

# Book Review: The Origins of Active Social Policy: Labour Market and Childcare Policies in a Comparative Perspective

by Blog Admin

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Since the mid 1990s, governments throughout Europe have invested massively in two areas: active labour market policy and childcare. The result, a more active welfare state, seems a rather solid achievement, likely to survive the turbulent post-crisis years. This book contains case studies of policy trajectories in seven European countries and advanced statistical analysis of spending figures. **Giuliano Bonoli** provides a rich and well-referenced narrative, which readers can use to scaffold their understanding of Western European social policies, writes **Donna Peach**.

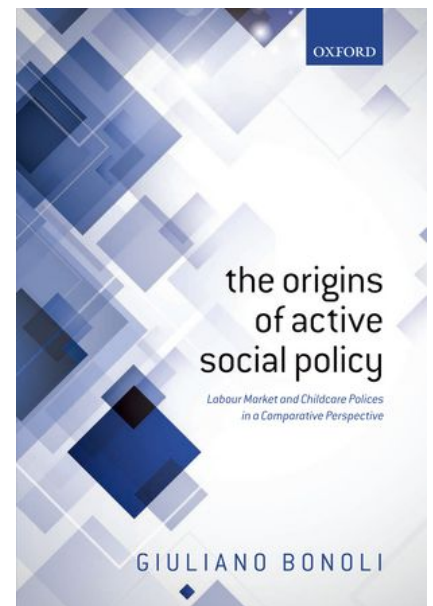
**The Origins of Active Social Policy: Labour Market and Childcare Policies in a Comparative Perspective. Giuliano Bonoli. Oxford University Press. March 2013.**

## Find this book:

The interrelationship of social policy and the economic structure of family life is a vital area of research at both macro and micro levels. How such research is undertaken is influenced by the lens adopted by different social science paradigms, which influence what knowledge is constructed and who is likely to read it. *The Origins of Active Social Policy: Labour Market and Childcare Policies in a Comparative Perspective*, authored by Professor [Giuliano Bonoli](#), is primarily for scholars and students of political science, although other social researchers have much to gain from dialogically engaging with this book.

Bonoli provides detailed case studies of the development of employment and childcare policies for several Western European countries. These are accessible and thoughtfully structured, providing rich content useful to a wide audience. The author is also refreshingly transparent about the methodological challenges presented when researching complex and changeable phenomena over time and space. However, as a postmodern social psychologist and feminist I found some of the structural perceptions embedded in the content of this book challenging to accept. Thus, I would encourage other critical social researchers to engage with this narrative in order to encourage discourse about the construction and positioning of women in the micro and macro aspects of social economic policy.

The logical structure of the book is helpful, as Bonoli seeks to define, map and explain what 'active social policy' is, before presenting his evidence and findings. His introductory chapter narrows the scope of his focus on Western European Countries, and distinguishes between Nordic, 'English speaking', and South Western European countries (p. 3). Bonoli asserts there has been a major transformation in the promotion of active social welfare in European countries subscribing to [Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development](#) (OECD). He investigates this transformative change by exploring the relationship between 'Active Labour Market policies' (ALMPs) and governmental childcare strategies. In 'Defining Active Social Policy' Bonoli premises his transformative argument by asserting that active social policies were not necessary before the 1950s as there was at that time 'full employment' (p.17). He identifies post-industrial risks to active social policies as: reconciling work and family life; single parenthood; having a frail relative; possessing low or obsolete skills, and insufficient social security coverage.



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The distinction between traditional male employment and the risks presented by the introduction of women to the labour market is a theme throughout his third chapter the 'Emergence of Active Social Policy'. Bonoli refers to the power relations within the social construction of motherhood and asserts, "given the strongly unbalanced distribution of care-work within households in OECD countries, the issue of reconciling work and family life is considerably more pressing for mothers than it is for fathers" (p.54). In his brief consideration of women's political influence upon the development of childcare policies (p.54), Bonoli cites several studies including [Swers, 2001](#) and [Lovenduski & Norris, 2003](#); which suggest female parliamentarians are more concerned with gender equality policies than elected men. Interestingly, Bonoli then proceeds to challenge his own hypothesis of an association between women's political influence and the level of childcare provision. He considers the hypothesis problematic because "it implies a link between women's presence in key democratic institutions and the effective representation of women's issues." Furthermore, Bonoli asserts it remains for some a 'puzzle' as to why elected female politicians would support women's issues when women did not elect them (p.54).

Throughout this study, Bonoli is challenged by moveable definitions and measures. Thus, he adopts a mixed-methods design to confine relevant variables with which to offer temporal and spatial case studies supported by quantitative empirical evidence. He uses two chapters to first present his qualitative comparative perspectives of active labour market policies and then childcare policies. Bonoli successfully condenses a myriad of social events and political decisions within seven Western European countries, furnishing the reader with multiple yet navigable chronologies. There is some commonality in the sub-headed structure within and between these chapters, which enable the reader to cross-reference information. For example, Bonoli gives consideration to the impact of the British historical antecedents such as the [1834 Poor Law](#) and the [1942 Beveridge Report](#) on the welfare state to explain its active labour market policies. When exploring British childcare policies, Bonoli briefly alludes to the 'ideology of motherhood' (p. 143) situating women as 'carers' rather than as 'carers and workers'. He proceeds to report on the Conservative government's childcare voucher scheme under John Major's leadership, which in 1997 received some [derision](#). Bonoli then discusses the family policies of Tony Blair's [New Labour](#) and the introduction of '[Working Families Tax Credit](#).' In my opinion, there would have been more value if the labour market and childcare policies had been interwoven, thus permitting a qualitative analysis of their interrelationship.

Bonoli complements his case studies with statistical analysis, the results of which are reported in 'Quantitative evidence: The determinants of public spending on active labour market policy and childcare'. His independent variables are: partisan effects, [economic openness](#), [crowding out effect](#) and per capita GDP (p. 155). Bonoli adopts [pooled time series](#) (p. 156) to conduct a cross sectional analysis of nations and time using public expenditure as a dependent variable. He recognises inherent difficulties with this measure, as it is unable to illuminate the specific factors, which underpin any fluctuation (p. 159). It could be argued that although this research design is widely accepted that it raises empirical challenges to the internal reliability and validity of its findings:

- There is a relationship between the presence of a policy problem and the development of a new policy.
- Relatively strong evidence of 'crowding out effects' within both policies.
- Positive effect of trade openness.

This book has many strengths and Bonoli's ability to provide concise chronologies for seven European countries is commendable. He furnishes the reader with a rich and well-referenced narrative, which they can use to scaffold their understanding of Western European social policies. A further strength is Bonoli's openness regarding the limitations of the complex task he is undertaking. He recognises that his definitions, hypotheses and variables are complex and at times transient; this presents challenges for both Bonoli and his readership. I consider these factors made the task of tracing an empirical line of evidence directly related to governmental policies, difficult. I found the construction and positioning of womanhood a challenge throughout the book. This criticism is not directed at Bonoli per se, but I would suggest reflects the inherent paternalism, which underpins Western European social policies.

In conclusion, I would recommend a wide and varied audience read this book. The issues of social policy as they pertain to our economic and family life are crucial to our personal and professional opportunities. Bonoli provides a framework, which invites dialogue with social political content and methodologies, and I would particularly encourage further discussion between political scientists and critical social researchers’.

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