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Solidarity and reciprocity in the social investment state: what can be learned from the case of Flemish school allowances and truancy?

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ABSTRACT

In this contribution, we discuss some of the new tensions that are emerging between the foundations of the welfare state. Several developments have led to the advent of the social investment state, in which people are to be activated and empowered instead of passively protected. We argue that this social policy shift has been accompanied by a normative shift towards a more stringent interpretation of social protection in which individual responsibility and *quid pro quo* have become the primordial focus. Using the Belgian (Flemish) disciplinary policy on truancy and school allowances as case in point, we demonstrate that this social policy paradigm may have detrimental consequences for societies weakest: they will not always be able to meet the newly emerged standard of reciprocity. This implies an erosion of the ideal of social protection and encourages new forms of social exclusion. As these changes in the social policy framework are not confined to the Belgian case alone, our analysis bears relevance for all European welfare states.

Keywords

Reciprocity, individual responsibility; capabilities; social policy; equal opportunities; truancy

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1. Introduction

In the golden age of the welfare state, the dominant discourse was one of redistribution and the protection of citizens against social risks such as unemployment, illness, disability, rearing children and retirement. However, over the past decades questions arose on the future of the welfare state, on the rising costs of social protection, on the principle of social insurance in a changing societal context (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Scharpf and Schmidt, 2001; Rosanvallon, 1995). Parallel with a changing discourse on social welfare, profound changes in social policy took place (Hemerijck, 2011; Bonoli, 2005). Nowadays one speaks of the “active welfare state” or the “social investment state”¹ in which people are to be activated and empowered instead of “passively” protected (Morel et al., 2009; Lister, 2003; Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Gilbert, 2002). Some of the consequences of this shift in the provision of benefits have been documented extensively (Hemerijck, 2011): minimum benefits in social security and social assistance schemes became less generous and increasingly dependent on activation programmes, the acceptance of ‘suitable jobs’ and in some cases even the obligatory acceptance of community services (Weishaupt, 2011; Van Mechelen et al., 2010). As such, the ethical justification of redistribution as fairness (e.g. Rawls, 1971; Van Parijs, 1995) has lost ground against a more stringent interpretation of social protection in which individual responsibility and *quid pro quo* have become key.

In this contribution, we discuss some of the new tensions that are emerging between the foundations of the welfare state as a result of these developments. We will argue that a shift in the focus of social policy from redistribution towards equal opportunities, accompanied by a normative shift towards more reciprocity and responsibility instead of solidarity and universality, may have detrimental consequences for societies weakest: they will not always be able to meet the newly emerged standard of reciprocity. In doing so, we will focus on the case of truancy which is related to the instrument of social investment *par excellence*: equal opportunities in education. In Belgium, the Flemish government introduced the possibility to recuperate (fully or partially) the school allowance (*schooltoelage*) from parents of persistent truants as a disciplinary measure². Some are however willing to go even further and propose legislative initiatives to link entitlement to child benefits with school attendance or allow administrative fines for parents of truants. Similar policy measures are already in place in several other European welfare states as we shall see further below. We believe that this specific case is symptomatic for the above-mentioned paradigm shift in social

¹ The term ‘social investment state’ was first coined by Anthony Giddens (Giddens A. (1998) *The Third Way. The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press.) and is often traced back to the Third Way politics of New Labour in United Kingdom. See for further reading: Lister R. (2003) Investing in the Citizen-workers of the Future: Transformations in Citizenship and the State under New Labour. *Social Policy & Administration* 37: 427-443.

² Since 1989, education is a competence of the language communities (Dutch, French and German) in Belgium.

policy in which the pendulum of responsibility could arguably swing too far.

In a sense, we extend Peter Taylor-Gooby's recent article (2011) in the *Journal of Social Policy*. In this important piece, he explores the shifted relation between opportunity and solidarity by focusing on individual-level views towards opportunity-driven policies in three countries. We however depart from the macro-level (social policy), discuss the broader evolutions leading to changes in social policy and explore its consequences using a real-life example of a relatively recent policy measure which is fully embedded in the new social policy paradigm. As we believe this policy shift is not confined to the Belgian case alone, our contribution bears relevance for all European welfare states.

First, we describe some broad evolutions that took place in the past four decades which were in our view major cause of the changing face of the welfare state. Second, we outline the consequences of these changes in the functioning of social policy, followed by a reflection on our evaluative framework. Third, we present our case study and discuss its implications for our analysis. We end this piece with some final considerations and further thoughts.

