

17/06/2016

Is a Break with Egalitarian Commitment Necessary to Sustain Europe's Welfare State?



Collectivist values, based on the idea of egalitarian social compromise, tend to break. For those profiles which have made up the traditional working class, social closure is a defence mechanism against competition for redistribution, which is reflected in negative views toward immigration. For those making up the middle class, with high levels of education, high incomes and upper middle positions, opinion on immigration and demand for solidarity is not a preferred option because they rely on the success of their individual trajectories.

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Considering these findings, we find a contradiction: there is an increase in collective values by those in the lowest social positions, but with a demand for "*social closure*" limiting the entry of immigrants in the areas of welfare rights and excluding immigrants. And, at the same time, individualism increases in those individuals who are better positioned on the social scale. This dual trend reveals that collectivism and individualism reflect the break with the *egalitarian commitment* that contributed to the sustainability of the welfare state from the 1950s to the 1980s.

The break with this *egalitarian commitment* hinders the formation of political coalitions, the representation of collective interests, immigrant integration and the formation of pacts to sustain the welfare state. It is important to note that the degree to which the break in this commitment occurs varies depending on the welfare model. Thus, in those countries having welfare models based on Universalist principles and with middle-high levels of redistribution, tend to have greater levels of collective values, as is the case with the social democratic Scandinavian welfare model.

The idea of egalitarian commitment seems to decline and the idea of “*worthiness*” tends to gain importance. Public opinion has shown that there are social groups that are more worthy than others; immigrants tend to be considered unworthy of the welfare provisions since they are further and have less reciprocal relations with “*us*”. The immigrant response to *social closure* consists of what Portes referred to as “*confined solidarity*”, such as reciprocity values and the creation of moral obligations of cooperation between immigrants within a specific community, which translates into mechanisms of mutual assistance in special events. In short, the results reveal that those having collective values are the salaried workers who form a part of the traditional working class, and are now elderly. In the opposite sense, it is possible that some young members of the working class and the middle class have taken on the idea of *worthiness* as linked to *individual success*. Thus, the demand for collective values is expressed via “*social closure*” in the face of immigration in order to avoid competition for scarce employment and welfare resources, opening new lines for further study.

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