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Radical Alternative Conceptualizations of the Classical Welfare State? Contrasting the United Kingdom and the Netherlands with Norway

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Introduction

Welfare states are rapidly changing, responding to or anticipating major challenges that include demographic change (ageing), rapid economic and technological changes, economic crises (the banking crisis of 2008 and the ensuing Great Recession) and humanitarian and political crises (migration, the refugee crisis, Brexit). Some of these challenges, such as ageing, concern longer-term developments and have already led to far-reaching changes in, for instance and self-evidently, pension systems. Most benefits and service components of the welfare state have been subjected to retrenchment examination, whereas the welfare state’s architecture (i.e., how the various policy components are assembled) has escaped such scrutiny. However, the financial crisis of 2008 and the economic downturn that followed in its wake have put issues of broader welfare state restructuring squarely on the political agenda. Although recent signs of economic recovery may be lifting some of the political pressure off the frenetic reform agenda, it is probably no exaggeration to say that the necessity of a major architectural overhaul of the welfare state has become prominent on the political agenda in many advanced democracies in the last decade or so.

Not all welfare states are under the same kind and level of pressure. Therefore, whether a major architectural overhaul of the welfare state is on the political agenda at all and how such reform is talked about, debated and politically imagined and anticipated varies considerably between countries. This variation runs from often still somewhat fuzzy notions of ‘modernization’ and ‘social innovation’ to elaborate attempts at radically rethinking and
redefining the very presence and role of the state in society and the market as a producer and provider of welfare.

Two attempts to radically reconceptualize the classical the welfare state stand out, namely the ‘Big Society’ project launched in 2010 by the Conservatives in Britain, a liberal welfare state, and the ‘Participation Society’ project adopted in 2013 by the government in the Netherlands, a continental welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Various critics in both countries have argued that these concepts were nothing more than deceptive labels put on what effectively were simply harsh austerity policies. Unquestionably, drastic spending and service cuts were a big part of the radical political projects in Britain and the Netherlands. However, to mask retrenchment and to avoid the potential political costs of austerity, governments already have a wide menu of obfuscation techniques at their disposal (Pierson, 1994; Lindbom, 2007; Vis and Van Kersbergen, 2007; Hood, 2011; Jensen and Lee, 2019; Wenzelburger et al., 2019). Adopting a radical alternative conceptualization of the classical welfare state as authoritative government discourse goes a step further and is not simply an elaborate exercise in blame avoidance, but, more importantly, must be seen as an ideational strategy to alter the normative framework that demarcates the parameters of the public debate on the value of welfare. As we show, the intention is to challenge the terms of the classical welfare state discourse and thus widen the discursive space for radical policy change, also for the longer term. The wider implication is that even when the radical alternative conceptualizations themselves disappear again from public debate (as they, in fact, did in both countries), their discursive significance is likely to last.
We analyze public papers, party-political statements, and government documents to reconstruct how the radical projects in Britain and the Netherlands envision replacing the classical welfare state and challenge the terms of political discourse. We believe that focusing on these documents best serves our goal to uncover the rationale and intent of a radical alternative conceptualization of the classical welfare state. Our approach allows us to present such a radical reconceptualization as authoritative (government) discourse. The limitation of this set-up is that we cannot (and do not claim to do so) describe, let alone lay bare, how the ‘Big Society’ and the ‘Participation Society’ were discussed and received in society more widely or were (critically) portrayed in the media.

We contrast the British and Dutch projects with the Norwegian experience. The analysis of public papers, party-political statements, and government documents in this country reveals that such a comparable ‘big idea’ of a radical overhaul of the universal social democratic welfare state is conspicuously absent. The Norwegian case demonstrates that in the absence of a radical alternative conceptualization, the classical welfare state continues to enjoy broad support. The Norwegian welfare state, as Haave (2019: 204) put it, in fact functions as ‘a national identity marker’, while its history is told as ‘an epic narrative’. Even though in Norway the role of the state vis-à-vis civil society is a topic in public debate as well, the normative framework that underpins the universal welfare state is not essentially contested.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we briefly present some theoretical considerations on welfare state reform and discuss a number of major policy shifts. The welfare state reform literature (see Hemerijck, 2013; Van Kersbergen and Vis, 2014) has extensively
documented welfare state reform, but has paid relatively little attention to the fact that in most countries new, broad and normative ‘conceptions of society’ have gained prominence that represent fundamentally different discursive alternatives to the classical welfare state. However, taking our cue from Petersen and Béland (2014: 305; see Béland and Cox, 2011; Béland and Waddan, 2012; Edling, 2019), we think that social policy language and discourse are an ‘integral part of the political processes that make and remake social programmes’ and hold that this holds a fortiori for ‘big’ alternative conceptions of society that are proposed as substitutes for the classical welfare state. In the light of this insight, we then present the British, Dutch and Norwegian welfare state reform projects. We reconstruct the ideational strategies and probe to what extent they are meant to redefine or confirm the parameters of the public debate on the value of welfare. In particular, we focus on the question how and to what extent these projects aim at altering the balance between state and society broadly speaking and hence challenge the traditional welfare state. We summarize our findings in the conclusion.

