The worldwide ascendancy of neoliberalism as a political economic orthodoxy has seen a widespread commitment to the reshaping of social institutions on the model of the market. Across the developed world, and elsewhere, we can trace a series of (often counter-productive) impulses towards deregulation, privatization, and welfare state retrenchment to the growing influence of ‘neoliberal’ ideas (Peck 2010). Starting in the 1970s and early 1980s, emerging conflicts between the complex of policies we call the welfare state and the current stage of capitalism – in which markets in capital, goods, information, culture and even labour are spread across national borders – have led to calls for the revision of the post-war consensus in which the state’s role is to counter the adverse effects of market forces through economic intervention and redistribution (Piven 2015). Influenced by the neoliberal conviction that the state should instead implement strategies that seek to facilitate market activity, parties at either end of the political spectrum have introduced policies that subordinate social policy to the needs of labour market flexibility, aiming to put downward pressure on the social wage and the cost of international production (Jessop 2002). As a result, welfare provision has been transformed. Time limits for financial support have been introduced, and activation requirements designed to mobilize the ‘economically inactive’ to compete for limited employment positions imposed.

The growing influence of neoliberalism is reflected in the establishment of a market-based approach to social policy, in which welfare programmes are primarily intended to encourage self-reliance rather than seek to ameliorate the condition of oppressed or marginal groups through efforts to equalize life chances or address unemployment. In recent years, this process has been driven by austerity measures involving symbolic cuts to welfare budgets and a broader dismantling of social programmes (MacLeavy 2011). But while emphasis placed on self-sufficiency and individual requirements to work has seen the withdrawal of the state from the poor as far as distribution is concerned (Smith (2007), the implementation of neoliberal workfarism (understood – after Jamie Peck (2001) – to comprise work-based welfare reform) has necessitated concerted state intervention to assist welfare recipients in moving from welfare into employment. This has taken the form of programmes that support prevailing capitalist social relations by mobilizing the unemployed through the introduction of stringent conditionality checks for state support, increased surveillance of welfare recipients’ work-seeking behaviours,
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and the promotion of an anti-welfare ideology that seeks to encourage welfare recipients to assume personal responsibility for systemic problems such as unemployment.

This chapter considers the process of policy development that epitomizes a neoliberalized approach to welfare. It starts by reviewing the decline of the post-war welfare state and the emergence of a market-based approach to social policy. Following this, it establishes what constitutes neoliberalism and the defining features of a ‘workfare state’ in general terms. Recognizing that keystones of the welfare state as ‘safety net’ continue to underpin the regulation of local labour markets, it then examines the extent to which neoliberal workfarism is reliant upon ongoing state spending and intervention. Developing an argument first articulated in an edited collection under the title ‘Remaking the Welfare State: From Safety Net to Trampoline’ (MacLeavy 2010), it considers (1) state strategies that support the flexibilization of the labour market and the maintenance of low-wage work, (2) the mechanisms that ensure the integration of welfare recipients into consumer culture, and (3) the long-standing methods of discipline that coerce people into behaving as market actors. The chapter concludes by contemplating the implications of austerity measures introduced in the aftermath of the ‘Great Recession’, which articulate and reiterate a neoliberalised approach to the broader political economy.

The decline of the post-war welfare state

For many years, governments of both the right and left have been involved in debates over the best way to deliver public services. Whereas during the post-war period it was widely accepted that state provisioning of infrastructure, health, education and social services was the best way to ensure wellbeing, today markets are understood as a better way of delivering public goods and services because they are associated with competition, economic efficiency and consumer choice. For scholars such as Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell (2002) this express commitment to market (or market-like) rule is understood to transform state strategies, modes of governance and political subjectivities through the destruction and discrediting of Keynesian welfarist and social-collectivist institutions (broadly defined) and the construction and consolidation of neoliberalized state systems, forms of intervention and regulatory reform. This political shift is predicated on the promotion of a minimalist state infrastructure, which is framed as a reaction to the Keynesian and/or collectivist strategies that prioritized demand-side management at a national scale (e.g. stimulating jobs by encouraging mass production and consumption). It requires the promotion of structural or systemic competitiveness through supply-side policies, which aim to increase labour market flexibility, by putting downward pressure on the social wage and thereby reducing the cost of international production (Jessop 2002). Crucially, it also entails a qualitative shift in welfare provision, whereby welfare is based less on a model in which the state counters the market and more on a model where the state serves the market.