2. Towards the social investment state: a brief overview

In the 1970s, industrialised welfare states sailed into choppy waters. The moment they began to reach a considerable level of maturity coincided with a period of social and economic upheaval. Growth was slowing down, unemployment was rising and the post-war institutions of the welfare state seemed unable to cope with the consequences of several evolutions following the economic crisis, such as demographic changes and changing family relations, the tertiarisation of employment and the massive entry of women into the labour market (Bonoli, 2005; Taylor-Gooby, 2004). Designed to cope with traditional social risks such as sickness, injury, unemployment, old-age and the burden of raising children, the welfare state had to set out in search of an adequate response to a set of unfamiliar new challenges and newly emerging social risks such as possessing low skills (often resulting in a high unemployment risk), single parenthood, the problem of combining care duties with paid work, the necessity to care for frail relatives and insufficient social security coverage (Taylor-Gooby, 2011; Vandenbroucke and Vleminckx, 2011; Pintelon et al., 2011; Bonoli, 2005). These new social needs required a new balance between solidarity and reciprocity, between universality and selectivity, between autonomy and responsibility.

In the following, we focus on three developments which have – in our view – played a major part in the shift away from the traditional welfare state to the social investment state, both in social policy and its normative framework: 1) the changing structure of the labour market; 2)

emancipation and individualisation; and 3) migration and multiculturalism. Bear in mind that this is a non-exhaustive overview and inevitably we provide a birds-eye view only. Developments and changes in different welfare states took place at different pace and did not always materialise along exactly the same lines. Hence, going more into detail would render our overview utterly complex. Nevertheless, our considerations hold - to a greater or lesser extent - for all European welfare states.

2.1. *The changing structure of the labour market*

The so-called post-industrial transition has resulted in often painful shifts in the labour market, from industry to services and from low-skilled to high-skilled jobs (Iversen and Wren, 1998; Pierson, 2001). Demand for low-skilled labour has declined sharply in OECD countries, including those that have experienced strong employment growth, and consequently, the newly created jobs were primarily (and often higher-qualified) service jobs. This has been a momentous change. Since the early 1970s a process of de-industrializing has taken place and the share of industrial production in the creation of national wealth has declined since then. Conversely, the importance of services has grown throughout the post-war period. According to figures from the OECD STAN Indicators Database, employment shares of manufacturing industries in the total economy of OECD countries have declined substantially since the 1970s (from about between 25 and 30 to between 10 and 15% in the mid-2000s) while employment in services has increased rapidly (Wölfl, 2005). Obviously, this evolution has implied 'winners' and 'losers'. The winners have been the high-skilled, the physically fit, and women (insofar as they belong to the aforementioned categories). The losers have been the low-skilled and the socially vulnerable who ended up in unemployment or in unsecure, often low-waged and flexible, jobs (Ferrera et al., 2000). A substantial group of unskilled people have effectively become economically redundant, resulting in greater reliance on social benefits and thus higher dependency rates (and costs) in social security. Pierre Rosanvallon (1995) termed this *la nouvelle question sociale*, the new social question. To the extent that the low-skilled become detached from the dominant culture in society (as it finds expression in the middle classes), their economic exclusion coincides with a far-reaching exclusion in social, political and cultural spheres (Cantillon et al., 2003). At the same time, job contents have changed dramatically: the share of routinizing and 'alienating' labour stemming from the industrial era (the traditional working-class jobs) has declined and generally made way for more knowledge-intensive jobs (be they low-end service jobs or high-end creative jobs) (Goos et al., Forthcoming; Oesch and Menés, 2011). This also implies a move towards a higher skilled workforce and is likely to exacerbate the gap between the winners and the losers, who cannot or are not able to acquire the skills needed in a so-called 'knowledge economy' (which was actively pursued in

the 2000-2010 Lisbon Agenda³ and again in the EU2020 strategy⁴). This at once sheds light on the paradigm shift that has taken place in the social agenda, away from protecting people from the perils of the labour market (by means of, say, the prohibition on certain types of (night) work for women, the introduction of shorter working hours, unemployment benefits et cetera) towards the notion of 'social inclusion through work' and 'investment in human capital' which is now prevalent in European discourse on social protection (Lewis, 2009; Gilbert, 2002; Streeck, 2001).

