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**From subsidiarity to “free choice”:  
child- and elderly-care policy reforms in  
France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands.**

Though much work has recently been devoted to welfare state change, relatively little attention has been paid to changes in care policies in mainstream work, despite the strong analytical potential of care for analysing welfare state change (c.f. Daly and Lewis, 1998). Indeed, care policies are particularly interesting as they represent in most cases a relatively new responsibility for the welfare state and are in fact one of the most dynamic areas of welfare state expansion (Daly, 1997; Lewis, 1998; Pfau-Effinger, 2003). This is true for all welfare states, whether ‘liberal’, ‘conservative’, or ‘social democratic’. As such, care policies are part and parcel of the recasting of the welfare state. Furthermore, care policies are recasting the overall set of relationships between family, market and state as well as gender relations and norms.

This process of expansion and/or restructuring will be the focus of my paper, but I will restrict my analysis to one particular welfare state regime, namely the Bismarckian or ‘conservative corporatist’ welfare regime.

Using a neo-institutionalist approach, my paper compares childcare and elderly-care policy reforms in France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands since the early 1980s. My hypothesis is that despite the differences which have often been shown to distinguish these countries with respect to family policy and women’s labour-force participation (thus France and Belgium have often been differentiated from Germany and the Netherlands), care policy reforms in these four countries in fact share similar logics and trajectories. I will argue that the shared conservative and corporatist traits of Bismarckian labour markets and welfare state institutions – and their impact on labour market adjustment possibilities and preferences – have heavily shaped both the timing and the content of care policy reforms.

Indeed, an analysis of the measures implemented and of the prevailing discourse around the different reforms show that care policy reforms have been very closely linked to specific employment strategies, and the politics of welfare without work and subsequent attempts to shift away from such a labour-shedding strategy go a long way in explaining both the nature and the timing of child- and elderly-care policy reforms in Bismarckian welfare states. Care policies have been used during the 1980s and early 1990s to reinforce the traditional male-breadwinner model that characterizes Bismarckian welfare states but, in the late-1990s, when low employment rates became widely regarded as the key problem for the sustainability of these welfare states, care policies have been used to

raise female employment levels.

This change therefore marks a real transformation in the role assigned to women who are now expected not only to care but also to work - a 'farewell to maternalism' which Ann Orloff has shown to characterize other countries also. However, the development of care policies in these countries has not sought to recast gender roles, and care policies continue to target women essentially. The paper also shows how a focus on promoting 'free choice' in all four countries has justified the introduction of measures that have simultaneously reinforced social stratification in terms of access to the labour market – meaning that some women have much more 'free choice' than others -, and weakened certain labour-market rigidities.

To conclude, we will argue that care policy reforms have provided a backdoor for the introduction of labour-cheapening measures and for increasing employment flexibility in otherwise very rigid labour markets, while maintaining distinctive conservative corporatist traits with respect to gender roles and to social stratification.