**Welfare State Reform: Three Key Shifts**

We could summarize the experience with welfare state reform in the 1990s and early 2000s with the following expression: ‘welfare reform is difficult, but it happens’ (Hemerijck et al., 2013: 77). In this period, institutional resilience and political resistance characterized political processes around welfare state reform. Path dependence and incremental change were key terms for understanding the paradox of, on the one hand, well-recognized and mounting pressures on the welfare state and, on the other hand, the fact that most social programs seemed almost impervious to fundamental changes (Van Kersbergen, 2000).
More recently, however, more fundamental, not to say radical, reform has been put high on the political and policy agenda and has in some cases already led to some profound reconsiderations of the very foundations of the welfare state (see Hemerijck, 2013; Van Kersbergen and Vis, 2014). We observe three major shifts.

The first concerns a fundamental redirection of what Wilensky (1975) once dubbed ‘welfare effort’. If social expenditure measures ‘the total commitment of society to the public provision of income support and social services’ (Huber and Stephens, 2001: 40), much more of current welfare effort, while still offering income protection, is aimed at the maximization of labor market participation or made conditional on it. Examples of this are: the move from passive social transfer policies (benefits) to (positive and negative) activation and workfare (Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Bonoli, 2013); policies that facilitate the labor market entry and continued participation of women (e.g. childcare), older workers (abolishment of early retirement schemes, increasing the pension age) and other groups (the young, immigrants, poorly educated, etc.); and more generally, the attempts to recalibrate social policy for social investment purposes (Hemerijck, 2017).

Second and related, welfare state institutions and core programs have been restructured and recalibrated so as to be able to cope with demographic, economic and fiscal challenges. There has been an extended period in which pension systems were adapted, the labor market was deregulated, social services were administratively reorganized, decentralized and even (partly) privatized. To a degree also driven by retrenchment goals of those governments faced with severe public budget deficits and as a result of creeping disentitlement, this has made social
provisions in a number of countries much less generous, if not to say much more lean, than they used to be a few decades ago (see Jahn, 2017; Morel et al., 2018). In other countries, existing systems were purposely reshaped not just for austerity reasons, but also to remedy evident dysfunctions, hence ‘turning vice into virtue’ as Levy (1999) once famously formulated this.

The third fundamental shift has not occurred so much in social policy spending or in the institutions and policies of the welfare state, but rather in the basic ideational and normative foundation that defines and underpins what the welfare state is or should be. The welfare state literature has thoroughly described and analyzed the first two shifts in welfare state development and reform politics (Huber and Stephens, 2015), but the basic ideational and normative transformations taking place in the third shift have so far attracted comparatively less attention (but see e.g. Mehta, 2013). Still, there is a growing body of scholarly literature that emphasizes the importance of the ideational and normative underpinning of (social) policies (Béland and Cox, 2011; Béland and Waddan, 2012; Petersen and Béland, 2014; Edling, 2019; for a good overview, see Béland, 2016) and with this article we contribute to a better understanding of the emerging political dynamics the discursive and architectural transformation of the welfare state.

Contrasting Cases

In some countries, discursive political projects were launched that embodied a whole new conception of society: the ‘Big Society’ in the United Kingdom and the ‘Participation Society’ in the Netherlands. What is striking about these conceptions is that they offered profoundly
different alternatives to the classical welfare state, respectively the liberal welfare state of the
United Kingdom and the (hybrid) continental welfare state of the Netherlands. In both cases,
the new discourse went well beyond the relatively well-known and well-documented transition
from passive to active social policies or from welfare to workfare (Bonoli 2013; Rueda 2015;
Knotz 2018). At the heart of these big reform projects, we find a discursive strategy that aims to
radically alter the balance between state and society in social service delivery broadly speaking.
Specifically, the alternative conceptions of society typically propose a much more pronounced
role of for-profit, non-profit and other civil society organizations as well as citizens, particularly
concerning voluntary work in the production and deliverance of social policies and services.
Such sweeping new conceptions are encompassing and – even though they may be short-lived
– they challenge the normative foundation of the existing welfare state architectures in the
United Kingdom and the Netherlands and open-up the discursive room for further far-reaching
social-policy reform.