2.2. Emancipation and individualisation

At least equally as important as the advents of economic transition are the changes that have occurred in the socio-demographic structure of the population. The post-war welfare settlement was grounded on gendered assumptions: men were primarily responsible for the household income while women were considered responsible for the children and the family, a 'silent agreement' resulting in regular and fulltime male employment and stable families (Orloff, 2006; Lewis, 2001). This model eroded, however, from the second half of the 1960s onwards with the emancipation of women resulting in a massive influx of women in the labour market (concurrently with the economic transition towards the service economy as described above) accompanied by changing patterns of family formation and an increase in divorce rates (Lewis, 2009; Crompton and Lyonette, 2006; Blossfeld, 1995; Cantillon, 1989). Described by Anne Orloff as a "farewell to maternalism" (2006), the policy logic changed from supporting women as mothers and full-time carers within the breadwinner family to encouraging employment for all, reflecting the ideal of a gender-neutral and individualized model wherein men and women are regarded as both workers and carers. Moreover, in the context of changing demographics (the ageing of the population which poses a real threat to the sustainability of the welfare state, e.g. Blome et al., (2009)), not only increasing employment but also increasing fertility became a policy focus. Making it possible for women to balance work and care duties was consequently regarded as of uttermost importance. (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002). In sum, increasing employment and the reconciliation of family and work has become key in contemporary family policy (Mätzke and Ostner, 2010), firmly underpinned by European discourse (e.g. Ghysels and Van Lancker, 2011) and promoted by international organisation such as the OECD (Mahon, 2006; OECD, 2007). The consequences for the functioning of the welfare state were far-reaching. First and foremost, the emancipation of women meant that the working population grew quite strongly, which inevitably translated into great imbalances in a labour market already in full transition. As a result,

³ It was formulated at the Lisbon Summit (2000) that the EU had to become "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustaining economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion."

⁴ The new strategy is to achieve the objectives of "smart, sustainable and inclusive growth."

the socio-economically weak (be they men or women) saw their position further deteriorate and the impact of the service economy on low-skilled individuals was further aggravated. Second, the outsourcing of care work, previously performed unpaid by women, suddenly came at a cost. Moreover, as women are still largely responsible for families' care work, despite the formal ideal of the individualized worker, this resulted in a double – and sometimes excessively burdensome – day's work for both single parents and mothers in dual income families. Third, marital instability led to the rise of one-person household and lone parent families which often goes hand in hand with an intensified poverty risk for these vulnerable households (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002). In sum, men and women alike now bear the *individual* responsibility to engage in paid employment, and family policy is reoriented to fully support this new settlement.

2.3. Migration and multiculturality

Finally, there has been the increase in and changing nature of migratory movements. Different from the case of organised labour migration in the 1960s and despite a freeze on immigration proclaimed in the early 1970s, the affluent West has since then attracted a rapidly growing flow of unsolicited economic immigrants and asylum seekers and witnessed various forms of family reunification (Hooghe et al., 2008; OECD, 2006a). These processes have unfolded quickly and concurrently with the problematic integration in education and the jobs market of the migratory flows of the 1960s. This has resulted in a high prevalence of poverty among immigrants, especially in the large urban centres and the emergence of a subclass of illegal immigrants in search of a better future (Lelkes and Zólyomi, 2011; Corluy and Verbist, 2010). Consequently, governments saw themselves compelled to attribute certain social rights to this group (Corluy et al., 2011) which in turn led to a fundamental change in the role of social security in general and social assistance safety nets in particular. Whereas minimum income guarantee was in most countries originally intended as an ultimate safety net for those slipping through the social security system, it is now increasingly serving as a 'stepping stone', so to speak, for the inclusion of immigrants in society. For many of them, this is the first entry into the social system. However, the inclusion of groups 'which do not belong' (e.g. Mau and Burkhardt 2009) in the social protection system impacts public attitudes on deservingness (van Oorschot, 2000). Indeed, previous research has shown that individual views on welfare state solidarity are negatively associated with migratory influx (Mau and Burkhardt 2009) and there is some evidence for the US that ethnic diversity is negatively correlated with social spending (Leibfritz et al., 2003). Although there is no evidence yet that European welfare states are 'going American' in this respect (Taylor-Gooby, 2005), it is nevertheless true for European welfare states that non-EU immigrants are overrepresented in the social assistance dependent population (van Oorschot, 2008) which beyond doubt feeds a

(perceived) 'no free lunch' rhetoric among both policymakers and the general public (Miller, 2008). As Will Kymlicka argues (Kymlicka and Banting, 2006), fears of this kind have helped to impose restrictions on solidarity and welfare entitlements.

