indeed, the three welfare system types can be understood as comprising a continuum, with the conservative, segmented and stratified welfare system located between the residual and comprehensive types. The difference is that Esping-Andersen explains these types as the outcomes of balances of class power rather than being satisfied with describing them as having attained a higher or lower level of some commonly shared evolutionary or developmental trajectory.

The political context: Scandinavian social democracy in crisis

To understand *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* it is necessary to appreciate that Esping-Andersen came to the study of comparative systems of welfare from his earlier work on Scandinavian social democracy (Esping-Andersen 1985). As a Dane living in Sweden, Esping-Andersen was pre-occupied by the problems that social democracy had been having since the late-1970s in maintaining its political and policy pre-eminence in Scandinavian – but particularly Swedish – society.

The immediate context of this question was that in 1976 for the first time in over 40 years the Swedish Social Democratic Party had lost office to a Centre-Right coalition that repeated its 1976 success in the 1979 election. At about the same time there was the phenomenal rise of a right of centre opportunist tax-protest party under Glistrup in Denmark. In Norway a centre-right government was also engaged in attempting to roll back the welfare state.

These political upheavals rang alarm bells for Esping-Andersen. He argued that the Scandinavian welfare state had been the fruit that social democracy had reaped from having forged a highly successful strategic alliance between manual and white-collar workers during the pre-war and early post-war years. This was now in danger of breaking down as a result of what he described as 'the decomposition of social democratic parties' in Scandinavia (Esping-Andersen 1985). In particular, the disenchantment of large sections of white-collar workers was threatening the continued existence of the Scandinavian welfare state.

These issues had subsided by the time Esping-Andersen came to write *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. In Denmark the tax-protest party had faded in importance. In Norway the Labour Party under Gro Harlem Bruntland had regained its pre-eminence, and in Sweden the Social Democrats had regained office in 1982, and gone on to win the 1985 and 1988 elections. This resurgence of Scandinavian social democracy after the setbacks of the late 1970s and early 1980s would appear to have allayed Esping-Andersen's fears concerning the decomposition of social democracy and provided him with the conviction that the Scandinavian model remained secure and quite different from welfare systems in other industrialized countries.

Esping-Andersen's analysis of the problems facing Scandinavian social democracy in the

early 1980s must also be understood in the context of the debates that were then taking place between the proponents of labour movement theory – which Esping-Andersen espoused – and corporatist theory. After decades of post-fascist disrepute, corporatist theory had undergone a conceptual transformation in the early 1980s at just the time when Esping-Andersen and others were developing labour movement theory. Sweden was a key society that the proponents of both theories focused on.

Labour movement theory versus corporatist theory

Two theories of power have dominated explanations of the Swedish model: corporatist theory (Fulcher 1987; Pontusson 1991; Rothstein 1987, 1988) and labour movement theory (Castles 1978; Esping-Andersen 1985; Korpi 1978, 1983; Stephens 1979; Tilton 1990).

Bearing in mind that there is considerable variation and confusion over what corporatism is and what it measures (Wilson 1983), in its broadest terms corporatist theory sees the welfare state as a compromise between oligarchized vested interests – usually capital and labour – within a capitalist framework and concerted by the state. Strong labour movements are taken as indication of the existence of effective corporatist arrangement rather than as a result of labour dominance (Western 1991), and Sweden is seen as a prime example of corporatism (Lehmbruch 1984:66; Schmitter 1982:26; Lijphart and Crepaz 1991).

Corporatism has therefore been a strong competitor of labour movement theory in explaining the Swedish welfare state and the strengths and weaknesses of the Swedish labour movement. In addition – almost uniquely among theories of power – corporatist theory has not been limited to generalities about the distribution of power but has been used to analyse the policy-making process.

Two major dimensions of corporatist policy-making have been identified: *intermediation* involving the vertical integration of vested interests into oligarchies that are recognized by the state as their sole legitimate representatives, in return for which they implement and police decisions made corporately (Schmitter 1982); and *concertation*, involving the co-ordination of oligarchies by the state, incorporated in the process of policy-making (Lehmbruch 1984).

Labour movement theory differs from corporatism in the way in which labour radicalism is viewed. According to labour movement theory, the extent to which the welfare system is developed in industrial societies is dependent on the relative strength of the labour movement and its political ability to implement collective welfare provision through electoral control of the state. Much of the work on the Swedish welfare state centres on the analysis of this 'democratic class struggle', as Korpi (1983) – following Seymour Martin Lipset and others before him – has termed it, and around issues of how social democratic political ascendancy is maintained or how it is under threat of decline through what Esping-Andersen (1985) terms 'the decomposition' of the alliance between Swedish blue- and white-collar workers.

Thus, for example, Korpi (1978) argues that the Swedish experience shows that labour can still become 'the gravediggers of capitalism' and that solutions to the inherent contradictions of capitalism can be found 'on the terms of the sellers of labour power, that is, strong, class-based organizations that span the labour market and the political arena' (Korpi 1978:335). Similarly, Esping-Andersen (1985:313) argues that 'the fate of social democracy hinges on the interaction between class alliances and political reforms'.

