Historical perspectives on integrated public action

Noel Whiteside (University of Warwick)

In recent years, labour market activation policies have created dilemmas for official agencies seeking to raise overall employment rates – as policy has shifted towards requiring the inclusion of more marginal and seemingly disadvantaged groups hitherto assumed to be outside the labour market (older workers, the disabled or women with small children). This corrosion of traditional labour market borders undermines established classifications of social dependency (and the conventional formulae shaping the remit of official help). Central dictation of targets for specified groups on the one hand – and the subcontracting of placement activities to competing private agencies on the other – undermine the possibility of locally co-ordinated public action, with official agencies caught in the cross-fire between central state and local market.

At the same time, the use of ‘soft law’ (as opposed to firm directives) offers an opportunity for localities to develop their own initiatives in the face of such challenges. In examining conditions at the end of the nineteenth century, we find several towns and cities faced very similar problems of labour market disorganisation. The period was also characterised by a revolution in communications, fast technological development and mass migration towards growing urban centres of both commercial and industrial character. What remits of public action faced these cities – and what role did public authority play in co-ordinating collective action, and with what results? This paper identifies not only how different ideological premises concerning the role of public authorities, but also points up the degree to which such interventions facilitated collective co-operation (or provoked opposition). Adopting a capability perspective and using examples drawn from Leipzig, Birmingham, Strasbourg and Liverpool, the paper analyses how, historically, varied typologies of public action fostered varied remits of personal and professional responsibility – with equally varied outcomes in terms of economic performance and social sustainability. The paper argues the general advantages of greater local autonomy as facilitator of integrated public action – while also demonstrating the problems of unequal resources that invariably plague such solutions in practical terms over the long run.

Contact: n.whiteside@warwick.ac.uk