In Norway, a universal welfare state, in contrast, such a comprehensive alternate vision of
society and of the role of the state is conspicuously lacking. Yet, as we show below, the social
policy discourse increasingly pays attention to citizens, volunteers, and various civil society
associations as potential actors (partners, means) that are vital for the production and
deliverance of social welfare services. The general conception, however, is that public services
are favored over private ones, as long as there is sufficient capacity to provide them, given
existing demand. At the same time, however, public documents emphasize non-profit welfare
providers as important contributors. An important theme that emerged concerns the issue on
which terms non-profit welfare providers should operate, and whether they should work under
the same terms as commercial or private enterprises involved in the production and provision of services. Still, the contrast between the conventional welfare state conception in Norway and the radical alternatives found in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands is vast.

*The Big Society*

The welfare state of the United Kingdom can be characterized as a liberal welfare state regime (Esping-Andersen 1990; for an overview, see Van Kersbergen and Manow, 2017). Such a regime tends to have rather low and flat rate benefits that are tax-financed, means-tested and/or targeted at narrowly circumscribed people, mainly the so-called deserving poor. For other than the poor (except where it concerns the universal health care system), the market is to provide social protection and services (e.g. child care, pension plans, etc.). In a few keywords: the liberal regime is characterized by targeting the deserving poor, needs-based rights and market dominance.

It is interesting to note that – even though the British liberal regime is already a lean and, as some say, mean welfare state – the role and size of the state as a producer and provider of welfare have always been contested, both on the right and, at least since Tony Blair’s New Labour and the Third Way, on the left. It is in this context that the introduction of a radical alternative for the welfare state by the Conservatives has to be understood.

In the *Conservative Manifesto 2010* (‘Invitation to join the government of Britain’), the ‘Big Society’ was introduced¹ as follows:

we offer a new approach: a change not just from one set of politicians to another; from one set of policies to another. It is a change from one political philosophy to another.
From the idea that the role of the state is to direct society and micro-manage public services, to the idea that the role of the state is to strengthen society and make public services serve the people who use them. In a simple phrase, the change we offer is from big government to Big Society (vii).

The Conservatives proposed ‘social responsibility, not state control; the Big Society, not big government’ (35). This implied that power needed to be redistributed ‘from the state to society; from the centre to local communities, giving people the opportunity to take more control over their lives’ (37). Paradoxically, the ‘Big Society’ required a strong and active state (see Sullivan, 2012 and Alcock, 2012) that ‘must take action to agitate for, catalyse and galvanise social renewal’ (37). But it also required a different type of citizens: the empowered citizen-volunteers embedded in their communities. ‘We will use the state to help stimulate social action, helping social enterprises to deliver public services and training new community organisers to help achieve our ambition of every adult citizen being a member of an active neighbourhood group’ (37).

The ‘Big Society’ project became the program of the coalition government of the conservatives and the liberal democrats (2010–2015). At the same time this government also launched an unprecedented austerity and welfare retrenchment program. According to Prime Minister David Cameron, his government had inherited a mess from the Labour governments that had ruled Britain between 1997 and 2010. Britain had become a ‘broken society’ with a welfare state that smothered civic activities and volunteering and destroyed the citizens’ responsible independence (see Szreter and Ishkanian, 2012). Cameron therefore argued that to build a responsible society, the ‘Big Society’, the welfare state had to be radically reconstructed. This
incited the obvious accusation that the ‘Big Society’ was nothing more than a false front for the neoliberal austerity project that the Conservatives were really pursuing. In fact, according to various polls, a majority of the Brits was of the opinion that the ‘Big Society’ was ‘just an excuse’ to save money by cutting public services, ‘largely a gimmick’ or ‘mostly hot air’ (as reported in Defty, 2014: 19).

