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„ Social policy in a French-German perspective “

Guest editors: Silke Bothfeld, Olivier Giraud and Clémence Ledoux

I. Changes in basic patterns of welfare arrangements

The French and German welfare systems have long been considered the continental "champions" of the conservative corporatist, or Bismarckian, worlds of welfare capitalism, characterized by contribution-based access to social protection, earnings-related benefits, and administrative structures involving social partners (Esping Andersen 1990 ; Palier and Martin 2008). Structural differences between the two countries were nonetheless significant from the outset. Germany built a system organized around industrial branches and a capitalism model grounded in the regulatory power of unions and business associations (Hall, Soskice, 2001). France similarly relied on social insurance, but pursued universalism as a political goal, with a stronger role for state actors (Schmidt, 2003).

From the late 1980s, France underwent far more severe deindustrialization than Germany. After the introduction of the Euro, Germany adopted an export-led growth model while France pursued demand-led growth (Hassel, Palier, 2025). These diverging trajectories shaped welfare state orientations distinctly: Germany prioritized its industrial sector and generous but unequal paid parental leave; France relied on its welfare state as a driver of consumption and maintained broader support for working mothers. Dualization of welfare entitlements emerged in the late 2000s in both countries (Emmenegger et al., 2013).

Since the "silver age" of Western welfare states, structural reforms have moved both systems away from classic Bismarckian models — introducing targeted flat-rate benefits, active labor market policies, new financing mechanisms, and greater state involvement in governance (Palier and Martin 2008). In addition to new social risks (population aging, labor market precariousness, rising female employment) (Bonoli, 2007), Germany and France now face pressures from digitization, environmental change, and the marketization of public goods. Trade union representation and co-determination have significantly weakened. These developments have transformed the "promise of social security" (Kaufmann 2003), and growing political populism accompanies rising insecurity and eroding trust in democratic institutions. To enrich our understanding of the changes underway, their differences or similarities

in Germany and France, we need to take a closer look at specific policy areas and intersectoral processes.

II. New issues, sectoral and intersectoral changes

Care policies have been transformed in both countries since the late 2000s. France developed childcare services early; Germany only introduced the right to childcare for children under 6 in 2006, extended to under-3s in 2013. In housing, Germany has recently recognized rising prices as a policy concern, while France has long supported homeownership and social housing.

Across sectors, privatization has shifted ownership in the pension, health and care sectors in both countries. Marketisation and corporatisation have applied business logics to welfare services, while financialization - through private equity and real estate investment trusts - has established new regimes of accumulation in large for-profit health and care providers. Anti-discrimination policies have developed in both countries, albeit later than in Anglo-Saxon contexts. In France, republican "color-blind" ideology delayed institutional recognition of ethnic discrimination until the 1990s; in Germany, federal protection was introduced only with the AGG in 2006.

Digital transformation has accelerated in both countries as a tool of state modernization and cost reduction. While promoted as a means to address the non-take-up of social rights, digitization benefits primarily educated groups and tends to exclude the most vulnerable. The reduction of physical services has shifted support to informal networks, reflecting the partial withdrawal of the state. Digital surveillance within social security funds has also expanded to track fraud and compliance.

III. Normative issues and reform agendas

Policy ideas have shaped reform agendas in both countries throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Béland, 2019). Concepts such as activation, social investment, and flexibility — promoted by the EU and OECD — have oriented reforms in labor market, anti-poverty, and health policies (Moreno, Palier, 2005). In France, notions of "precariousness" and "social exclusion" emerged from domestic debates before circulating internationally; more recently, non-take-up of social rights has come to the fore (Giraud, Tietze, 2025). In Germany, the idea of *Teilhabe* and activation-oriented citizenship have been prominent since the early 2000s (Lessenich, 2014). Some ideas have also circulated between the two countries, notably vocational education models from Germany to France.

The rapid succession of crises appears to have undermined the capacity of both policy systems to advance a coherent progressive reform agenda. Whether these crises might nonetheless generate new policy ideas remains an open question.

We invite authors to submit abstracts of 500 words analyzing one of the following topics — preferably from a Franco-German perspective:

- To what extent were new social problems faced by France and Germany since 2008 truly common to both?
- Do we see common trends, convergence, or divergence in their responses to similar social problems?

- How did conservative corporatist structures influence these responses?
- How have new social needs or ecological concerns been represented, and have new societal actors been integrated into democratic decision-making?
- How can institutional change at the macro level be described and explained, including new actors, coalitions, financing modes, or governance schemes, especially in the labor market, pensions, basic income support, education, and care sectors?
- How has the relationship between the economic/productive model and welfare state transformation evolved in both countries?
- How might the dynamic between crises and normative development be interpreted as a trigger for, or obstacle to, social reform?
- Are there alternative spaces — sub-national or domain-specific — where normative keywords have successfully driven social policy reform (Schmidt 2000)?
- Can policy transfers between France and Germany in social policy be identified and explained?
- How do representatives of both countries pursue social aims in supranational organizations such as the EU or ILO?

Deadlines: Abstracts due **7 May 2026** (emailed to the guest editors); acceptance notifications by **27 May 2026**; first drafts by end of August 2026. A workshop is planned for autumn 2026 in Paris, Bremen, or Duisburg. Final papers due **1 January 2027**, with publication targeted for autumn 2027.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the guest editors.

Contact:

Prof. Dr. Silke Bothfeld, Hochschule Bremen, silke.bothfeld@hs-bremen.de

CNRS Research Director Olivier Giraud, Centre national de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Laboratoire Interdisciplinaire pour la sociologie économique, olivier.lipari-giraud@cnrs.fr

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Clémence Ledoux, Nantes Université, clemence.ledoux@univ-nantes.fr

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Institut Arbeit und Qualifikation (IAQ)
Universität Duisburg-Essen
47057 Duisburg
Email: zsr@uni-due.de