Labour movement theory therefore rejects the 'end of ideology' and the co-optation of labour views that are implicit in much corporatist theory and its assumptions of inevitable capitalist hegemony. Nor does it see the state as some sort of neutral co-ordindator of labour

and capital interests. Instead, the state is seen more as an instrument for the labour movement to control, for the attainment of its ends, albeit by electoral means: as one step on the road to socialism achieved through the ballot-box.

Esping-Andersen's commitment to labour movement theory is a reflection of his belief that Scandinavian social democracy is not merely a variant of corporatism but is qualitatively different. In particular, it is much more resistant to the middle class backlash that is so potent in many other societies.

This is crucial to understanding Esping-Andersen's theory of welfare regimes. The theory cannot be understood without understanding its political and intellectual genesis in the debates during the 1980s between corporatism and labour movement theory in the context of the threat to social democratic hegemony in Scandinavia. The social democratic welfare regime as represented by Scandinavia is the direct successor to Esping-Andersen's earlier work, and constituted the starting point for his typology of welfare regimes. The elevation of the Scandinavian welfare state to one type in a three-fold typology of welfare states, with its own welfare regime created by a uniquely powerful labour movement, must therefore be understood as a reassertion of Esping-Andersen's confidence in Scandinavian social democracy and his continuing adherence to labour movement theory.

What is particularly striking about *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* is that no reference is made to either labour movement theory or corporatist theory. The failure of Esping-Andersen to locate his theory in the literature and to address thorny issues thrown up by competing theories of power is remarkable. This has been one important reason why the confusion has arisen in the minds of many commentators between a typology of welfare regimes and a typology of welfare systems, and why his proto-theory of power has not been centrally addressed. However, the issue will not go away simply because Esping-Andersen has been unwilling to address it or commentators have so far failed to identify and critique it. The questions remain to be answered.

The detachment of corporatist theory from its Scandinavian context is incomprehensible, if not perverse. There is wide agreement among corporatist theorists that Scandinavian countries have among the most clearly corporatist power structures in the world. Lijphart and Crepaz (1991), in a statistical analysis of the work of twelve leading scholars of corporatism, ranked eighteen industrialized countries in terms of the degree of agreement over which countries were defined as corporatist. The four Scandinavian countries – Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland – are ranked on this scale second, third, fifth and eighth respectively. By contrast, the three major European countries classified as corporatist by Esping-Andersen – Germany, France and Italy – are ranked seventh, twelfth and thirteenth respectively (Lijphart and Crepaz 1991, Figure 1).

The dilemma that Esping-Andersen finds himself in is that while Scandinavian countries possess corporatist power structures they also possess dominant labour movements and, according to his data, highly egalitarian welfare states. The systems of power of both conservative and comprehensive welfare systems seem, therefore, to point to one category of welfare regime (corporatist) embracing all these countries while the power structures and the data on welfare point to two types of welfare system. The separation of Scandinavian countries from Esping-Andersen's idiosyncratic category of corporatism cannot therefore be sustained without a redefinition of the typology. Esping-Andersen's solution is to change the definition of corporatism to fit the facts of the welfare system. In this way he preserves the conceptual uniqueness of Scandinavia's strong labour movement and smuggles in his own preferred labour movement theory as the explanation for a third – regionally-defined – welfare regime.

It is clearly necessary to make a choice between defining Scandinavian political systems as corporatist along with the other countries defined as corporatist or resolving the labour

movement theory versus corporatist theory debate in a convincingly satisfactory manner. I have argued elsewhere that the debate is somewhat artificial and can be resolved by defining Scandinavian countries as corporatist regimes in which labour movements are the stronger partner (Kemeney 1992b). According to this perspective, corporatism varies considerably from country to country. To define corporatism as a deadlocked power structure in which capital and labour are equal and hold each other in permanent check is crude and simplistic. In some countries and in some periods of history one corporatist partner will be stronger than the other. It is therefore useful to distinguish between corporatist regimes that are led by labour or by capital. In these terms, Scandinavian countries can be defined as examples of labour-led corporatism, which have been sustained during the crucial decades when welfare state formation was in progress.

If the detachment of corporatism from its Scandinavian context and its attachment to other – non-Scandinavian – corporatist societies is to make any sense then it must be placed into a broader framework that embraces both corporatism and labour movement theory. Esping-Andersen does not explicitly provide such a framework. However, it is possible to discern one that has at least a degree of conviction. Perhaps without being aware of it, Esping-Andersen has developed what might be best termed a neo-Gramscian framework.

Esping-Andersen's neo-Gramscian framework

Esping-Andersen rejects explanations of the differential development of welfare states in terms of the power of the working class – or as he puts it, 'a simple class-mobilization theory of welfare-state development' (Esping-Andersen 1990:32). Instead, he argues that the decisive factor is the ability of the working class to form political coalitions. This is, in turn, influenced by the pattern of working class political formation and the institutionalization of class preferences and political behaviour.