David Cameron addressed this criticism on several occasions. In his first speech as Prime Minister to the Conservative Party conference, he said: ‘the big society is not about creating cover for cuts. I was going on about it years before the cuts. It’s not about government abdicating its role, it is about government changing its role’.²

In his ‘Big Society’ speech of 23 May 2011³ David Cameron explained that he wanted to build a bigger and stronger society. To do so, two things had to happen. First, in addition to cutting public spending, public services had to be modernized, so as to help the ‘Big Society’ become the 21st century’s way of public service delivery:

Get rid of centralised bureaucracy that wastes time and money. Break open state monopolies and open them up to new providers (...). Wherever possible put power – and money – in people’s hands to choose what’s best for them. Pay providers by the results they achieve (...). Make sure there is transparency so people can see what they’re getting in exchange for the taxes they pay. This is real people power, and there has never been a better time to do it.

The second necessary condition was the creation of a ‘culture of responsibility’ that the big welfare state had undermined. Hence, a radical overhaul of the welfare state was necessary to create space for this ‘culture of responsibility’. The big welfare state gives all the wrong
incentives, taxing and punishing people who work hard and are responsible, and rewarding those who do the wrong thing. And he referred to a ‘welfare system that has paid people who had no intention of getting a job to stay at home’, defending his radical reforms that will turn the tables:

For that single mother who wants to work – we are making sure work pays. And for that person intent on ripping off the system, we are saying – we will not let you live off the hard work of others. Tough sanctions. Tougher limits. In short we’re building a system that matches effort with reward instead of a system that rewards those who make no effort. That is not cutting welfare for the sake of it. That is a vital step in building a more responsible society in Britain.

He then spelled out what the ‘culture of responsibility’ looked like. It implied committed family life and policy to support it. It meant active citizens in communities, stimulating charity, activating people to do good for society. It also entailed that the government would ‘give more of a social norm’ for instance with respect to volunteering.

Cameron ended his ‘Big Society’ speech with some philosophical reflections. ‘The idea that the centre right is simply about the philosophy of individualism – of personal and commercial freedom – is a travesty of our tradition (...). Tradition, community, family, faith, the space between the market and the state – this is the ground where our philosophy is planted’. This marked a major shift in emphasis in conservative thinking away from the – until then still – dominant Thatcherite hyper-individualism. ‘There is no such thing as society’, Margaret Thatcher said (The Sunday Times, 31 October 1987), ‘There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It’s our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after
our neighbour’. This shift in the political theory of conservatism is most clearly expounded in

The new conservatism stresses independent institutions, and horizontal ties, the
conversation of many equal voices over the command of one voice, the wisdom of
crowds over the fallibility of central control. Its emphasis is not on what the state can do
for you or you for the state but on what we can do for each other.

Elsewhere (Glasman and Norman, 2012: 10), Norman clarified: ‘the Big Society is about
empowering free and independent institutions that lie between the individual and the state,
and it is about empowering individuals on the basis of a rich conception of human nature’.

In sum, the ‘Big Society’ project’s goal can aptly be characterized as the attempt ‘to mobilise
citizens to take responsibility for activities that would formerly have been seen as the preserve
of the state’ (Lister, 2015: 352).

The ‘Participation Society’

The Dutch welfare state is often classified as a continental or conservative welfare state. In such
a state social rights depend on performance on the labor market. Social protection programs
are almost exclusively based on contribution rather than taxes and those who are not in
employment derive their rights from the family member who does have a paid job. The
generosity (replacement and duration) of benefits depends on former income and the
contribution history. The conservative welfare state is transfer-heavy and service-lean. In a few
keywords: the continental regime is focused on maintaining income for labor market insiders,
social rights are performance based and there is a strong family orientation.
Sometimes the Dutch welfare state is also labelled as a hybrid welfare state, because it has also assumed features of other models, such as the universal model, exemplified in the so-called ‘people’s insurances’, especially the basic people’s pension to which all citizens are entitled on the basis of residence. The Dutch term for welfare state is ‘verzorgingsstaat’. ‘Verzorgen’ means ‘to take care of’, but also ‘to care’, and implies ‘to nurture’, ‘to tend to’ and ‘to nurse’.). The distinct connotation of the Dutch term is paternalistic and reminiscent of charity in its emphasis on social obligations rather than rights, which has been strongly influenced by Christian Democratic politics (Van Kersbergen and Woldendorp, 2014). The emergence of the ‘Participation Society’ as a radical alternative to this ‘verzorgingsstaat’ has to be understood in this context.

