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## Varieties of Universalism

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## Introduction

Universalism is a polysemic, context-bound and multidimensional concept (Stefánsson 2012, 45). As a socio-political idea and logic, it is an object for multiple struggles and redefinitions. In social policy context universalism refers to principles or logics, practices, normative assumptions and ideals over the modes, functions and objectives of social policy. Our aim is to clarify, what universalism is about, what makes a cash benefit or service universal, what kind of social conditions promote universalism and what are the problems of universalism.

We speak of *varieties of universalism* rather than treating it as a single coherent idea and principle. Varieties refer to time and timing (break-through), modes and mechanisms adopted, justifications and assumptions connected to universal social policies. There are different historical moments and preconditions for universalism to evolve and strengthen. From time to time, it turns as a leading rationale to develop entire social policy systems or regimes like in the Nordic countries between 1940s and 1980s (Anttonen & Sipilä 2012). In post-war Britain universal flat-rate benefits (e.g. pensions) and services (e.g. health care) designed to entire population marked a new era in the history of social policy. One of the most important drivers of motivation in Britain was to leave behind the legacy of humiliating Poor Law. But that time universalism also was a compromise between socialism and liberalism, and a new way to foster social rights of citizens. The grand idea of universal welfare state in the Northern European countries was set as a major goal to promote class, gender and regional equality among citizens. There was a longer history for welfare stateism, most particularly in Sweden, due to the people's home thinking that was brought into public debate in the 1920s by young social democrats. During the last decade some developing countries have adopted universal social policy programmes to smoothen poverty-related problems (Willmore 2007). We can identify different moments in history that bring universalism in the forefront of social policy reforming. The other side of the coin is de-universalisation: universalism might weaken or vanish.

In this paper we discuss universalism mainly as an idea or principle, and we approach universalism as a policy solution to some identified problems (Mehta 2011). Ideas are important and they travel from one country to another. There always are different solutions at hands to theoretically or politically identified problems like poverty. Policy ideas provide some means for solving problems. Of course all this depends on actors, institutional frames, philosophies and mentalities that influence these decisions. This

also explains why there are many ways to speak of universalism in social policy. Ideas of course need to be implemented; universal social policy systems must be institutionalised for universalism to become a principle that brings new order in social policy world.

The idea of universalism has been strong in (socio) political history, collecting both friends and enemies. There is not one narrative to be told. Universalism has many roots and many faces. We start by describing briefly what universalism is and what it is not about. We also discuss what has brought into being universalist solutions and what kind of problems are related to universalism.

### **What makes a benefit universal?**

Even today scientists do not agree, whether certain social policies or benefits should be called universal or not. Chiefly, this is a consequence of the fact that the word “universal” has been used in different frames of reference, in different times, and for different purposes (Kildal & Kuhnle 2005). It is however important to specify our speech of universal benefits. Despite of a variety of definitions and practices universalism retains an essential core. It always refers to something that is common to ‘all people’. It is not only an abstract idea used to underline that all citizens are treated with ‘equal concern and respect’ (Rothstein 1998, 4). Universalism carries some idea of wholeness, unity, totality and sameness (Stefánsson 2012).

What are the criteria for the universality of a benefit? When should a particular benefit (cash or service in kind) be called universal? There are two particular steps in the process of redistribution that must be in accord with the principle of universalism. The first step concerns the inclusion of citizens and the second one the principle of allocation. Universal inclusion means ‘membership for all citizens’ (Kildal & Kuhnle 2005) so that no one is excluded. Universal allocation means that the benefit is distributed evenly and that it is available for all but also used by a majority of citizens. Goul Andersen (2012) has proposed that different notions of universalism can be arranged in a hierarchy including the following dimensions:

1. eligibility and entitlements are clearly defined *rights*, not a matter of discretion
2. rules apply to *all* citizens/residents who could be relevant beneficiaries
3. benefits are financed by general taxes, very seldom by contributions

4. benefits are almost the same for all citizens – at least, nobody is excluded by means-testing
5. benefits are adequate.

It is obvious that universalism has to refer to social rights of citizens or residents. Most commonly universalism implies that those who are eligible enjoy the same entitlements but in many cases there are also some income test in use. The latter case has to do with positive discrimination. Universal benefits are either flat-rate benefits, when same amount of money is given to all those who fulfil the criteria used (child benefit, basic pension), or those who need more, also get more (income test might be used). Financing of benefits bases nearly always on tax funding, and nobody is excluded by means testing. This is the main marker of universalism. There is also a criterion that benefits should be ‘adequate’ but this is not always the case. (Goul Andersen 2012, 164-171)

In addition, universalism means different things in connection to different social protection systems: universalism in social service provision differs from universalism in monetary benefits (Anttonen, Häikiö & Stefánsson 2012). Very often universalism is discussed only in relation to cash benefits like pensions, child benefits or basic income programmes. But services are at least as important mechanisms to promote equality, participation and social rights of citizens in a society (Sen 1995).

Anttonen and Sipilä (2012) mention primary education and health care as two main service categories most often extended to all. Beyond these two service forms there is much less unity in the world when it comes to service universalism. Universalism in service makes a difference. Sometimes even very little money might have a radical influence on people’s well-being and capabilities to take care of their nearest persons. The same is however true with services: good health care matters a lot in all countries if there is free access to services. However, sometimes universal services cannot be benefited because parents do not have money to pay for children’s school transportation or school suits. In some other cases universal services are heavily criticised for being paternalistic and not taking into account the diversity of needs and life situations. There are many problems attached to service universalism, but they will not be dealt with in this paper.