3. The reconfiguration of social policy in the social investment state

It is against the above-described background that we must try to understand the change of direction that has taken place in social policy thinking over the past decades: purely protective goals have made way for concerns with social inclusion, activation and investment, for economic as well as social reasons. The scope and simultaneity of the economic, social and demographic⁵ evolutions presented the welfare states with a tough balancing act. Responding to new social needs, together with a tight budgetary framework, rapidly increasing dependency rates and a surge in take-up of social benefits compelled policymakers to search for a new settlement which was found in an 'opportunity-driven logic', to use Taylor-Gooby's phrasing (2011).

In general terms, the policy ingredients in OECD countries have included the following ingredients, although actual implementation differs greatly between welfare states: 1) *an all-encompassing focus on work*, e.g. by making work attractive by acting against unemployment traps, imposing restrictions on early retirement schemes, activating benefit recipients, providing in-work benefits, subsidizing low-productive labour, and – more general – by making the labour market more flexible (Eichhorst et al., 2008; Clegg, 2007; Serrano-Pascual, 2004; Grover and Stewart, 1999); 2) *cost containment*, e.g. by making minimum benefits in social security and social assistance schemes less generous and strengthening its link with work histories, imposing greater selectivity such as an increased dependence on activation programmes, stricter eligibility requirements such as the obligatory acceptance of 'suitable jobs' or community services, and by shifting responsibilities to other actors such as private bodies and local governments (Cantillon, 2011; Weishaupt, 2011; Van Mechelen et

⁵ We have not explicitly tackled the issue of demographic changes (declining fertility and increasing life expectancy) and the consequential ageing of European societies. Although we are fully aware of the fact that population ageing poses a greatest challenge (in financial terms) for the sustainability of welfare states in general and pension systems in particular (Auer P and Fortuny M. (2000) Ageing of the labour force in OECD countries: economic and social consequences. *Employment paper 2000/2*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.), we however believe that it is no *direct cause* of the changed policy logic. Rather it should be regarded as an underlying factor fuelling the broad developments we have identified above. For instance, the reality of declining dependency rates has without doubt contributed to the increased emphasis on employment and the idea of enhancing the employability of weaker groups in the labour market, which in turn led to a shift away from the traditional welfare settlement. The challenge of successfully integrating migrants into the labour market can be regarded in the same vein as a strategy to offset the consequences of population ageing. Another example is the case made by Esping-Andersen (2002) that the ageing of the population also demonstrates the necessity for investment in children early-on as a precondition for their later participation in the knowledge society. This view became in particular popular in the United Kingdom (e.g. Surestart programs).

al., 2010; Kazepov, 2010; Van der Veen, 2009); 3) *family policy as a productive factor*, e.g. by implementing career break schemes, the expansion of parental leave schemes and pre-school services such as child care and long-term elderly care services (Ghysels and Van Lancker, 2011; Esping-Andersen et al., 2002); and 4) *investment in human capital*, e.g. a move towards early childhood services, equal opportunities in education, encouraging life-long learning and vocational training (Esping-Andersen, 2008; OECD, 2006b). These policy changes are summarized by Neil Gilbert as “privatization, recommodification, selective targeting and conditional solidarity” (Gilbert, 2002: 44). It is quite clear that the underlying rationale of these reforms is the belief in welfare through work, exemplified by investment in human capital and the enhancement of individual opportunities (Van der Veen, 2009). Otherwise (and briefly) stated, the social investment state puts emphasis on “the ability of everybody to accumulate skills and to find one’s way on the labour market” (Gazier, 2009: 153).

These are radical changes that go to the very essence of the welfare state. In the social investment state, reciprocity and responsibility not only appear more prominent, but also in different guise to the front. In the social security configuration of the ‘old’ welfare state, reciprocity stood for the system of social insurance in which there is equivalence between contributions and benefits albeit characterized by a considerable degree of solidarity: high-income and low-risk groups pay more than is strictly required from an insurance-perspective (Barr, 2001). It was founded on a degree of well-considered self-interest as well as on an element of benevolence, the human capacity for compassion and altruism. Moreover, it also admitted a high degree of freedom: social security benefits can generally be spent freely. Although in many countries child benefits, for example, are paid to the mother (the underlying reason being that she will spend the money appropriately), the benefit is freely disposable.