In many western post-industrial nations this shift is observed through a move from flat rate to graduated benefits and from universalism to greater means testing. ‘Activation’ policies form part of this approach, placing work requirements on welfare recipients as a condition of their benefit payments. In the anglophone model, governments have increasingly promoted individual responsibility through work incentives, welfare disincentives, and the privatization of service provision. The welfare state is no longer viewed as a ‘safety net’ for people with low or no incomes, but has been restructured to support training and the use of compulsions in relation to welfare-to-work programmes.

In support of this restructuring process, a free-market ideology has been marshalled, alongside a (moral) discourse of welfare that warns of the dangers of welfare ‘dependency’. This builds on conservative discourse that presents welfare recipients as ‘naturally’ deficient in the characteristics
that make responsible citizens and good workers, and frames welfare as a system in need of reform, not least for its propensity to harbour joblessness and inactivity in the lowest socio-economic sectors of society. This anti-welfare rhetoric is frequently directed at the discursive (and material) body of the young/single/minority-ethnic/inner-city mother, unable to support herself and her children through ‘a lack of gainful employment’ – a claim which has been expanded and used in some instances to depict the welfare system itself as an enlarged maternal system, spawning offspring that are not only a drain on the public purse, but who also constitute a threat to society through their links with rising crime, juvenile delinquency and myriad other social problems (England 2008).

Rhetoric of this kind points towards the embedding and extension of neoliberalism through the imposition of a new form of governance and is said to signal the end of the post-war welfare state (Powell and Hewitt 1998). In contrast to this claim, however, the ascendancy of a set of neoliberal processes, rules and institutions requires a form of statecraft that retains rudiments of the Keynesian welfare state. Flexible labour markets are underwritten by (conditional) welfare provisions. Social cohesion is maintained through means-tested payments that enable citizens with no or low incomes to participate in society as low level consumers. Furthermore, in spite of frequent allusions to the establishment of ‘active citizenship’ through the restructuring of social benefits to support training and enterprise, the use of compulsions in relation to state-supported labour market programmes acts to create ‘docile bodies’ who discipline themselves in the name of individual initiative and responsibility, in a move that parallels the individual self-regulation that was previously achieved through Fordist organizational forms and management practices (see Fraser 2003; Hartman 2005).

Although neoliberal discourse emphasizes the retrenchment of state social provision to make space for market regulation, the neoliberal approach sees social programmes being not simply retrenched, but (also) redeployed. Delivered in varying modes of conditionality, they aim to transform the subjectivities and identities of citizens through the promotion and enforcement of market-compliant behaviour (Larner 2000; Peck 2010). In the case of welfare, this involves new programmes geared towards getting people to accept personal responsibility for getting by in a time of low economic growth, high unemployment and rising poverty, and poses a particular challenge to the sections of the population that are most frequently reliant on state support. This includes younger people with low or obsolete skill sets, families with small children and/or elderly dependents trying to reconcile work with caring responsibilities, and women working in part-time posts or building portfolio careers (MacLeavy 2011).

**Neoliberalism and the workfare state: key features**

Neoliberalism is a distinctive political economic theory that, at broad level, proposes that ‘human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade’ (Harvey 2005: 2). Based on the monetarist theories and research of Milton Friedman (1962; Friedman and Schwartz 1963), it places primary emphasis on the maintenance of (macro)economic stability as opposed to the Keynesian goals of full employment and the alleviation of poverty. Its political philosophy builds on Friedrich von Hayek’s (1944) critique of the interventionist state and asserts that the only legitimate role of the state is to safeguard individual and commercial liberty, and strong private property rights. As such, it advocates a ‘rolling back’ of the state and the creation of a society governed by market mechanisms. While the market is traditionally defined through an absence of state intervention, it is acknowledged that markets are not naturally occurring phenomena, but need to be made, steered and policed. To
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This extent, neoliberalism maintains a self-contradicting theory of the state as laissez-faire policies cannot be implemented without government intervention. The mantra of ‘less state’ is thus illusory as neoliberalism compels rather than reduces state action (O’Neill 2004: 259), albeit in different ways to that of more openly interventionist forms of political economy.

