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# Myth and ceremony in workfare: rights, contracts, and client satisfaction

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## Abstract

Throughout Western Europe, the ideology of workfare has been adopted for the “workless.” Social citizenship has been changed from status to contract. The change is justified in terms of “contracts of inclusion” between welfare agencies and recipients. Recipients are empowered and have “rights” to work or training and obligations to participate. Contracts of inclusion, however, necessarily exclude. The paper examines the concepts of rights, contracts, and client satisfaction in terms of the U.S. workfare experience. The evidence so far from Europe indicates similar problems in administering workfare for the most vulnerable. I conclude that the administrative failure is an *additional* reason to support a basic income guarantee. By providing an exit option, the worker–client relationship changes from vertical to horizontal.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines the myths and ceremony of rights, contracts, and client satisfaction in 1996 welfare reform in the United States and the changes that have been occurring in the welfare states in Western Europe. In the U.S., “welfare” means the program for single mothers and their families, formerly called Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and now, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). The 1996 reforms covered a number of issues, but the principal focus is on *mandatory work requirements*

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enforced by sanctions and, what is truly novel, time limits on welfare receipt. These changes are commonly referred to as “workfare.” Workfare in the U.S. means primarily taking any job, even a low-wage job, in the private sector; public employment (for either the welfare grant or a very low-wage) is rare; and there are limited opportunities for education and training.

In Western Europe, most of the changes thus far are directed at the long-term unemployed, unemployed youth, certain groups of immigrants, lone mothers, and other social assistance recipients who cannot make a stable connection to the labor market. They are often called “workless” or lumped together as the “socially excluded.” In addition to making the labor market more “flexible” so that employers would be willing to hire more workers, the welfare state for social assistance recipients is to be changed from “passive” to “active”; from disincentives to work to incentives. Programs vary in terms of what is required—from taking job offers, to job training, to education and training. But the basic point is that social assistance has now been made *conditional* on doing something related to work. It is no longer a matter of status.

The changes in Europe are called either “active labor market policies” (ALMP) or “workfare.” The former usually connotes incentives, opportunities, flexibility; the latter, requirements, sanctions, bureaucratic quotas—more like U.S. welfare reform. In this paper, I will use the term “workfare” (Lørdomel and Trickey). The reason is that I want to discuss the *risks* involved in pursuing inclusion through workfare. I do this because government officials, policymakers, and other proponents of workfare, in both the U.S. and Western Europe, emphasize the positive—those who find employment, the decline in the unemployment rolls, the numbers who are actively engaged in work and training, and, invariably, a positive cost–benefit ratio. These are important accomplishments, and I do not mean to minimize them—after all, those included in workfare may be more employable but, at the minimum, they have had a considerable spell of unemployment. But programs of inclusion based on contract necessarily exclude those who cannot negotiate conditions of participation. Programs that target the most vulnerable will, inevitably, have higher failure rates. But, the political leaders and the public want to hear about success, not failure. In emphasizing the positive, there is the tendency to ignore, or even blame those who drop out. For a similar reason, I use the term “socially excluded” even though it can be too inclusive. I want to emphasize my concern for the most vulnerable, the objects of contracts of inclusion.

The paper is organized as follows. I first describe the changes that have been occurring in the welfare states of Western Europe. While many of the economies and the welfare states are under stress, the major point is that the ideology of workfare is not based solely on necessity. It has been adopted in countries with sound economies, good employment, and no welfare crisis. I then describe the ideology of Western Europe workfare, namely, the contract of inclusion—that social assistance recipients have a *right* to a contract of inclusion and the state has an *obligation* to provide opportunities for inclusion. I discuss what rights and contracts actually mean in practice in bureaucratic relationships with dependent clients. European proponents recognize that there is a power imbalance between clients and agencies but argue that agency workers will empower clients through contracts. I discuss the problematic nature of power in bureaucratic relationships and how this bears on client attitudes. I then turn to how agencies, in fact, administer workfare—the “practice of agency survival.” I first briefly discuss the U.S. example, where there is now a rich empirical

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