## **Universalism, selectivism, residualism and subsidiarity**

Universalism might turn into a comprehensive social policy rationale. It does not necessarily characterize all social policy fields and mechanisms but a large or crucial part of them. There is no full universalism in any country: in most countries different social policy rationales co-exist. Everywhere social support is given, also informally, although some kind of formalized systems certainly develop in the course of time. Well-organized or high-status groups usually start to arrange selective social protection for their members – the most common examples are the civil servants, the clergy, the entrepreneurs and the professionals. Social insurance for industrial workers may be seen as an enlargement of this phenomenon.

Residual benefits are targeted for the poor but the selective benefits may be targeted for any social groups. Selectivism means restricted membership. The history of social policy is riddled with selective programs; e.g. there have been separate pension systems for sailors, farmers, industrial workers, and employees in short-term jobs. Selectivism and residualism differ from universalism while they do not allow the inclusion of all. Residualism means that social policy institutions should come into play only when other standard institutions of supply, the family and the market or selective social policy, do not fulfil the need. Residual benefits are granted after individual or familial means testing whereas truly universal benefits are allocated independent of both income and spending. The desire to weaken residualism in social policy has been the main historical impetus for introducing universalism in social policies.

The distinction between residual (or marginal) and institutional model had been a dominant classification since 1950s (Wilensky and Lebeaux 1958, 138). Interestingly, roughly 30 years later Esping-Andersen and Korpi (1987, 40-41) in their definition of the Nordic welfare model still took marginalism as the main contrast. Universalistic measures are always directed towards large sections of population, while selective policies are directed toward subgroups of the population with specific needs. They also wrote that “the marginal model is premised on a commitment to market sovereignty”, and the state plays “only a minor role in the distribution of welfare”. The state steps in when “the normal channels of distribution fail” (Esping-Andersen & Korpi 1987, 40-41). Normal channels refer to those of family and market.

According to Korpi “in areas where universal programmes exist, institutional social policy decreases inequality by making it possible for lower socio-economic strata to enjoy roughly the same standard as other groups” (Korpi 1983, 190-2). *Universal or institutional welfare model* promotes the principle that all citizens should be equally entitled to a decent standard of living, and that full social citizenship rights and status should be guaranteed unconditionally. Esping-Andersen developed further the distinction between marginal and residual model and arrived at his famous regime theory. He renamed the institutional model as social democratic regime alongside liberal and conservative regimes. According to his definition the social-democratic regime-type is solidaristic, universalistic and de-commodifying (Esping-Andersen 1990, 28). Gradually universalism became a label for entire welfare state system. Accordingly, ‘institutional’, ‘universal’ and ‘social democratic’ are nearly synonymous concepts even if the notion of institutional has nearly vanished from welfare state literature. Nordic scholars often use the labels of ‘universal’, ‘social democratic’, and ‘Scandinavian’ welfare state to describe roughly the same thing (e.g. Bergh 2004).

Finally, there is also the principle of subsidiarity meaning that social action should always take place at the lowest practical level, typically the level of the individual or the family. In the event that the near-by levels are not able to cope, the responsibility passes from them to the level immediately above them. Subsidiarity meets social needs on the basis of feelings of solidarity among people who know each other, and among local communities and congregations (Spicker 1992, 212–213). A crude way to describe the difference between universalism and subsidiarity is that in the former the solidarity functions top-down but in the latter down-up. Subsidiarity states a clear preference for private enterprise over public action. It does not guarantee the citizens’ equal access to social benefits but it may strengthen selective inclusion.

### **Universalism and diversity**

In contrast with the three social policy principles mentioned here, universalism is an idea that emphasizes that all people may be in need of social benefits (cash or services), all should have access to support (in case of risks) and that a large majority also uses them (high take-up rates). Of course, universalism does not mean that all people can use the same social benefits or welfare services irrespective of their needs. Therborn (1995, 97) says that universal rights “entitle all citizens or residents to social services and

income security, specified mainly by their position in the human life-cycle only.”  
Actually, residence or citizenship is always another criterion.

Diversity in turn has a different rationale shaping and framing social policy ideas and solutions. Since the 1970s, it has been construed as a major challenge to universalism. The rise of universal social policies was closely connected to cross-class solidarity and alleviation of class conflict (Marshall 1950). It seems plausible that universalism as policy logic started to lose its importance when other tensions than the class conflict got more political space and public attention. In the early 1990s Fiona Williams wrote that “the fragmentation of class politics and the development of identity politics implies that demands upon welfare provision will be about meeting the specific needs of particular groups, rather than about pressing for universal provision to cover the need of all” (Williams, 1992, p. 206). She also used the term of ‘false universalism’ to point out that the post-war welfare state in Britain was based primarily on the interests of male workers. The post-war ideas and modes of universalism were embedded in masculine notions of social protection and rights.

Feminism is not the only position that has been critical towards universalism. An increasingly popular view is that greater social diversity presents a challenge for the sustainability and legitimacy of the welfare state in contemporary societies. The critique is framed from two vantage points. On the one hand, critics pose that universalism cannot deal with the increasingly diversified societies. Social heterogeneity, especially if created by a rapid increase in the numbers of immigrants, affects the basis for large-scale redistribution that has characterized Nordic welfare states (Banting and Kymlicka 2006). An ethnically heterogeneous population is thought to undermine perceived similarity, mutual identification and trust, thus undermining the conditions for establishing or sustaining collective risk protection through tax-based redistribution and

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