In the Netherlands, the government traditionally presents its yearly program and budget on the third Tuesday in September. The program is read by the King. In 2013, the new King Willem Alexander read his first ‘speech from the Throne’ (troonrede) that introduced the political-ideological term ‘Participation Society’. The King said:

It is an undeniable reality that in today’s network and information society people are both more assertive and more independent than in the past. This, combined with the need to reduce the budget deficit, means that the classical welfare state is slowly but surely evolving into a participation society. Everyone who is able will be asked to take responsibility for their own lives and immediate surroundings.

When people shape their own futures, they add value not only to their own lives but to society as a whole. In this way, the Dutch people can continue building a strong nation of confident citizens. A nation with a small but strong government which gives people the space they need.
The government, in the words of the King, pointed out that that the classical welfare state was unsustainable and did not meet people’s expectations anymore. ‘In today's world, people want to be able to make their own choices, manage their own lives and take care of one another. It is in keeping with this development that care and social services be organised close to people and in a coherent manner. To achieve this, the government will decentralise public services (...)’ (id).

Leading politicians in the Netherlands, most prominently the liberal Prime Minister Rutte, claimed that the term ‘Participation Society’ should be understood as describing a factual development that the state should facilitate rather than a political goal to set and to achieve. And indeed, this is what the King’s speech underlines. But as the quotes also indicate, this is clearly only half the story. First, the need to reduce the budget deficit is invoked to legitimize the ‘Participation Society’ also as a political project that demands more individual responsibility and decentralization. Second, the ‘Participation Society’ was politically and ideologically charged during the public and political debate that boomed immediately after the King’s speech.

The launching of the term ‘Participation Society’ sparked a lively public and political debate on the proper role of local government, citizens and care and welfare institutions in this type of new society that is taking over the place of the classical welfare state. The term ‘participation’ in this context does not refer to labor market participation, but is being used in Dutch social science, public and policy discourse in diverse and sometimes confusing ways, ranging from indicating self-governance, where the state can assist (e.g. subsidize) bottom-up initiatives from
citizens in social care, to *citizen participation*, where the state takes the top-down initiative to invite citizens to participate in care (Jager-Vreugdenhil, 2011).

Research on the use of the term ‘Participation Society’ in the media shows that the core of this society is that citizens take responsibility for their own lives and actively contribute to society, primarily through informal care, volunteering and citizens’ initiatives in neighborhoods and communities (Van Kersbergen and Vis, 2016: 94 ff.). The state facilitates and supports such bottom-up initiatives by giving citizens the freedom and trust they need and activating them, while upholding a social safety net for those who cannot cope on their own.

However, the analysis of media use also indicates that the notion of the ‘Participation Society’ is strongly associated with less state and more retrenchment and the top-down approach to active citizenship. The overarching discursive notion associated with the use of the term ‘Participation Society’ is therefore citizen participation rather than self-governance.

More than a year after the notion was introduced the government further explained the ‘Participation Society’ in a letter to Parliament. The core of the ‘Participation Society’ is that people themselves are involved and become ‘co-owners’ of public provisions. The care and support from the government should follow private initiatives rather than the other way around. Care and support from the government are individually customized, depending on a person’s circumstances and the opportunities they and the people in their environment have to provide solutions for themselves.

The government stated that the role of the classical welfare state must be redefined as one that facilitates bottom-up initiatives in civil society. However, the fact that policy is geared toward
decentralizing central state tasks and a more prominent role of local government indicates that the top-down approach is the main driver. The government introduced a so-called social innovation agenda according to which the state and the local governments should constantly be in contact with service providers, client organizations, professional associations, insurance companies and other social partners to find the best solutions.

There is special attention for volunteering in the government letter, in which volunteering, private initiative and informal caregiving are referred to as fulfilling a key function in the ‘Participation Society’. The state is to facilitate these, primarily by removing laws and regulations that are said to be obstacles that limit freedom to act privately.

The various political parties in the Netherlands have all adopted the notion of a ‘Participation Society’ and stress the self-responsibility of citizens and praise the active participation of volunteers and informal caregivers. However, they have diverging visions of the further development of the ‘Participation Society’ and what will remain of the classical welfare state. Crucially, the main government party, the liberal VVD, values freedom and private initiative and seeks a state that is as small as possible as a goal in itself. To guarantee a social safety net, citizens must be activated in health care as a means to control costs.

Clearly, as in the UK-case, the Dutch ‘Participation Society’ also aims at redefining the existing connections between individuals, the state and civil society broadly speaking and in this sense provides an alternative for the traditional welfare state. The overarching aim is to decentralize policies and services and increase citizen participation, although the notion of self-governance that has to be facilitated also pops up as an aim.
Like in the British case of the ‘Big Society’, the Dutch ‘Participation Society’ can also be aptly summarized as the attempt ‘to mobilise citizens to take responsibility for activities that would formerly have been seen as the preserve of the state’ (Lister, 2015: 352).