In the new social policy paradigm, however, things have changed. New forms of reciprocity have emerged whereby individual responsibility and merit are focal points (Vandenbroucke, 2011) due to 1) the emergence of new social risks, which are more than the old risks a result of choice (think about divorce versus widowhood); 2) the commitment to equality of opportunities rather than equality of outcomes (think about the emphasis on schooling and training which presupposes commitment and hence responsibility from individuals); and 3) the focus on employment as a fast-track to social inclusion (which – again – presupposes a commitment to look for a job and the responsibility to accept suitable employment). Benefit recipients, newcomers and persons in need are expected to act upon the opportunities that are opened up to them by the investment state, resulting in a loss of autonomy and freedom because reciprocity is now interpreted as a condition for entitlements.

How should we evaluate the consequences of this shift? A useful framework of thought that goes right into the heart of the social

investment idea (e.g. Gazier, 2009) is the capability approach, developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (e.g. Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). The capability approach allows to evaluate the *real opportunities* one has regarding the life one may lead, incorporating both personal characteristics and the social context (Robeyns, 2000), instead of focusing on formal equality of opportunities⁶. Key to this approach are the concepts of *capabilities* and *functionings*. The latter relates to the final achievement, a practical outcome, while the former is the 'ability to achieve' a certain functioning (Sen, 1987: 36). We can illustrate this with a classical example. For an able-bodied person and an impaired person to have the same capability to be mobile, the latter will not only need a wheelchair, but also pathways adapted to the use of a wheelchair. In other words, whether impairments results in the same capability to be mobile depends on the personal, social and physical environment. Public policy has evidently an important role to play in enhancing people's capabilities. At this point, a crucial question emerges: does the government with its social policy has to go for the provision of *real opportunities* (capabilities) for people to live a valuable life, or should government also ensure that people achieve social desirable *outcomes* (functionings)?

In the social investment state, social policy measures are increasingly oriented towards the latter by incorporating behavioural incentives within the equal opportunities framework to steer individuals into the direction of appropriate behaviour (Gilbert and Van Voorhis, 2001). Proponents of the role of conditionality in benefit entitlements argue that these improve outcomes for the targeted population (often the poor and the welfare dependents, in short, the vulnerable). For instance, by requiring beneficiaries to send their children to school, conditionality is assumed to enhance human capital (Bastagli, 2008). A stringent standard of *quid pro quo* thus goes to the core of the social investment strategy. Several examples of such policies, enabling the suspension or cancellation of income support payment to parents whose child is not enrolled in school or is a persistent truant, are to be found in several European countries. The CSB MIPI dataset (Van Mechelen et al., 2011) learns that the conditionality of (some) social benefits on school enrolment is nowadays present in *inter alia* Belgium (Flanders), Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Slovakia and United Kingdom. In some of these countries, social benefits are dependent on a status of 'material need', a status which can be retracted when a families' children are playing truant. Some countries even go further: in the UK, truancy is considered a criminal offence for parents and they face penalty fines and prosecutions, and recently (September 2011), the government has proposed to cut child benefits of parents whose children regularly play truant. Similar proposals have been

⁶ This approach pays attention to what is of intrinsic value in one's life (what are people really able to do? Which opportunities do they really have?) rather than focusing on the mere instrumental value of productivity (such as the expected returns on investment from enhancing human capital) Saito M. (2003) Amartya Sen's Capability Approach to Education: A Critical Exploration. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37: 17-33.

made in Belgium⁷. Although this is only a partial overview, our case study of truancy clearly is highly relevant in the current policy context of European welfare states. There are of course numerous other examples of conditional and disciplinary policies ('behavioural management contracts') that have emerged in the normative framework of reciprocity and individual responsibility, such as jobseekers agreements, youth offender contracts, parenting contracts *et cetera* (Vincent-Jones, 2009). In this sense, European welfare states became more similar to the US (Alber, 2010), where work-conditioned and selective benefits have been common practice for a much longer time.⁸

But can conditional policies of this kind be expected to contribute to better outcomes? In the following, we will focus on our case study of Belgian (Flemish) policy on truancy and school allowances, which is fully embedded in the social investment idea and thus an ideal example to illustrate the problems and pitfalls arising from the prevailing social policy paradigm.