In recent times, the principles of marketization, privatization and deregulation associated with neoliberalism have been extended across policy arenas in the global North and global South. Emanating from the political projects of Thatcher and Reagan, this form of statecraft has progressed the qualitative reordering of state–economy relations through an experimental repertoire of policies. The ubiquity of market-orientated politics positions neoliberalism as universal, yet neoliberalism is not a monolithic or entirely homogeneous entity. While recognizing that neoliberalism is variegated (Peck and Tickell 2002), constellations of core values can be identified in anglophone versions of this political economic phenomenon: as Wendy Larner (2003) notes, there are different variants of neoliberalism, each of which result from the general assertion that market mechanisms are the optimal way of organizing all exchanges of goods and services.

Wendy Brown (2006), for instance, identifies the particular formulation of neoliberalism in the USA, which accords full citizen rights only to those who are autonomous individuals, whereby autonomy is construed as independence from the state or other institutions. This idealized conception of the American citizen with the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions whether as welfare recipients or workers in ephemeral occupations devalues or misplaces the role of social relationships in promoting autonomy. This produces a culture in which political problems are transformed into individual problems with market solutions. As neoliberalism produces the citizen on the model of the entrepreneur and consumer, it simultaneously makes citizens available to a heavy degree of governance and authority (ibid.: 705). The state is remade on the model of the firm, with entrepreneurial and managerial functions, and this, in turn, facilitates and legitimates significant state intervention in personal, social and economic affairs.

Yvonne Hartman (2005), commenting on the Australian context, notes a contradictory commitment to a libertarian economic philosophy combined with morally conservative view of family, in addition to an appeal to nationalism. The privatization of public assets, the outsourcing and contracting-out of government services (through competitive tendering), and the private provision of economic and social infrastructure have helped to replace state interventionism with market-guided regulation. At the same time, reforms to the Australian welfare system have privileged better-off two parent families, while expanding the scale and scope of regulation for single parents without an employment wage, and asylum seekers (Hancock 2002). These covert forms of government intervention comprise policies (such as mutual obligation and work-for-the-dole), which attempt to construct particular subjectivities on which to impose market disciplines (Dean 2002).

In the UK, neoliberalism has been articulated with social democratic principles and given rise to a philosophy of governance that embraces a mix of market and interventionist philosophies. This starts from the premise that, as relatively closed national economies no longer exist, there is little scope for national-level economic management; however, if decisions are left purely to market forces, then failures will result. Thus, it follows that ‘a new democratic state’ is needed, in which progress and market innovations are promoted alongside supply-side objectives to permit the pursuit of equity and the improvement of efficiency in contemporary circumstances (Giddens 1998; see also MacLeavy 2007, 2011).

In each of these different national contexts, then, neoliberal discourse tends to castigate welfare as economically inefficient as well as morally dubious. With competitive mechanisms seen to herald the key means through which states can achieve economic progress, systems that
'discourage' competition in the labour market through the provision of a basic level of income to the unemployed are seen as problematic and in need of revision. Altering this, there is now a 'tough love' approach in which people are 'helped and hassled' back to work (The Guardian 2010). Whereas welfare has negative connotations of inactivity, workfare embraces a more punitive approach that emphasizes self-sufficiency and individual requirements to work. The role of civil society has also been recast through the establishment of a new relationship between citizens and the state, in which there is an expectation of increased participation in the socio-political realm: in neighbourhoods, communities and complementary arenas of local governance.

Workfare as a framework of welfare provision

Accounts of the transition from Keynesian welfarism to neoliberal workfarism should note the extent to which the workfare state is subtended by the continued operation of the welfare state as a safety net. While significant, this trajectory of development ought not to frame the welfare state as immobile and thus outmoded, but rather should be used to unpack the different forms of welfare that have emerged in the contemporary period. Indeed, there has been fundamental yet complex restructuring of welfare across western post-industrialized nations, through, for instance, the reduction of cash benefits to the unemployed and the ‘underemployed’ (who do not qualify for unemployment insurance but instead are eligible to receive means-tested welfare payments), as well as the introduction of new labour market measures that are subordinate to market forces (e.g. the increased private sector involvement in the delivery of state services). As Hartman (2005: 61) observes,

[al]though welfare may now be leaner and meaner for some, the welfare state has not shrunk; rather different forms of welfare have arisen coupled with new modes of administration and underpinned by a theoretical rationale that has shifted from entitlement to obligation.

