

## **Poverty and the transformation of the welfare (state) arrangement. Food banks and the charity economy in Germany**

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### **1 Introduction**

If the main task of this journal issue<sup>1</sup> is to analyse the “Ambivalences of the Rising Welfare Service State” and, as the title suggests further, to understand the “Architecture of Welfare Modernity”, then my perspective is a particular one. To borrow the metaphor of architecture for a moment longer: I will not look at the main house, which is described as the welfare state. I will in fact argue that behind the complex, that is called the welfare state, quite a while back a little shed was built, not necessary pretty, in some cases even a bit dishevelled. When the main complex is described and measured, the shed is often overlooked and ignored. But I will argue, that what might have started as a little dishevelled shed, that wasn’t meant to stay there for long, has in fact grown to such an extent that it is neither tiny in quantitative terms nor unimportant in qualitative terms now. In fact: While the old structure of the main house has been redesigned, the new building has developed into something that now has acquired central functions. It has, and that is my main argument, become part of the architectural structure of the main complex itself.

Alright, enough of the architectural metaphors, before they all become too distorted!

As the title of the article already indicates: I will focus in my following remarks on poverty or, to be more precise, how poverty is addressed, through food banks and similar organisations that have led to a new system, that can be described as a charity economy (Kessler, 2015; Kessler, Lorenz, & Schoneville, 2019 - in press). My core argument is, that the charity economy itself has become an integral part of the modern welfare (state) arrangement: Food banks and similar organisations can therefore be understood as a sign for the transformation of welfare (state) arrangements and a symbol for change within the fabric of our societies.

### **2 Food banks as an international phenomenon**

Food banks and similar institutions are an international phenomenon. One of the first books with the title “Food banks and the welfare crises” by Graham Riches dates back to 1986 and focuses on Food banks within Canada (Riches, 1986). Similar accounts have been published about the United States, where food banks were first invented in New York City (Poppendieck, 1998). Within European societies, the rise of food banks started a bit later, but they have developed rapidly over the last 20 to 30 years. For the UK, Kayleigh

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper that I presented at the symposium “Ambivalences of the Rising Welfare Service State – Hopes and Hazards of fundamentally realigning the Architecture of Welfare Modernity.” at the VW-Foundation in Hanover, Germany. A similar version of the paper was also presented at the Faculty for Social Policy and Practice (SP2) at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, USA. I thank the participants of the symposium as well as the members of the faculty at SP2 for their important comments, suggestions and ideas. For the purpose of this publication I was unfortunately only able to include very few suggestions. I decided therefore to leave the article very close to the original form that I presented.

Garthwite (Garthwite, 2015) undertook a vivid description of what she calls “Life inside foodbank Britain” in a publication that was published in 2015 under the title “Hunger Pains”. Furthermore there are accounts from the Netherlands (van der Horst, Pascucci, & Bol, 2014), Belgium (Ghy, 2018) and other countries. We also have quite a few publications and studies about food banks within Germany (Selke, 2008, 2013; Lorenz, 2012; Maar & Eberlei, 2013, 2014; Kessl & Schoneville, 2010, 2013; Groenemeyer & Kessl, 2013; Schoneville, 2013a, 2013b).

In essence, we have quite similar developments in different countries all over the world. At the same time, we must be sceptical about being too quick to say that the rise of the idea of food banks and the rapid growth within different countries means the same thing for all these societies. Not only do the approaches of food banks slightly differ, but – and that is much more important – the welfare arrangements and the role of the welfare state institutions within the societies differ immensely. The rise of food banks within the liberal and market-driven welfare arrangement of the United States might mean something different to the rise of similar institutions within the Netherlands, the United Kingdom or Germany. The role that food banks play within societies depends on the different forms of welfare arrangements. I will try to take this into account, and will consequently, focus on the German case and will try to show what the rise of food banks and similar organisations mean for the German welfare arrangement.

### 3 Food banks in Germany

Within the German public food banks are known under the German term *Tafel*, the word itself is more a metaphor than a clear indicator of what it really is and could be translated as table or dining table. While images of *Tafeln* are quite present in the media and often used as an illustration of poverty in Germany, there is not an absolute clear answer how to define what a food bank in Germany actually is. As a first definition I would like suggest: Food banks in Germany are charitable organisations, mainly run by volunteers, which distribute donated groceries to people in ‘need’. In order to clarify this definition a bit more, I would like to point out a few core characteristics of food banks in Germany regarding their organisation, their users and their distributed products.