4. Equal opportunities amidst new tensions in social policy: Flemish truancy policy

It is well-known that education is an important determinant for individual fulfilment and opportunities in the labour market and in later life, yet education is also beneficial for society as a whole in the form of enhanced human capital (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002). In this sense, education is regarded as one of the cornerstones of the social investment state. And indeed, since the nineties, Flemish educational policy is strongly characterised by the ideal of equal opportunities. It is aspired for everyone alike (rich and poor, vulnerable and strong, more and less talented) to reap the fruits of qualitative education. To achieve this, (in principle) free elementary and secondary education is provided, and families who cannot afford the additional costs of schooling are entitled to a means-tested school allowance. However, to make this government investment 'profitable' for both the individual and society, an effort on behalf of the children and their parents is expected. The ones waiving this reciprocity, *in casu* persistently fail to attend class, are disciplined and their families may lose their school allowance (if they are entitled to it).

The Flemish school allowance is a textbook example of selective and conditional social policy: it is a form of vertical solidarity but subject to a

⁷ For instance, Bart Somers (mayor of the city of Mechelen and MP) recently (May 2011) announced the submission of a bill which would allow municipalities to issue administrative fines in the case of persistent truancy. Earlier, other MP's submitted bills to retract child benefits from truants.

⁸ Moreover, in 2007 a conditional cash-transfer program (*OpportunityNYC*) was initiated in New York under auspices of Michal Bloomberg which was explicitly styled after the systems of conditional cash transfers prevailing in Latin America, as exemplified by the well-known examples of *Bolsa Familia* in Brazil and *Oportunidades* (formerly known as Progresá) in Mexico. See Bastagli F. (2008) Conditionality in Public Policy Targeted to the Poor: Promoting Resilience? *Social Policy & Society* 8: 127-140.

means-test. If all conditions are met, the allowance (capped by a ceiling) varies with household income. The allowance is thus by definition targeted at financially vulnerable families. As being said, the provision of school allowances is not only an instrument of targeted solidarity, but also one of discipline. Parents of students who are either unauthorized absent from school for more than 30 half days in two consecutive years or not officially registered for more than 15 consecutive days, have to repay their allowance. Between its implementation in 2008 and 2010, 351 allowances were recovered (Van Steenberge, 2011).

Against the background of the aforementioned tensions between the foundations of social policy, we will discuss this disciplinary measure drawing on the concepts of *social efficiency* (consequentialist dimension) and *responsibility* (ethical dimension). We believe that it ultimately boils down to a matter of social justice.

4.1. The efficiency of a disciplinary policy measure

Evaluating the social efficiency of a disciplinary measure from a consequentialist point of view cannot but start with a straightforward question: *does it work?* Looking at the figures, this doesn't seem to be the case so far. The annual monitoring reports issued by the Flemish Ministry of Education suggest that 'problematic absenteeism' in secondary education is on the rise, both in respect to the total school population as compared to the previous years (Departement Onderwijs en Vorming, 2010). As it however may be too premature to empirically assess the genuine effect of this measure, there are three additional reasons to question its social efficiency.

A first issue concerns the *time period*. The complete package of measures issued by the Flemish government to combat truancy ('*Spijbelactieplan*') encompasses a bunch of integrative measures (in cooperation with schools, community workers and pupil support centres) to intervene rapidly in the case of problematic absenteeism. This is obviously of uttermost importance. However, the financial disincentive follows with a delay of about two years. The link between cause (truancy) and effect (repaying the school allowance) has dissolved after such long period and therefore has little effect as an instrument to raise awareness among parents: if there is a real problem of truancy, one can safely assume it will be already too late.

A second issue concerns the *financial consequences* of the measure. These households are financially deprived by definition, which means that repaying such (often substantial amounts)⁹ may well reinforce their

⁹ E.g. for a secondary school student living at home, the amount varies between €120 and €800. For complete and up-to-date amounts, see <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/studietoelagen> (in Dutch).

financially precarious situation. Disciplinary policies of this kind at least corroborate the unequal distribution of income.

A final issue is that the *principle of non-discrimination* is violated because only families receiving an allowance are subject to the disciplinary measure. One could at least assume that disciplinary rules apply to everyone: the late ethicist Koen Raes rightly described this as a moral benchmark for a public sense of justice (Raes, 2003: 3). As we will see below, there is substantial yet not complete overlap between families entitled to a school allowance and families with truant children. Not everyone is equal when it comes to truancy which can hardly be regarded as fair. Thus arises a somewhat schizophrenic situation in which only the least affluent are punished by revoking an allowance designed to help them preventing exactly what is being disciplined.

