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Marius B. Busemeyer: *Skills and Inequality: Partisan Politics and the Political Economy of Education Reforms in Western Welfare States*

Cambridge 2015: Cambridge University Press, 326 pp.

This book aims to tackle a very complex and multi-level issue. It asks how Western welfare regimes in the larger OECD world have ended up with different education and training regimes and what are the ef-

fects of educational institutions, which are a reflection of policy choices of the past. It brings together the insights from welfare-state research and political science to understand the role of education in welfare-state regimes. As posited by the author, the role of education in welfare regimes has been strongly underestimated in the literature to date. Linking politics, welfare state regimes, inequality and attitudes towards education access as well as funding, especially with the focus on vocational education and training (VET), is a very welcome and insightful endeavour.

This book makes a significant contribution to the literature and is highly relevant today when investments in education, increasing drop-out rates, and increasing inequalities in access to higher education have been so problematic across the world. Further, the choices made for financing higher education and the overwhelming rationalisation of higher education under neoliberalism have tended to spur one-sided stories about the reasons for and consequences of reforms to improve access to higher education and optimal funding models of higher education. Busemeyer's contribution provides an opportunity to look deeper into welfare systems to understand their complex interlinkages of political, social, and economic spheres and it provides a useful comparison between welfare-state types and different educational and social-policy sectors. This book also allows us to better understand the path-dependencies of the different education systems and the linkages to political preferences and feedback mechanisms in terms of popular attitudes and preferences towards public education funding and the stratification of education systems.

Theoretically, the author builds on insights from historical institutionalism, partisan politics, and welfare-state regimes. He argues that the variation in the role of VET relative to higher education and the division of labour between public and pri-

vate sources in education funding are the crucial dimensions in variations between education systems. Moreover, he thoroughly examines how the balance of power between social democrats, Christian democrats, and conservatives explains the choices of the institutional design of education and training systems in the post-WWII period. The main hypothesis of the first part of the book is that different types of politico-economic coalition were responsible for shaping education and training policies during the critical junctures of the post-war decades. In Liberal Market Economies (LMEs) such as the United Kingdom, cross-class coordination is expected to be absent. Government parties may aim to expand VET instead of higher education, but they will do it for different reasons. Conservatives will promote institutional stratification in order to lower the political pressure to open up access to higher education, while left-wing parties want to promote VET because it serves the educational needs of their core electoral constituency and helps unions to consolidate their membership base. In the absence of cross-class cooperation, VET will not become a viable and credible alternative to higher education as it will lack institutional and political support. The partisan conflict is hypothesised to centre on the question of access to and financing of higher education in LMEs. Conservative parties are expected to be proponents of an expansion of private financing in order to slow down the expansion of access, and left-wing parties to promote public financing. On the other hand, in Coordinated Market Economies (CMEs), it is expected that different education regimes will be associated with different political cross-class coalitions, depending on the long-term balance of power between partisan forces.

The empirical analysis of the book draws on a thorough literature and document analysis and on existing datasets.

A significant amount of archival material was used in Chapter 2 to understand the politics behind education and training reforms in the UK, Germany, and Sweden, which showed the development paths of education and training systems. The evidence points to the critical junctures in the three education systems which provided windows of opportunity for certain policy preferences and dominant development paths to be established in education systems, especially with regard to VET sector. The existence of cross-class alliances is hypothesized to contribute to the sustainability of VET as a credible educational alternative. It converts VET into a viable and credible alternative to academic higher education, because the institutional and political support for VET ensures that vocational degrees will have a high labour-market value in terms of employment security and wages (pp. 54–55). The historical analysis lays the ground for further analysis of OECD and UNESCO data across a number of OECD countries in Chapters 3 and 4. After establishing the evidence based on longitudinal data the hypotheses are confirmed regarding the important role of VET in mitigating inequality in income.

Further, the author compares attitudes towards educational policies with attitudes towards other social policies like health, unemployment benefits, and pensions using somewhat limited data from selected Western European countries that are based on the 2006 ISSP Role of Government IV survey and the Eurobarometer from 2004. This analysis provides a clear picture of education as a distinct policy domain and points to its importance in the overall set up of welfare-state political economies according to public preferences. The author reveals an insightful multi-level story, whereby macro-level institutions mediate the micro-level effects of income and educational background. In the case of stratified education systems, high-income and

well-educated people are more likely to support spending increases on education as they will be likely beneficiaries of these benefits (p. 252).

This book contributes to the current thinking on the causes and consequences of stratification of education systems and the path dependencies engrained in welfare-state regimes and the results they have on inequalities found in Western societies. The highlighted role of the VET on the stratification of education systems and overall income distribution is especially interesting and has strong policy relevance.

This book addresses two very important aspects that have been discussed in higher education studies literature for decades: access to higher education and the financing of higher education. It discusses these issues in the context of political struggles and preferences and the stratification of education systems. The author could have done more justice to the literature on these two very important aspects in higher education studies which have explored a number of factors influencing the reforms to widen participation and access to higher education and to 'privatise' higher education across a wide range of governance regimes. This could have helped to supplement the evidence base beyond OECD and UNESCO data. I also wish I could have seen more evidence of the links between primary and secondary education, as this is where the differentiation of paths of students towards access to professional or higher education opportunities strongly lies and where parents make important choices based on their preferences. I would also have liked the author to address the issue of migration—both low and high skilled—and how that has influenced popular attitudes and the stratification of VET and higher education. One could hypothesise that economies that depend more on an immigrant labour force may have different attitudes to the institutional design of the

paths towards education compared to those that do not depend much on immigrant labour.

Another aspect that could have contributed to the study would have been the longitudinal data collected by the author regarding public preferences for different types of VET and different types of higher education. The data used from the survey of public attitudes at one point in time uses questions which do not fully fit the present study—as noted by the author himself. Also, higher education systems that do not have strong VET have quite stratified higher education sectors (e.g. the UK or the US). Accounting for this possibility would provide further nuances in understanding the public preference differences regarding the funding of and access to education. I also wonder what the results would look like regarding the stratification and the role of VET in welfare regimes if one paid more attention to the size and types of industry found in different Western welfare states. Lastly, I would have enjoyed seeing less emphasis on methodological descriptions and more graphic presentations of the hypotheses and main findings, which would have made it easier to follow the red thread of the book.

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Armin Schäfer and Wolfgang Streeck
(eds.): *Politics in the Age of Austerity*
Cambridge 2013: Polity Press, 320 pp.

'Democracy depends on choice. Citizens must be able to influence the course of government through elections' (p. 1). Political sociologists Schäfer and Streeck open this edited volume with this statement, on which the bulk of the book's argument rests and develops. The book covers a wide variety of topics: the evolution of Euro-