#### *Organisation:*

While there are a number of large food banks in the bigger German cities, they are mostly small and locally organised. The first food bank was established in 1993 in Berlin. Since 1995 a lot of the food banks are organised within the association of German food banks, which calls itself ‘Tafel Deutschland’. Over the last 25 years they have seen a rapid growth and in increase of their importance. As a result, food banks are now present in almost all major German cities and many smaller cities as well. They have in fact become a normality – like a local branch of a post office, or a bank, people expect them to be there. They have become a part of the infrastructure for the provision of basic goods. While we don’t have reliable data on the total number of food banks, we do have the number of food banks which are organised within the federal association: Tafel Deutschland (2018) states that there are over 940 food banks within their association with over 2.000 local distribution ‘shops’.<sup>2</sup> They also state that there are currently around 60,000 volunteers working at food banks. Interesting regarding the main interest of this article is, that around 60% of the food banks within Tafel Deutschland

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<sup>2</sup> While the number of 940 food banks is often quoted within the media, I would like to point out that there is a real lack of reliable data. Not only is the number of 940 misleading, because what matters much more in terms of visibility but also for the people who actually use them, are the 2.000 local distribution ‘shops’, but also are these numbers are based on the self-assessment of Tafel Deutschland and includes only the food banks that are organized within their federal association.

are run by one of the big welfare associations, like Caritas and Diakonie. In some cases this can mean that volunteers are able to use the facilities of a building that is owned by them, in other cases it might mean that a professional social worker is more involved within the food bank. With regards to the main question of this article this is of importance, because the welfare associations like Caritas and Diakonie are an integral part of the German welfare state arrangement and provide a large number of services that are based on obligations of the state.

#### *Users of food banks:*

Regarding the total number of food bank users Tafel Deutschland (2018) states<sup>3</sup> that up to 1.5 million people use a local food bank regularly. And some local food banks have publicly stated that the interest in their goods is not only already significantly higher than the supply, but also further increasing. Generally speaking the goods are given to people 'in need'. But what 'in need' means depends highly on the local food banks themselves. There is simply no regulation or laws that would define who gets, which form of support from a food bank. But interestingly in most cases the users have to prove in some form that they are 'in need'. Quite often food bank users are asked to provide documents that they are already recipients of certain forms of social benefits from the state (unemployment benefits for example). The food banks present themselves as a means tested benefit system. By using the official documentation, they are linking themselves up with the state regulations. Within interviews with food bank users it becomes clear that the support they get from food banks helps them to cope with the limited financial resources they have. Some report that they have been struggling financially for a while, and even though they didn't want to use a food bank, they saw themselves in a situation in which they didn't know how to cope otherwise. The usage of a food bank is a choice that stems from the "silent force of deprivation" (Schoneville, 2016). One very common topic within interviews with food bank users is the topic of stigmatization and emotions of shame (Schoneville, 2013a, 2016, 2017b; Selke, 2013; van der Horst u.a., 2014). The emotion of shame seems to be important, when we want to understand the subjective meaning of poverty. It can be understood as one of the core emotions for those living in poverty and rely on services such as food banks.

#### *Distributed Products:*

In difference to other countries, food banks in Germany distribute goods that are mostly left-over groceries from supermarkets. In terms of its quantitative scope of the groceries that are donated, Tafel Deutschland (2018) states, that every year tens of thousands of tons of food are donated. They are almost always no longer of use within the regular market. The employees within the supermarkets will have sorted them out, either because the goods are nearing the end of the expiry date, were labelled incorrectly or the product appearance is no longer meeting the market's quality standards. The supermarkets gather the food they can no longer sell and put it out for collection. In most cases the food banks themselves collect the groceries from supermarkets with their vans. Afterwards they will be sorted and in some cases cleaned. The users themselves come into a food bank and usually exchange a symbolic amount (for example: one Euro) for a basket grocery – which would be much more expensive the users would have to buy a fresh product at the supermarket. Because of this form of supply system, it can mean that the food bank gets quite a lot of packets of eggs, which are nearing the expiry date or bowls of strawberries, in which a few slightly mouldy are to be found, or a few tins

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<sup>3</sup> Again this data is problematic in terms of it's reliability. Not only that the number is not counting all the users of food banks who are not part of Tafel Deutschland, but we also don't know where these numbers exactly come from and how they are collected. While some local food banks have a software that basically keeps 'customer' accounts and have therefore very precise data, others are more likely to guess the total number of weekly users.

that don't look appealing from the outside but are good otherwise. They very rarely receive groceries that can be stored for a longer time. And furthermore, it also means that the food that is given out by the food banks does not necessarily make a whole meal. It is much more likely that the food does not fit together and will not stay fresh for longer than a couple of days. Therefore, users state, that a huge effort goes into the planning, cleaning and preparation of their food. They also frequently report very mixed views about the groceries: While there are some statements in which they are compared to unexpected Christmas presents, there are also – and sometimes even by the same person – portrayed as left-over food that nobody else wanted anymore.