Esping-Andersen's typology of welfare regimes reflects the different strategies adopted by the working class and its differential ability to mobilize other classes behind its preferred model of welfare. Thus, during the early stages of industrialization Esping-Andersen (1990:30) argues that this commonly involves an alliance with rural interests by which agricultural subsidies are provided in exchange for support for a full-employment welfare state. Later, the strategic political coalition shifts to white-collar workers, who are brought on board by expanded state employment and universal benefits. It is the degree to which working classes have succeeded in mobilizing other classes behind these ideas that determines which welfare regime will result.

This model of class mobilization and coalition-formation bears a close resemblance to that of Gramsci (1971). Cramsci argued that the working class cannot succeed in achieving its aims without enlisting the support of other interests and so must build broad-based coalitions, or *blocs*, which it leases and concerts through exercising moral leadership, or what Gramsci termed *hegemony* (for a discussion see Kemeny 1992a, Chapter 6). A successful working class mobilizes a broad range of interests behind it.

The types of welfare systems – residual, conservative and comprehensive – represent the different degrees to which working class hegemony has been established. Thus, for Esping-Andersen, Scandinavian comprehensive welfare states are the fruits of a class mobilization based on a coalition between working class and farm worker plus white-collar interests. Scandinavia therefore represents the successful model of labour movement hegemony. The working class-led coalition succeeds in building a truly comprehensive welfare state in which decommodification is taken to an advanced level.

Conservative welfare states are the product

of a less complete mobilization in which middle class loyalties are forged by segmenting welfare into a stratified system. Here, it would seem, no genuine hegemony exists. Instead a compromise derived from a stalemate is reached, with interests representing different classes agreeing to structure a welfare state that is segmented. That is, the political representatives of the dominant classes agree to disagree and accept the existence of a stratified welfare state in which the degree of commodification varies between the segments.

Residual welfare states are the product of weak middle class mobilization behind the welfare state, in which their interests are largely met by the market but a much-reduced welfare state is tolerated for the working class. How large this residual welfare state is allowed to be will depend on how much of the middle class can be mobilized behind it. The degree to which the mobilization of other classes is incomplete or patchy is an indication of the weakness – or in some cases the absence – of working class hegemony.

Esping-Andersen is also much concerned with the phenomenon of the middle class backlash against the welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990:33). This can be understood as one of the dire consequences of the 'decomposition of social democracy' in Scandinavia that Esping-Andersen had feared in the early 1980s. This, of course, remained a possibility in the late 1980s, especially in the light of the Thatcher and Reagan regimes. Esping-Andersen argues that the narrower the base of middle class loyalty to the welfare state, the more likely a backlash is to occur in the form of tax revolts and welfare state destructuring. Residual welfare states are clearly the most vulnerable to this.

This formulation clearly echoes Gramsci's concept of the *Risorgimento*, or Bonapartism. Applied to welfare states, this takes the form of tax revolts such as the Glistrup phenomenon in Denmark and more far-reaching revanchism: Thatcherism being the most recent and extreme example. Esping-Andersen effectively restates Gramsci's analysis in modern electoral terms. What took the form of the rise of dictators such as Napoleon and Mussolini in pre-democratic states re-emerges in electoral democracies in different form.

Although this proto-theory of power can be seen as a direct descendant of Esping-Andersen's (1985) analysis of political coalition formation in Scandinavia and his concern over the possible decomposition of the alliance between blue- and white-collar workers, in *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* the analysis is extended much further. It has been developed into a theory of welfare state formation, applied to welfare states beyond those of Scandinavia and placed within an implicit neo-Gramscian framework. It may not be purely coincidental that the Scandinavian sociologist became influenced by Italy's major Marxist theorist while working at the European Institute in Florence.

Conclusions

Esping-Andersen (1990) has made a major contribution to the conceptual development of comparative social policy by placing issues of power at the centre of the comparative analysis of welfare states. At the same time his work has raised more question than it appears to answer. An important reason for this is the fact that his power anlaysis remains underdeveloped and largely implicit. Nor has he integrated his analysis into the literature on power. In particular, adopting the concept of corporatism as a central feature of his schema without even acknowledging the existence of the corporatist literature, and without reviewing the debates between labour movement and corporatism appears to be a serious negligence. The framework that he has developed is of considerable interest, in its own right. However, because it is only implicit it remains opaque and hard to criticise. It is therefore little wonder that many critics of Esping-Andersen (1990) have neglected the power dimension of his analysis.

In the wake of Esping-Andersen (1990), the first task must be to re-integrate the study of comparative social policy with the debates over theories of power. This will require a closer integration of comparative studies of social policy with issues that are central to the disciplines of political science and sociology. This will in turn lead to a welcome deepening of the conceptual and theoretical dimension of social policy.

It may then be possible to begin the process of refinement of Esping-Andersen's thesis by highlighting variations within however many worlds there may prove to be. In any event, Esping-Andersen's analysis will have broken the mould of comparative social policy. Paradoxically, it may be the shortcomings of his analysis that prove in the long run to be the most fruitful.

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