4.2. The unbearable complexity of individual responsibility

The more fundamental, ethical, issue at stake is the concept of *merit*. If one fails to attend school, isn't it simply a matter of fairness that one loses its entitlement to a school allowance? That society, echoing Cicero's *suum cuique tribuere*, only has a duty to give to whom it deserves? The crux of this argument boils down to the association of merit with responsibility: *who* is responsible for the socially aberrant behaviour, and *to what extent*?

To fully understand the significance of this issue, one has to go back to the beginning: the *coincidence* of being born in a disadvantaged or privileged family. Many of the inequalities, disadvantages and wrongdoings we observe in contemporary society find their origins in the accident (or lottery) of birth. Obviously no one can be held responsible for being born. Furthermore, several crucial elements are more or less fixed at birth: not only genetic endowments, cognitive abilities and talents but also parental educational attainment, socio-economic background of the family, the quality of the house in which one lives, the neighbourhood in which one grows up. More than a century of historical, sociological, economic and psychological research has made very clear how determining those contextual factors are in becoming an 'autonomous individual'. Children growing up in precarious neighbourhoods where social problems (unemployment, crime, poverty, .. and truancy) are cumulated, which is by the way a largely urban phenomenon, begin their adult lives with a disadvantage they are often not able to overcome.

Now let us turn to the profile of persistent truants in Flanders. Table 1 shows that students from non-native descent, students with poorly educated parents and students from families entitled to a school allowance are overrepresented (Departement Onderwijs en Vorming, 2010). Moreover, the problems are relatively concentrated in urban areas (the Brussels Capital Region and the cities of Antwerp and Ghent). Obviously, it

is not a coincidence that we recognize the same characteristics of vulnerability as outlined above in the profile of truants, and that families entitled to school allowances are overrepresented.

Table 1 Socio-economic characteristics of truants in Flanders in secondary education

	<i>% of truants</i>	<i>% of school population</i>
Non-Dutch home language	33,3	9,0
Low educational level of the mother	65,2	23,1
Homeless	2,8	0,3
Entitled to school allowance	33,2	25,8
Large cities	34,1	3,9

Source: own calculations on Departement Onderwijs en Vorming, 2010.

Given all this, to what extent is individual responsibility a useful concept to support disciplinary policy? In this case, the measure is aimed at parents in order to raise their awareness on the importance of education. The parents are thus held responsible for the behaviour of their children. Not of the *de jure* responsibility parents have for their children, we are here concerned with the *de facto* responsibility. We believe that holding parents accountable for the absenteeism of their children does not take into account the unbearable complexity of the concept of responsibility: seldom clear-cut, almost always equivocal and ambiguous.

Consider the following examples. Can we hold the single mother responsible for the regular absenteeism of one of her children when she is time-constrained combining paid employment with the care for all of her children and doing the household? And what about the short-term perspective of a sixteen year old preferring quick money in the informal circuit above the longer-term perspective of graduating, whose never have seen among its peers and kin that education effectively leads to a decent job? These examples, albeit hypothetical, illustrate how hard the task to exactly demarcate responsibility. Do we blame the parent(s), or the child? Is it a matter of insufficient social protection of vulnerable households, which makes it a collective responsibility? And what about the responsibility of the school and the school system? Research shows that truancy occurs least in schools with a strong commitment to provide support for pupils including a clear focus on their well-being (Claes et al., 2009). Vice versa, truancy frequently occurs in school where negative features (such as inadequate infrastructure, shortage of teachers and lack of funding) are cumulated. More generally, school systems reproduce existing socio-economic inequalities (Dronkers, 2010). This is especially so in the Flemish school system (van Aerden and Cantillon, 2010) which is characterised by early tracking and a segregated structure of differentiated educational careers (Ferrer et al., 2006). Lesser performing students from weaker socio-economic backgrounds are 'reoriented' downwards towards vocational tracks, while the better ones remain in the higher track, preparing for higher education (Phalet et al., 2007). Again

we are confronted with the same dilemma: is it an individual or collective responsibility, or both?