#### **4 The charity economy**

Food banks are not a singular phenomenon. In fact, there are quite a few organisations, that provide a similar form of support. In order to summarise these different organisations and point out their systematic similarities we can use the term “new charity economy” (Kessl 2015, Kessl, Lorenz & Schoneville 2019 – in press). The term basically describes a distribution system of elementary goods. It tries to cover not only food banks, but also soup kitchens, charity shops for clothes and what are called “social department stores”.

All these organisations provide a form of charity and rely themselves on the donation of goods and work of volunteers. But at the same time, and we shouldn't be naïve about this, there is an economic side as well. Firstly, because they are part of the capitalistic market economy. Supermarket chains use them for marketing purposes, they save money they otherwise would have to pay for waste disposal and they can also be used in order to get tax credits. Secondly, they are an economy themselves: not only because they are run like enterprises, but they create a secondary economy of its own.

Two things I would like to mention:

- The charity economy is bigger: The research study by Melanie Oechler, Tina Schröder, Fabian Kessl, Axel Groenemeyer (Oechler & Schröder, 2015; Kessl, Oechler, & Schröder, unpublished paper), who tried to measure the extent of the charity economy, showed that the numbers that we have got about food banks are just a proportion of the phenomenon as a whole.
- The charity economy is connected to the welfare state: The study was also able to show that there are organisational links between the charity economy and what we would consider central parts of the welfare state. In my own study, this connection is reflected in the language of food bank users; in the interviews they described that the job centres “referred” them, or that social workers “advised” them to go to a local food bank.

#### **5 The architecture of the welfare (state) arrangement & the charity economy**

But what does the rise and establishment of food banks and the charity economy mean for the German welfare (state) arrangement? I would like to tackle this question by looking at two common characterisations of the welfare arrangement. In doing so, I will try to show that in both cases the existence of the charity economy is not sufficiently acknowledged and explained.

##### **5.1 The traditional conservative welfare state regime**

Traditionally the characteristic form of the German welfare (state) arrangement is described as a mix between the provision of welfare by families, by the state, by civil society actors and through the market. The principle of subsidiarity means that before the state intervenes, other

resources have to be used. But it means also, that the state assures, that a certain standard is provided. The provision of welfare is not necessarily carried out by the state itself, but the state addresses itself as the entity that assures that a certain standard is guaranteed. The main institution, that gives the traditional German welfare state its characteristic form, is the insurance system, which is accompanied by a system of basic security benefits. The insurance system effectively protects the middle classes: Firstly, they need insurances, because they don't have enough capital to be safe against standard risks of life. Secondly, they have something to insure and are able to contribute towards the insurance system in a way that means that they would get a pension (Rente) or relevant financial support in the case of unemployment. Those who don't have private resources and are not effectively protected by insurance, because they aren't able to pay into the insurance system in a substantial way, can claim a basic form of welfare benefits, in case they are faced with certain hardships.

In this way the traditional German welfare system stabilises the structure of the society, including the existing inequality, and at the same time provides a basic web of security to secure a minimum for those at the bottom of the society. This is of course the reason why Gosta Esping-Andersen's (Esping-Andersen, 1990), in his "worlds of welfare state capitalism", categorised the case of Germany as a conservative welfare arrangement.

The distinction between the social insurance system and the means tested benefit system. Has been criticized as a divide of workers policies or now even population policies on the one side and poverty policies or even poor people policies on the other hand (Leibfried & Tennstedt, 1985).

But: The fight against poverty was and *still is* part of the core of the self-description of the German welfare state. Within its self-description, the welfare state claims that it ensures not only social and cultural participation but claims furthermore, that it enables people to live their lives in dignity.