*Lucky Norway*

The Norwegian welfare state is an exemplar of the universal welfare state regime, often also designated as the social democratic welfare regime. Its features are that it is a predominantly tax-financed system that offers generous social protection and services as social rights to its citizens, granted without means-testing. They are a citizen’s right and benefits and services tend to be generous. The social democratic regime provides many welfare services in care, health, and education, and the welfare state itself becomes a major employer, most notably of women. In a few keywords: the universal welfare state provides all with income protection and social services, rights are citizenship-based and the system is strongly state-centered.

This state-centered orientation, both in terms of the dominant producer and supplier of welfare services and as a mass employer, is one of the most remarkable features of the Nordic model more generally and stands in sharp contrast to the market-dominance of the liberal model and the strong family orientation of the continental regime. In addition, it is the positive moral meaning that the welfare state has acquired that is truly remarkable in the Nordic countries. The state is an institution that carries out a moral vision: ‘to help people maximize their human potential in a belief that this is good for both individuals and the society as a whole’ (Kangas and Kvist, 2019: 126). As Rothstein (1998) famously explained, the universal welfare state is organized so as to meet some intuitive universal moral human principles: general
fairness/substantive justice, meaning that the state should treat all citizens with equal concern and respect; procedural justice, implying that the state implements its policies in a fair manner, making no judgments as to recipients’ worthiness; and just distribution of burdens, entailing that citizens contribute to the common good on the condition that no-one abuses solidarity.

Within the group of Nordic countries, Norway takes up a special place, because in this country the level of external and internal pressure on the welfare state has so far been low and the ability – thanks to the oil-financed budgetary fortune of the country – to spend one’s way out of the recession that followed the financial crisis was substantial. Hence, the recent reference to Norway as ‘lucky Norway’ (Sørvoll, 2015). ‘The main story,’ writes Sørvoll (2015: 11), ‘is continued support for a generous welfare state amongst politicians and voters, limited external pressure for welfare state retrenchment, and elite consensus about social policy reforms’. Be that as it may, there are nevertheless a number of challenges that inform the public debate and public (social) policy debate in Norway. ‘Over the past few decades,’ writes Rommetvedt (2013),

Norway has become increasingly diverse and pluralistic. This is partly due to migration, but also to the general societal changes of late modernity with increased individualism and pluralisation of interests, social groups, identities, and life-styles. The resulting dissolution of overarching schemes of identity (such as class or nation) and weakened egalitarianism has put pressure on the welfare state and its principle of universalism.

One key observation to make on Norway is that the discourse on welfare state change is not captured by any ‘big idea’ of a radical overhaul of the welfare state. In fact, the Norwegian debate on welfare state reform and the role of other actors than the state can be best put in
the light if the overwhelmingly positive normative view of the welfare state (see Haave 2019). Even though there has been a long-standing recognition that there is always a need for both private and public care (e.g. Bondevik’s New Year’s speech 2003), the key role of the welfare state has never been subjected to any fundamental attack. It is this positive state view that makes it almost unimaginable that any ‘big idea’ emerges that can function as a radical alternative to the moral highpoint of universalism. Still, also in Norway there is a movement in welfare state and social policy discourse that entails a principled reconsideration of the role of citizens, volunteers, civil society associations and for-profit organizations vis-à-vis the welfare state.

The National Labour and Welfare Administration Reform (NAV) (2006–2010) was a huge restructuring of welfare services (employment, national insurance administration, social services) into one new organization, which redefined administrative relations with local governments in terms of partnership. However, the overall goal of this reform was not to fundamentally alter as such the place and role of the welfare state in Norwegian society, although it did aim at an increase of labor market participation and a reduction of the number of welfare claimants (Aakvik et al., 2014; Breidahl et al., 2016).

The Nordic tradition of the universal welfare state, with its prominent role of the state in the production and provision of welfare, is largely continuing. In Norway, the political project of reform still explicitly appeals to the communitarian organic society–state tradition (Rothstein, 1998: 35) and to well-known and well-embedded concepts (e.g. ‘medborgerskap’). The role of civil society organizations and voluntary work is stressed too, but is quite distinctly seen as an
addition to what the state does, not as an alternative to the state, as in the British and Dutch cases.

