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Title: Towards the eco-social state? How the (implicit) normative approach in gender scholarship in comparative welfare state research can help us to understand transformative change

Abstract: Categorising and explaining change has been a much researched subject in comparative welfare state scholarship within the past thirty years. Change has been conceptualised as incremental or disruptive, path-dependant or paradigmatic and the welfare state has been re-conceptualised as an activating welfare state and, more recently as a social investment state. However, the world keeps on turning: At present, welfare state researchers increasingly focus on the challenges of climate mitigation policies to the present welfare state arrangements. The necessity to adjust the industrial production and social consumption, to deal with rising prices for energy and food and mitigate the consequences of global warming for the living in dense settlement areas create worries about the reliability and sustainability of welfare arrangements. Scholars increasingly ask how the living standard, financing of public provision, poverty protection or compensation for damages can be adjusted.

The acknowledgement of structural problems and the questioning of the basic goals of welfare state-intervention is similar to the aims of feminist comparative welfare state scholars. Feminist research was extremely successful in a) describing gender inequality as a structural problem of the traditional welfare state, b) explaining the origin of gender bias in social policies (in terms of power relations, cultural practise, or capitalism), c) grasping and evaluating change towards a more ‚gender-friendly‘ welfare state, and d) identifying necessary conditions for change.

In my paper, I argue that feminist research has made fundamental contributions to our comprehension of welfare state change. This helps us now, to better understand the logic and the conditions of transformative change, identifying its driving forces and barriers. My main point is that the continued externalisation of social and ecological costs of our way of production and consumption can only be reversed if we readdress the implicit normative orientation in our welfare states. We need to redefine our comprehension of ‘a good life’ in a way that is compatible with the protection and maintenance of our natural ecological environment on the one and social and gender equality on the other hand.

Silke Bothfeld is political scientist and Professor for international and comparative social policy at the City University of Applied Science in Bremen, Germany. Her publications cover a wide range of subjects of comparative and German social policy, such as labour market and equal opportunity policy and welfare state theory. In 2011 she published, together with Sigrid Betzelt, the volume “Activation and Labour Market Reforms in Europe: Challenges to Social Citizenship” (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan) where she outlined her social rights approach to labour market policy. She currently works on a book on the normative foundations of German social policies.