Assuming for a moment, that this characterisation is still accepted as more or less valid: I would like to argue that the rise and establishment of the charity economy must be seen as a symbol for a shift within the welfare arrangement:

- They indicate a shift of responsibility regarding interventions towards people in poverty from the state to civil society actors.
- The support is no longer provided on the basis of citizenship and individual rights, but out of a charitable act in the form of alms and comes with a personal relationship of dependency.
- The support is not given by money, but by elementary goods of a special quality. They are not market products but donations, surplus or simply leftover goods.
- The provision of groceries by food banks cannot be guaranteed, which means that food bank users in Germany face unpredictability and insecurity regarding their supply of food.
- The use of food banks means the loss of the consumer role and the integration into a secondary supply system of elementary goods.
- Food banks provide a form of emergency support that has become permanent in most cases. The support at food banks is neither capable nor has the aim of preventing or tackling poverty, their official claim is to soften the hardship within poverty. The

acceptance of the existence of and the need for food banks can therefore be seen of the acceptance that poverty does not need to be tackled.

- Food bank users find themselves in a situation where they are confronted with stigmatisation, emotions of shame and substantial attacks on their self-respect and self-esteem. Which raises the question of whether the security net is protecting dignity for all people (Schoneville, 2017a).

## **5.2 Welfare in transformation – the social investment and activation paradigms**

Within the last 15 to 20 years, the most commonly described change regarding the German welfare state has probably been the rise of the social investment and activation paradigms. The installation of the social investment strategy is understood as a change regarding the reason and the aim for welfare interventions. The focus changed towards the outcome regarding future benefits for the society as a whole. Within such a perspective certain social groups, like children, became an important target for social interventions, regarding the promises they hold. They come into perspective as investments into the future. The idea of activation entails that recipients of welfare benefits don't foremost need financial resources in order to secure a decent life while they are unemployed, but have to be activated and motivated in order to find work. Many, and much more detailed, descriptions show that the two paradigms changed the way in which the traditional German welfare state is organised (Lessenich, 2008; Kessl & Otto, 2004, 2005, 2009; Olk, 2009).

Interestingly, food banks and similar institutions don't quite fit into this picture either. They are neither a form of social investment, nor do they aim to activate their users in a direct way. In fact, almost the opposite might be the case. They could be characterised as the other side of a welfare state that focuses on potential resources to activate and to invest in. In the view of the paradigm of social investments, the users of food banks are in most cases no longer of any interest as an investment for the future. Regarding the activation paradigm it seems we have to distinguish two cases: Firstly, some of the food bank users might be recognised as people that can no longer be activated. They might still be officially registered as job seekers, but quite a lot of them have been unemployed for a long time and they have been told by the staff of job centres that they probably won't find a job before they reach their retirement age. The second case is different: Here the interventions of the welfare state institutions still focus on their activation, for example by trainings that are made mandatory or by asking the benefit recipients to prove that they are applying for jobs and last but not least, by benefit sanctions. The first case means that food banks (and the charity economy as a whole) function(s) as a form of social support for those who are neither being recognised as being worth any form of investment nor capable of being activated. The second case suggests that the food banks have become an integral part of the activation paradigm itself. While food bank users might not be recognised as an object of investments, they are still within the focus of activation. The lack of financial resources, which lead to problems within their way of life, can be seen as a structural form to pressure people into the labour market. The stigmatisation and the attacks onto the self-esteem that comes with the charity economy would therefore be a functional part of the new welfare state itself.

## **6 End: The charity economy and contradictions within the modern welfare arrangement**

Let me go back to the beginning: If the main task of this issue is to analyse "the ambivalence of the welfare service state" then my contribution to it, might be, (first) that the focus must be readjusted. The focus on the "state" would not be able to detect the transformation that today's welfare arrangement is facing. Secondly, I hope I was able to show that the

transformation is symbolised by the charity economy, which has become functional part within the welfare arrangement. The charity economy indicates a new divide between poverty policies and workers (or population) policies. Poverty policies that are granted by the state are more and more reduced, while charity organisations provide a new form of support aimed to help people in poverty. One of the core differences is, that the support of food banks and similar organisations can only alleviate the reality of poverty, but it is neither capable nor aimed to fight poverty. Thirdly, my aim was to point out that the “ambivalence” of the welfare arrangement in the German case is one of contradiction: While the self-description of the German welfare state still states, that it aims to fight poverty and provide the resources so that people can live their lives with dignity, we are faced with ambivalences and contradictions. These contradictions become visible within food banks and the charity economy as a whole.

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