Municipalities in Norway have become more aware of the need for cost containment and have started to invoke appeals to civic engagement, voluntary work and self-reliance as means to contain costs, while upholding high quality services such as in elderly care (Vabø, 2011: 92). However, the universal welfare state depends on middle class support (see Jensen and Van Kersbergen, 2018) and insufficient or low quality social services tend to offend middle class citizens. Remarkably enough, discontent among elderly middle class citizens produced an elderly revolt (eldreopprøret) in 1990 that proved successful to the extent that the budget for elderly care was significantly increased and the issue has been on the political agenda ever since. This elderly revolt ‘came to symbolise a social consensus that public care provision was and should be a matter of public concern’ (Vabø, 2011: 93).

Still, successive governments (starting with the second Bondevik-government, 2001–2005) have pursued policies that facilitate voluntary work and civil society organizations that provide welfare services. In October 2004, Prime Minister Bondevik stated in an article in the newspaper Verdens gang that ‘to retain and develop the welfare state, we must adapt to a new reality. The generated level of wealth increases the population’s expectations as to the amount and quality of public services’. To meet these challenges, Bondevik underlined that politicians are capable of many things, but they cannot adopt the type of commitment, enthusiasm and passion that voluntary workers have. So, he saw the role of the state as a facilitator, e.g. through extra tax exemptions for those who support volunteering financially and through the
instalment of a ‘Frivillighetsminister’ (Minister of Volunteering) to help ‘those who want to build a good community’. 

The Stoltenberg I (2005–2009) government underlined the same approach. The government’s political program, for instance, stated that ‘the welfare state and the market alone cannot solve today’s social challenges. The government will therefore meet the new social challenges, through good public welfare services as well as by supporting and facilitating voluntary engagement and the development of a vibrant civil society’. This included a new, comprehensive policy on volunteering. In 2007, the government published a white paper on voluntary welfare, the government’s expectations of the non-profit organizations, and how they can contribute to the provision of welfare services. This paper was widely criticized for its seeming attempt to instrumentalize voluntary organizations as solely a means to realize public welfare and health care aims. To some extent, that is indeed what one can read in the white paper. For instance, the government stated:

Precisely against the background of the voluntary organizations’ potential, it is positive that voluntary organizations implement projects and activities that can be a supplement to the government’s integration and social inclusion policies. Voluntary organizations represent many different interests and fields of expertise, and it may therefore be of great importance that voluntary organizations use their special expertise, their contacts with various groups in society and their members’ resources in various areas.

The second Stoltenberg government (2009–2013) in 2012 reached a partnership agreement with non-profit organizations on the delivery of health and social services. The non-profit organizations welcomed that agreement as one that ensured that the civil society associations’ idealistic character would count as an added value in public biddings for buying health and
welfare care services. The organizations also saw the agreement as recognition of value of proximity to the users of their specific services, increasing the visibility of their social competences and qualities as providers of welfare. The organizations took the agreement as reaffirming that civil society organizations are independent and autonomous institutions that work to relieve health and social needs in society.

The Solberg government (2013–2017) has continued to some extent the approach adopted by former governments, included volunteering in the government’s main priorities and described voluntary organizations as important partners in the delivery of welfare. However, the center-right signature of this government does surface in several of its statements and policy proposals. For instance, in its political declaration the government expressed its intention to seek more and stronger private elements in the health care sector, from the non-profit idealistic associations, but also from for-profit firms.

In our interpretation of the discursive developments in the relation state–civil society and non-profit–for-profit organizations in the health and welfare sectors, clearly public services are still favored in Norway on the condition that there is sufficient state capacity. It is in the room left open by the state, be it for budgetary or other reasons, that volunteering and non-profit organizations have assumed a new role. In public discourse (e.g. Frivillighetsmeldingen, Omsorgsmeldingen), non-profit welfare providers have become recognized as important contributors to health care and welfare. However, politicians in Norway no longer, to the same extent, wish to, or are able to, differentiate between private non-profit and private commercial
providers of health and welfare. Increasingly, welfare projects are exposed to competition (konkurranseutsettes), where non-profit and commercial providers are treated equally.

