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Welfare Regimes in the Global South

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Foreword

The question of the role and notion of a welfare state is a pressing one in times of crisis. As is currently seen in Europe, a common answer to a financial and economic crisis is austerity, entailing a reduction of public expenses and a cutback of social services. Social policies – under this conventional paradigm – have to follow economic and fiscal priorities.

There is much at stake. The development of the various European social welfare models is by no means a one-way street. What can be observed is a constant shift of the perception and conception of welfare or social policies throughout the twentieth century. For some decades a shift towards a profound neoliberal ideologisation seems to have become predominant; an ideologisation which was even partly successful within progressive political movements in Europe.

This shift – implying an interpretation of social policies as a distortion of effective (market driven) allocations by the use adverse incentives – is possibly accelerated by the current crisis, a crisis which started off as a financial one and seems to have ended up as a sovereign debt, political, economic as well as environmental crisis. Nevertheless, instead of rethinking the current economic models, the unbearable imbalances within the European Union and the fundamental causes of the crisis, we see an ‘adaptation and modernization’ of the social systems. These adaptations result in new (or old) forms of recommodification, privatisation and scaling back of the level of social security – not only in ‘Old Europe’, but especially also in the countries of the east and southeast of the European Union.

However, it is not only useful but indispensable to leave the predominant Eurocentric viewpoint and to change the perspective. On the one hand many countries of the Global South had already developed welfare systems early in the twentieth century, a fact which is often neglected when discussing processes of state formation in the southern hemisphere. On the

other hand, as several contributions in this special issue show, many parts of the Global South – sometimes federal states within certain countries like Brazil, sometimes even on a regional or transnational scale – recently seem to have developed models of welfare provision beyond existing economic and political hegemonies. These recent developments of welfare states sometimes clearly turn away from previous and current neoliberal transformation processes; however, until now they seem to have been widely ignored in the political sphere of the Global North. It has still to be examined whether certain social improvements were a result or rather a precondition of economic growth and development in the South. These new approaches towards socially and ecologically more balanced and sustainable growth models definitely deserve attention, as they create opportunities for many and not prosperity for a few.

We are very thankful for the productive and fruitful cooperation with the Mattersburger Kreis in the framework of this publication. The Karl-Renner-Institute will intensify its work on these subjects, focussing not only on the economic developments of the BRICS-states (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), the ‘shooting stars’ of the global economy, but also dealing with questions of social and ecological transformation processes in the respective countries and regions. For us as a political academy, it is of the utmost importance to discuss certain dimensions of globalisation not only within scientific circles, but also with a broader public audience. Looking outside often sharpens the perception of internal developments. In Europe – and probably especially in countries like Austria – certain social and political positions and achievements are taken for granted, even if in reality they are subject to constant struggles and very much depend on political power relations of different forces and groups in the society. Social systems and democracy are interdependent and influence each other. This is not only true for countries of the Global South, but also for Europe – and it makes it even more important to shed light on this topic and to discuss the fundamental principles of the welfare state and social systems on a global scale.

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