Martin Kronauer, Günther Schmid

**A self-determined life for everyone – Social preconditions for autonomy**

The article is an introduction to the issue addressed in the WSI-Mitteilungen. It confronts the apologists of social inequality and critics of the welfare state who, in times of redistributive struggles, seek to dominate the public debate in the name of freedom. In opposition to these views, the article holds that freedom, understood as the autonomy to have the possibility to make relevant, reasonable choices in order to live a self-determined life, depends on social equalities and security. The argument is founded in theories of social justice as well as empirical perceptions of justice. Drawing on theories of social justice, the authors demonstrate why equality of opportunities has to be supplemented by equality of resources and that both must be expanded through the dictates of justice to empower individual self-determined action. Empirical perceptions of social justice are discussed to determine how autonomy can be strengthened at a political level.

Petra Böhnke

**Equality and security as preconditions for quality of life?**

Subjective well-being is unquestionably an important part of the overall quality of life. How satisfied people are with their life promises insight into their standard of living, their health conditions and social integration. Social policy and democratic basic principles shape the framework within which expectations and wishes for a secure and self-determined life can be realized. How successful that is and the extent to which social rights are realised influences how individuals estimate their quality of life to a considerable degree. Both privileged and disadvantaged people tend to be more content in countries with distinctive social protection benefits and redistribution effects, and where democratic institutions work effectively and trustworthily. The polarization of incomes contributes to a reduction in the degree of satisfaction with life. Equal opportunities in the education system however have a positive effect. People do not only want progress and a good livelihood, they want it in a fair and safe society with equal opportunities.

Irene Becker

**Social justice as reflected in income distribution in Germany**

The article first points out that opportunities, performance and equality are woven together in multi-layered interdependence. A systematic analysis of targets reveals a number of conflicts but to a large extent there are complementary relationships. In view of this complementary aspect, in particular with regard to opportunities and equality, debates on values, where partial targets are treated as alternatives, seem to be cut short. In a second step, income distribution in Germany is addressed and the question posed as to the extent that current developments reflect the aim of social justice. The analysis of the institutional background and empirical indicators of income distribution in Germany reveals a divided picture. On the one hand there are improvements, in particular in the provision of institutional child care and incentives towards increased gender equality of job opportunities. On the other hand the obstacles in the education system for members of lower income groups continue to be considerable. Furthermore, increasing restrictions in the transfer system in connection with tax reductions for high income groups lead to a decline in redistribution effects. Deficits in the
application of equality of opportunity are strengthened by a diminishing level of social justice. Tax financed transfers of a stronger vertical redistributive character could counteract this.

Henning Lohmann, Hans-Jürgen Andreß

**Autonomy or poverty? On securing equal chances for material welfare through gainful employment**

The article analyzes the question whether gainful employment in European countries provides a sufficient income that protects the active worker and their dependent family members from poverty. The authors argue that the size and the structure of the working poor population can be explained by the interplay of market forces, family structures, and interventions of the welfare state. Using the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) and the European Community Household Panel (ECHP), working poor rates are analyzed with respect to countries, time frames (1994-2008) and selected groups of the gainfully employed.

Günther Schmid

**Strengthening autonomy through labour market policy that is sensitive to individual behaviour**

Despite the slogan "Fördern und Fordern" (supporting and demanding) labour market policy in the past decade has increasingly had the disciplining function of pushing unemployed people into work, not least with the laudable aim of preventing transfer dependency. Enhancing individual autonomy in the sense of employability on equal terms with potential employers has been increasingly neglected. This tendency, however, also contradicts the objective of re-establishing the trust in the ability to earn a living in a sustainable way. Furthermore, lack of such trust weakens the readiness to take risks connected with, for example, changing the occupation or the workplace. This is why a labour market policy is needed that is sensitive to individual behaviour and not aimed at individual control. The paper develops examples in this direction on the basis of new findings in behavioural economics.

Wulf Hopf

**Education – equality of competition and equality of social participation**

In an international comparison, educational success in Germany is seen to be strongly dependent on the social background of the students’ parents. Equality of educational opportunity and the role of education for social participation are therefore widely discussed topics. Whereas equality of educational opportunity is tied to a system of competition and achievement as a pathway to privileged social positions, equal education for social, cultural and political participation is not. Elementary education in Germany ends at the end of grade 4 and is relatively successful in creating equal conditions for the subsequent competitive educational system. However, in grades 9 and 10, the levels of achievement are strongly aligned to social class levels. This is the consequence of a specific combination of a typified school system, a strong right of parents to choose the school form for their children’s education, a short elementary education and a negligent procedure to distribute children among different types of schools. The middle and upper classes profit the most from this combination, and their resistance to “structural” reforms is very high.