

## Laudatio Rokkan Prize 2015

The Jury for the Stein Rokkan Prize for Comparative Social Science Research 2015 has decided to honour Marius R. Busemeyer in recognition of his book *Skills and Inequality: Partisan Politics and the Political Economy of Education Reforms in Western Welfare States*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2015. Busemeyer's central ambition is to show that education and training systems are central to understanding the evolution of Western European welfare systems. He does so through a comparative historical analysis reaching back to the immediate post-war period in Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom that is innovative in its analytical ambitions; theoretically sophisticated; exceptionally broad-ranging in its empirical scope; and rigorous in methodological terms. As such, the book constitutes a 'very substantial and original contribution in comparative social science research', as stipulated as the main criterion for the award of the Stein Rokkan Prize.

*Skills and Inequality* is animated by the contention that the analysis of education and training systems is capable of making a central contribution to comparative welfare state research; conversely, the dynamics of education and training can only be understood in the context of the welfare states in which they are situated. The "political and institutional connections between education and the welfare state" that the book highlights can be found in three domains. The first connection highlighted lies in the fact that those political and economic coalitions that shaped the post-war evolution of the welfare state in Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom have also left a deep imprint on education and training systems. As Busemeyer's book is grounded in partisan theory, it is, in his view, above all "the cross-country differences in the balance of power between social democrats, Christian democrats, and conservatives" that "help to explain the different choices in the institutional design of education and training systems in the post-war period". The countries under consideration, therefore, developed "distinct historical pathways, displaying obvious institutional similarities to well-known worlds of welfare capitalism".

The second connection that the book explores concerns outcomes: differences in education and training systems matter for the distribution of income, wealth and life chances, notably as regards the relative weight of vocational education and training versus academic education. Perhaps contrary to what might be expected, it is not the expansion of higher education that mitigates inequality, but rather the existence of a well-developed system of vocational education and training (VET): "The reason VET is so important with regard to inequality is that it opens access routes to high-quality training and well-paid employment for individuals in the lower half of the academic skills

distribution, who have little chance of being admitted to tertiary academic education”.

The third connection between education and welfare states that Busemeyer explores relates to the impact of education and training systems on popular attitudes towards the welfare state. Here, the focus of the analysis is on the implications of two dimensions of variation: “the public/private division of labor in education financing, and institutional stratification in terms of the relative importance of VET versus higher education”. The analysis reveals both “positive and negative” feedback mechanisms and highlights that “macro-level institutions mediate the micro-level effects of income and educational background”. What emerges very clearly is that institutional design affects popular attitudes towards VET and the welfare state more generally.

Busemeyer’s book stands out for the boldness and the rigor of its analysis. His work is bold in its comparative design that traces developments over several decades and across Western Europe, complemented by an in-depth analysis of the three country cases; in its theoretical approach, which is grounded in partisan theory, but adds three critical “extensions” that take into account preferences regarding the political process, institutional context and the importance of time and timing; in its empirical scope, drawing on a wealth of qualitative and quantitative data; and in its analytical ambition, which is expressed in the effort to explore dynamic interactions between institutions, actor constellations, outcomes, and preferences and attitudes over time rather than limiting itself to a unidirectional analysis. The book shows rigor in the methods employed, in examining the data it draws upon and in the care with which it interprets its findings.

Busemeyer has produced an important piece of comparative scholarship that reaches across the study of politics, institutions and public policy. He not only explains institutional choices in education and training, but highlights their long-term consequences for individual life chances. As such, his book makes interesting reading not just for scholars of the welfare state, but, just as importantly, political decision-makers tasked with rebalancing the welfare state between, as Busemeyer puts it, “social investment” and “social protection”.