

Welfare systems are increasingly returning to 19th century ideas in a bid to encourage individuals to participate in the labour market.

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[Christina May](#) places current debates on welfare reform within their historical context.

Looking back to approaches from the 19th century, she concludes that we are now witnessing a return to the ideas of the past, where the key aim of a welfare system was to make individuals fit to participate in the labour market, rather than to aid the victims of imperfect social structures.



When British Prime Minister David Cameron presented his [ideas on welfare reform](#) in June 2012, he had a particular conception of welfare in mind: benefits are paid in exchange for work and prior wage contributions. Consequently work (and being fit for work) is the basis for the well-being of the individual. This seems only the latest act in a wider debate around state intervention: “welfare to workfare” and its political implications have been discussed in Europe since the 1990s. Usually this process is subsumed under the heading [americanization](#), since the US-American welfare state is believed to be traditionally more centred on work and individual social provisions than the European welfare states. Indeed, the US was the first to promise to “[end welfare as we know it](#)” in 1996, since then all welfare benefits are strictly dependent on the willingness to work. Britain’s New Deal of 1997 and Germany’s Hartz Reforms of 2001 resembled these efforts. However, the predecessors of this debate go back much further and were part of European discussions during the 19th century. Interventions such as “workfare” and job-training can be termed *educational* interventions into social life ([as opposed to legal, economical or environmental interventions](#)). The idea that individuals need training in skills and character in order to participate willingly in the labour market was highly influential in the 19th century, lost a little of its dominance during the expansion of the welfare state but has regained momentum since the 1990s.

The debates in the 19th century centred on interventions against poverty. They were influenced by two perspectives. According to the first, poverty was a part of a god-given order, an irrevocably given state that served a purpose: alms-giving and charity work was part of divine service and philanthropic organizations were flourishing. They provided benefits in cash or kind – early forms of economical interventions, albeit provided on an unreliable basis. In the other perspective, being poor was simply an individual failure, a trait of a bad character that was usually caused by immorality, insobriety and idleness. Early forms of political intervention were directed at these. Work houses in England, especially after the implementation of the New Poor Law in 1834, and Prussia or veritable work colonies in the Netherlands tried to educate the “undeserving” poor. The aim of educational intervention was *commodification*, i.e. making the individual fit for participation in the labour market, or at least to separate them from society to prevent them from doing any harm. Less violent, although similarly intrusive forms, were the educational programmes of philanthropists visiting poor quarters, or special programmes for schools to educate the children of the lower classes. In these early educational practices the aim of educating individuals for a wage centred society seems inseparable from means of social control.

The traditional perspectives on poverty were challenged by social changes brought on by industrialisation. Migration to the ever growing cities cut traditional forms of help in times of personal crisis, the medical and hygienic conditions in the working quarters were abysmal, as horrified visiting philanthropists reported from their visits. Toward the end of the 19th century social reformers, influenced by the newly evolving social sciences, began to view poverty as a problem caused by the economic order and the conditions of the labour market. Instead of an individual problem, they believed poverty to be caused by societal *structures*, especially those structural problems connected to wage labour. Reformers’ societies believed that if enough knowledge about poverty and its causes was accumulated it would be possible to eradicate it – in the same way that

advances in medical knowledge had the potential to eradicate diseases.

In the process of accumulating knowledge the rather amorphous concept of “poverty” was divided into several sub-problems that were easier to research and handle. Unemployment, illness and old age as well as living and working conditions were specific and circumscribable areas that could be targeted individually. In this process, logics of social insurance were distinguished from logics of welfare and social work. Although the actual implementation of social and welfare policies differed widely amongst different nations, their general aim was *decommodification*: they were supposed to make individuals independent from the labour market in case they encountered risks such as illness or old age. Furthermore, they all had a *legal* basis: in contrast to earlier forms of interventions social policies got implemented as a social right, the state therefore became juristically entangled into the lives of its citizens.

The introduction of social policies changed social conditions and led to new welfare aims. The Post World War II welfare states have seen the expansion of state intervention in economic and environmental terms, with social programmes both including more people (also from the middle strata of society) and paying more generous benefits. This expansion lasted until the 1980s; since then a retrenchment of statutory benefits and an expansion of private provision is discussed. In national debates, pictures of misuses of public transfers, or of workshy beneficiaries of welfare are dominant. Consequently the perspective on poverty as a form of individual failure is regaining influence. The “welfare to workfare” reforms aim at *recommodifying* the individual. Educational measures such as job-training programmes but also the penalty of cutting benefits for work-shy individuals gain importance. These perspectives seem to be dominant from a policy perspective. But the debates are led alongside those of social scientists pointing to “[New Social Risks](#)” and unions that stress the effects of these risks on those being dependent on wage labour. Of course, these new risks are quite different from those of the 19th century. However, a renewed interest in the structural causes might again change ideas about dominant forms of intervention.

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