The public debate in Norway has started to focus on whether welfare services should indeed be subject to open competition, where non-profit organizations would have to compete for projects, assignments and tasks on the same terms as commercial providers. Because the terms for competition are often based on how well the competitors score on cost containment and efficiency, non-profit providers are increasingly likely to lose in competitive bidding processes. In Norwegian discourse, this has been referred to this as putting ‘Bestemor på anbud’ (putting grandmother to tender). The former privileged position of non-profit welfare organizations has given way to the political ambition of giving people freedom to choose between private and public welfare. Consequently, we see the arrival of a ‘volunteerism exposed to competition’ (‘Konkurranseutsatt frivillighet’).

Unlike in the British case of the ‘Big Society’ and the Dutch ‘Participation Society’, the Norwegian project of welfare state reform is neither characterized by any ‘big idea’ to completely overhaul the welfare state nor by any serious attempt to have citizens and the (volunteer) organizations take over the responsibility for producing and delivering social services. The debate is rather on the appropriate place and role of civil society organizations within a state-dominated system of social benefits and services and more recently on the extent to which idealistic civil society organizations should receive privileged treatment in bidding or whether they should be forced to compete with private business.
Conclusion

In this paper we presented two political projects that contain radical alternative conceptualizations of the classical welfare state, the ‘Big Society’ project launched by the Conservatives in Britain in 2010 and the ‘Participation Society’ project adopted by the Dutch government in 2013. We studied how these projects envisioned replacing the classical welfare state and contrasted this with Norwegian developments, where no such a radical overhaul of the welfare state can be found.

The British and Dutch political projects were attempts to replace the classical welfare state. Family members, citizens, volunteers, and civil society associations were imagined to take over many of the social service tasks and functions that the state so far had taken on. The difference between the United Kingdom and the Netherlands is that the British ‘Big Society’ was more a purely political-ideological project than the Dutch ‘Participation Society’ project. Nevertheless, the Dutch ‘Participation Society’ concept also functioned as a discursive instrument for those political actors who welcomed the development and proposed policies to help it taking shape and speed up the process. In both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, the aim of these discursive projects was to redefine the role of the state, individuals and civil society organizations in the production and deliverance of social services.

The Norwegian experience is very different. In this country, there is ostensibly no comparable big idea about a radical overhaul of the welfare state. However, the normative basis of public policy, the legitimacy of the state’s role in the production and provision of welfare as well as the division of labor between the state and societal actors are nevertheless important subjects
in political discourse. In fact, also in Norway there is a shift in discourse and policy that adds up to a principled reconsideration of the role of citizens, volunteers, and civil society associations vis-à-vis the state. However, the main message must be that in Norway there is no ‘big idea’ that functions as an alternative to the welfare state and that – unlike in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands – the state is not at all perceived or experienced as something problematic; on the contrary.

The public and political debate on the appropriate place and role of citizens and volunteering within a state-dominated welfare regime and on how much competition there should be allowed between idealistic civil society organizations and private business seems a mere ripple compared to the tidal waves of radical alternatives that threaten to ravage the classical welfare state in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.

Our analysis more generally contributes to a better understanding of what we defined as the third fundamental shift in welfare state reform, namely a radical reconsidering of the ideational and normative foundation that defines and underpins what the welfare state is or should be. We have shown that this includes a rethinking of social rights and their correlative (individual) obligations and the rebalancing of these two in the favor of the latter. It also concerns a reassessment and consequent reformulation of the appropriate role, power, rights and resources of key actors in the welfare state, including benefit recipients, clients, producers, providers, but also unions, employer organizations and other interest groups. More generally, it involves a re-examination, restructuring and ultimately redesign of the association between
market, state, family and civil society and a rearrangement of their respective functions in the production of work and welfare.
References


Van Kersbergen, K. and Vis, B. (2016). De verzorgingsstaat. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.


1 The shift towards the ‘Big Society’ has been traced back to the 1990s, while similar ideas have also shaped Labour’s political ideology, particularly in New Labour’s communitarian project of the Third Way (see Lister 2015; Williams 2015: chapter 5; Ferragina and Arrigoni 2016).


4 As in the case of the United Kingdom, ideas on making citizens more responsible for what essentially have been state tasks goes back further in time, in the Dutch case according to recent research all the way to the 1960s (Brok, 2016).


In our research on Norwegian government documents and new year’s speeches from 2005–2015, we noticed several frequently used ‘buzzwords’ or typical phrases, including kunnskapsdugnad, kunnskapssamfunn, trygghet, velferdsløft, sosialt partnerskap, (god offentlig sektor gir) verdiskaping, (i forbindelse med forenkling og fornyelse av offentligsektor) tidstyver, rornye, forenkle og forbedre, alle skal med, frivillighet for alle, arbeid til alle.

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