There is a need, then, to make visible the extent to which Keynesian welfarism underwrites neoliberalism. In the present era of post-Fordist globalization, welfare has three key functions: first, it underwrites the peripheral labour market by ensuring a minimum level of income to those switching between welfare and work in line with fluctuations in the economy and changing personal circumstances; second, it allows those with low or no pay to maintain (at least) an impression of social integration through consumer activity, because welfare payments are discretely made and blame is allotted at the level of public debate; third, it provides education and training to help (re)connect welfare recipients to work that legitimates a level of (self)regulation, which is reminiscent of the social control established through the disciplinary apparatuses of the post-war period (for instance, social services, public health measures, and therapeutic practices) (on this, see Foucault 2003).

Regulating the labour market

The welfare states of the anglophone or market-based model of capitalism (including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the USA) are fundamentally labour market institutions, which condition the rules and dynamics of the job market, particularly with regard to low-wage employment relationships (Piven 1999). As ‘liberal welfare regimes’, they have long attempted to restrict government intervention in the market by targeting welfare assistance to those in greatest need. This reflects an underlying assumption that the market will be able to provide for
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As Gosta Esping-Andersen (1990: 26) observes, ‘[b]enefits cater mainly to a clientele of low-income, usually working-class, state dependents’ and those on welfare are often stigmatized as unproductive and lacking in work ethic. In recent years, although anti-welfare rhetoric has increased, state provisions have continued to support the (low-wage) labour market through a combination of welfare payments made to those on low or no wages and tax breaks introduced to ensure that ‘work pays’ for people in minimum-wage jobs (Brewer 2001).

With deregulation of the labour market creating a periphery of workers who engage in precarious employment, the provisions of the welfare state might even become more rather than less important (Hartman 2005). Low-wage workers cannot usually survive on what they earn from work alone, so welfare provision is crucial in allowing this end of the labour market to flourish. Through the granting of tax credits through earned income, government buttresses the working poor and furthers the establishment of a dual labour market which is comprised of a core of stable well-paid jobs, and a periphery of precarious employment (ibid.). This indicates that flexible labour markets, which are seen to have been established through laissez-faire economic policy, are not naturally occurring phenomena, but instead must be constructed, regulated, and policed (Peck 2002). This requires an interventionist strategy to underwrite the operation of contingent labour markets and to socialize the working poor for flexible employment (Peck and Theodore 2000).

The normalization of the flexible labour market and worker insecurity is achieved through the undermining of union organization and experimentation in active welfare and workfare programming. As Peck (2002) outlines in the US context, this re-regulation intensifies competitive pressures by expanding the labour pool, keeping wage inflation low, and facilitating an increased rate of worker exploitation. With the macro-orientation of policy towards full ‘employability’ rather than full employment, a concordant privileging of individual responsibility over social rights is achieved through the pastoral activities of government operated on individuals so that they work upon and monitor themselves (for example, through further education and training and/or participation in welfare-to-work schemes).

Maintaining social cohesion

Workfarist policies are promoted on the basis of a three-fold political economic critique of the welfare state. This contends that long-term unemployment depletes skills and damages motivation, adversely affecting future chances of getting a job; that people remain unemployed for longer than is necessary because of the level of benefit payments that are made available to them; and that reconnecting people to the labour market through mandatory welfare-to-work programmes will put downward pressure on wage inflation, thereby permitting the economy to operate at a higher level of employment (Peck 2001). Workfare, by contrast, seeks to (re)attach people to the labour market through temporary work placements; to restructure benefit payments in order to remove the ‘welfare trap’ that effectively sanctions limited non-participation in the labour market; and, through welfare retrenchment, to induce and enforce new rules of engagement with the paid labour market that will animate latent market forces (Peck 2002).