Every human being wants to ensure his children a good life, but the resources to do so (not only financial resources but also including 'knowledge', 'information' and 'time') are not equally distributed. As John Rawls discusses in his *Theory of Justice*, the outcome of *formal* equality of opportunities is "affected by all kinds of social conditions and class attitudes. Even the willingness to make an effort (..) is itself dependent upon happy family and social circumstances" (Rawls, 1971: 14). In this context, conditional policy measures grafted on the individual responsibility to seize the available opportunities are deemed to promote new or reinforce existing inequalities, thereby shifting the blame from the community to the individual. Popular discourse¹⁰ would say that people are responsible for their own (mis)fortune when occurring through own choice. Hence, if people '*choose*' not to comply with the entitlement conditions (in casu, going to school), no one but themselves are to blame (e.g. Goodin, 1988). In this sense, we do *not* state that parents or their children bear absolutely no responsibility in the case of truancy. We however firmly believe that the common sense notion of 'who is responsible for what' is too ill-informed and weak to support disciplinary measures against financially vulnerable families, certainly so in cases where real (net of formal) opportunities are not equally guaranteed.

5. Some final considerations

Truancy is a social phenomenon that deserves proper attention: it is related with undesirable social consequences such as alcohol and drug abuse, early school dropout, nuisance, delinquency; in short, damaging outcomes detrimental for future opportunities in life. In fact it is a matter of social justice: truancy is in particular a problem among vulnerable families with a precarious socio-economic profile whose children are generally enrolled in educational levels with less favourable labour market perspectives, the same families that are entitled to school allowances in the first place. We have demonstrated that the use of financial disincentives as a disciplinary measure – aimed at exactly those vulnerable groups – is neither socially efficient nor ethically justified. Furthermore, we believe that the case of school allowances has broader implications in the sense that it is symptomatic for the current discourse on reciprocity and individual responsibility as foundations of the social investment state.

It seems like our society has freed itself from social class and traditional bonds and transformed into a place where everyone has the opportunity

¹⁰ Not only in popular discourse, but also in philosophy and political theory this has been advocated – although in a much more nuanced way - by so-called 'luck egalitarianists' such as John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, Richard Arneson and G.A. Cohen (although the term is actually a misnomer, see Dworkin R. (2003) Equality, Luck, and Hierarchy. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 31: 190-198.).

to be, in William Henley's words, the master of his own fate¹¹. This is what we could call, following Ulrich Beck (1992), the *individualisation thesis*. However, this thesis does not follow from the facts. Time and again research shows that people are just as determined by their background and origin as they were half a century ago (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992), and – although to a lesser extent - that also holds for new social risks (in which individual choice presumably plays a greater role) (Pintelon et al., 2011). In other words, we observe a discrepancy between the *moral* and the *factual* notion of merit and responsibility (Raes, 2007). Crucial in this respect is what psychologists call the *fundamental attribution error*: people tend to overestimate individual explanations and underestimate contextual and situational explanations for the observed behaviour and decisions of others (Ross, 1977). In such frame of mind, adverse social behaviour such as truancy is more often ascribed to one's own responsibility and failure. The same reasoning holds for the views people have on redistribution and the welfare state (Taylor-Gooby, 2011; van Oorschot, 2000). Yet in our view, the concept of individual responsibility is not strong enough to constitute a fair basis for social policy.

Because of the enormous gravitational pull of social class, punitive measures – justified under the mantra of individual responsibility – should be approached with great circumspection. Young truants, often with a low socio-economic status, personal problems, an unhappy home, attending an inappropriate school and with few prospects in the labour market, will not be compelled to 'behave properly' by reclaiming allowances from their parent(s). Any such course of action can and will only lead to resentment and personal frustration and will, consequently, contribute to social unrest. Disciplinary policy instruments should only be deployed if they stand a good chance of achieving success, in accordance with human dignity, in the service of self-fulfilment and social justice. That is why great modesty is called for in policy outlining and implementation.

When the social policy paradigm grafts on the moral notion of individual responsibility whilst overlooking the factual one, this inevitably leads to tougher policy measures and a more stringent form of reciprocity, which the most vulnerable will not always be able to meet, despite formal equal opportunities. In such context, we strongly believe that social policy should be primarily a matter of the evenly distribution of capabilities, of equal opportunities for functioning (Nussbaum, 2001), instead of enforcing desirable functioning by means of sanctioning and conditional policies. Otherwise, the social investment state risks to encourage new forms of exclusion.

¹¹ See Henley's poem *Invictus* (1875).

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