This neoliberal politics is invoked through public discourse, which articulates the doctrines of the individual and the free market (Brown 2006). In the UK, for example, a commentary on welfare reform has accompanied the explicit focus on paid work in government policy. ‘Help to Work’ is the latest in a line of government schemes – including the ‘Work Programme’, the ‘Community Activity Programme’, and ‘Mandatory Work Activity’ – intended to improve welfare recipients’ job prospects (through training, rehabilitation and work experience) and deliver...
socio-economic gains (by improving expertise and efficiency in the labour market and improving local community arenas through voluntary contributions).

Further legislative reforms of the benefits system have also been implemented in the context of very high levels of economic inactivity through sickness and disability (including those suffering from mental illness). Indicative of this, the UK’s ‘Employment and Support Allowance’ was introduced to bring existing social insurance and social assistance schemes for people incapable of work through long-term illness or disability under the rubric of a single system. This has helped to tighten the basis on which people’s capacity for work is assessed, with fit-for-work tests to decide how a person’s illness or disability affects their ability to work and new arrangements for supporting their (re)entry to the labour market, through personal action plans and financial sanctions for failure to engage in work-related activity.

The logic of welfare-to-work is complex and hybrid in nature, comprising a problematic combination of ‘human capital development’ and ‘work first’ approaches (Dean 2006). While policy rhetoric signals the empowerment of claimants, their preparation and ownership of action plans and the utilization of untapped skills, the strong emphasis on compulsion, participation and the application of benefit penalties or sanctions for non-compliance indicates a different notion of responsibility that obscures the state’s failure to meet people’s non-material needs, including their need to work. Thus, as job insecurity becomes increasingly common for those who do contingent work or work in low-paid service positions, the requirement for all to look for work, train for work or face sanctions is applied alongside cash transfers to sustain those at the bottom end of the labour market. In contrast to rhetoric about ‘hand ups’ not ‘hand outs’, such payments allow recipients to get by and get on at the more mundane level of everyday life, in spite of the scapegoating that appears at the level of public debate. In this sense, workfarist policies seek to promote social cohesion by helping to reduce the income inequalities between workers and the unemployed, and allowing the latter group to conform to societal norms as citizen consumers (for a useful discussion of the building blocks of social cohesion, see Forrest and Kearns 2001).

Preserving social control

By making welfare payments conditional upon recipients’ willingness to seek employment, undertake training and/or volunteer for work in the local community, workfare programmes enforce the civic responsibilities of citizens to sustain themselves. This assault on the spectre of dependency culture is intended to draw individuals into accepting responsibility for aspects of social protection once governed by the welfare state by codifying rules of conduct (such as independence and a preference for paid employment to welfare benefits as a source of income) and making them the basis for government intervention (Dean 2002). As poverty is associated with individual irresponsibility or the failure to manage risk, work assumes the form of a moral obligation. This moral obligation entails compliance with the social order in the workfare state era.

The fostering of a shared sense of morality and common purpose is an important element of social control. While anti-welfare discourse operates to legitimate an increased level of control over welfare recipients’ lives, it simultaneously ensures that expectations regarding citizen entitlements will be dampened. Thus measures are introduced to make the receipt of welfare payments more onerous for some groups, with broad public support (Hartman 2005). In the anglophone model, the state promotes a general shift away from a culture of state support of the economy, business and society to a new ethos of self-help, enterprise and individual initiative. This occurs through the provision of self-esteem training and job-search skills in a quasi-market. Such quasi-markets of public and private service providers are intended to educate the unemployed into exercising choice in relation to their own economic development.
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promote the neoliberal assumption that the delivery of welfare services and benefits through the market is not only efficient, but also in the interests of individual liberty in the sense of giving the welfare ‘consumer’ the freedom to choose.

To make certain that choice is exercised at a micro-level, the UK’s welfare-to-work pro-
grammes, by way of illustration, allot a case manager to individuals to ensure they enrol for courses and training activities tailored to meet their ‘specific needs’. This micro-regulation is at variance with the interpretation of welfare reform as a kind of market deregulation, because it reveals that declining support for social welfare is part of a punitive policy development in which the state has a substantial and active role (Beckett and Western 2001). In the wake of Victorian penal policies that reflected the individualist, laissez-faire philosophy of free-market capitalism, the post-war welfare state was built on the assumption that government intervention could and should reform and integrate the socially marginal (Garland 1985). This has since been undermined by new conceptions of social marginality that imply the need for more exclusionary and security-minded responses to marginal groups and individuals. Hence, there is a shift in governance towards workfarist programmes that emphasize the undeserving or un-reformable nature of welfare recipients that tend to stigmatize and separate them from society as a whole. These programmes feature less generous welfare benefits and more punitive anti-crime policies as a result of political discourse about individual responsibility for social problems, and simultane-
ously welfare programmes and the ‘culture of dependency’ as important causes of crime (Beckett and Western 2001).

Once again, however, this transformation should not be interpreted simply by counter-
posing an interventionist to a non-interventionist state. As Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller (1992) make clear, neoliberal political initiatives entail the adoption of a range of devices, which seek both to create a distance from the formal institutions of the state and other social actors, and to act upon policy subjects ‘at a distance’. This ought not to be viewed as the disintegration of the disciplinary apparatuses of the post-war period, but as a transformation in the mechanisms of control that are pivotal to the governance of social life. An array of organizational forms and technical methods now impel citizens to conform to particular codes of behaviour through the utilization, instrumentalization and mobilization of techniques and agents other than the ‘state’ (for example, the calculative personnel of the jobcentre that impel individuals within that locale to work out ‘where they are’, calibrate themselves in relation to ‘where they should be’ and devise ways of getting from one stage to the next).

Workfare in the aftermath of the ‘great recession’

The expansion of work-based welfare reform in the context of rising unemployment and deep recession poses a challenge to the promotion of self-provisioning, prudentialism and an individualist ethic of self-responsibility. In contrast to the buoyant economic climate of late 1990s, when the first workfare programmes were established in the UK, financial-economic conditions in the years following the global financial crisis have posed a discrete challenge to the neoliberal philosophy of a smaller (welfare) state, the primacy of the market, and the renewed significance of labour flexibility. With businesses shedding jobs and households struggling to pay debts, more skilled workers are coming onto the job market with the effect that the most excluded have to compete even harder to get work. As Richard Johnson, managing director of welfare-to-work for Serco Civil Government (a UK organization that works with government to deliver front-
line public services) says: ‘Think of it like a conveyor belt: as unemployed numbers rise, those at the front of the queue get pushed lower down’ (quoted in The Guardian 2008). Against this background, the renewed commitment to a market-based approach to social policy is geared
towards changing people’s expectations of the labour market, rather than creating jobs or changing the lives of the poor. Its objective is to make low-paid, non-unionized jobs socially acceptable by declaring those who refuse to take such posts as lacking in basic civic virtues, including the propensity for self-help.

Because workfare sidesteps the low rewards for many low-skilled and part-time workers, its ambition to ‘solve the wider problems associated with worklessness’ (Iain Duncan Smith, former UK Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, quoted in The Globe and Mail 2010) is particularly significant for young people, women and those with low skills. It also affects those for whom participation in the formal labour market is difficult because of the ongoing challenges of balancing work and family life. Middle-class parents struggling to reconcile work and caring responsibilities suffer a loss of income from lower limits for tax credits, while unemployed single parents face heightened expectations to participate rather than withdraw from the paid labour market while performing care (MacLeavy 2011).

While it is argued that austerity has ‘long been part of the neoliberal repertoire’ (Peck 2012: 629), the alleged dangers of debts and deficits have been used in the aftermath of the ‘Great Recession’ to discipline citizens in politically and economically expedient ways. Contra to evidence that workfare fails to increase the likelihood of people finding work (Crisp and Fletcher 2008), there has been little, if any, serious discussion of how job creation can be achieved through deliberate policy measures or the propensity for austerity to increase pressure on the most vulnerable members of society. In the USA, deficit-reduction plans include sharp cuts in tax rates on corporations and the wealthy alongside moves to remove healthcare and nutritional aid for the poor. In the UK, austerity is linked to a desire to reduce the overall size of government and, especially, spending on social insurance, with Prime Minister David Cameron proclaiming that austerity is a means to make the state ‘leaner… not just now, but permanently’ (quoted in Krugman 2015). In this respect, it seems, the restructuring of contemporary welfare states might actually be accelerated in the context of austerity – at the very point at which the deepening of a market-based approach to social policy is arguably anathema to social cohesion and the wellbeing of the most vulnerable members of society.

References


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