

PROOF

1 The Contentious Politics of  
2 Unemployment in Europe: Some  
3 Conclusions  
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14 This book has taken a look back at a difficult period for the labor mar-  
15 ket in order to inquire into the relationships between political insti-  
16 tutional approaches to employment policy and political conflicts  
17 mobilized by collective actors over unemployment in the public  
18 domain. This is what we have called the contentious politics of  
19 unemployment. In more prosaic terms, we have looked at the inter-  
20 vention, in claim making in the public domain, but also in policy  
21 networks, on issues relating to unemployment. On a more theoretical  
22 level, this volume has tried to bring together two research streams  
23 and theoretical traditions that have remained largely unaware of  
24 each other: work on social movements and contentious politics, in  
25 particular the works that have stressed the impact of political oppor-  
26 tunity structures on social protest (see Kriesi 2004a; Meyer 2004 for  
27 reviews), on the one hand, and the literature on the comparative  
28 political economic of the welfare state on the other (see Arts and  
29 Gelissen 2002; Green-Pedersen and Haverland 2000; Pierson 2000a  
30 for reviews).

31 The various chapters that form the volume have highlighted a  
32 number of relevant features of the contentious politics of unemploy-  
33 ment in the six European countries included in our study (France,  
34 Germany, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK). Rather than simply  
35 summarizing the main findings of the book, which is not an easy  
36 task in edited volumes even when they originate, like this one, in a  
37 common research project, in this concluding chapter I would like to  
38 briefly address three particularly relevant aspects: (1) differences across  
39 countries in the way collective actors enter the field of unemployment  
40 politics; (2) the place and role of the category of people most directly  
41 concerned by what happens in this field, namely the unemployed

1 themselves; and (3) the relation between a still predominantly national  
2 political field of unemployment and trends toward a transnationaliza-  
3 tion of this field.

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5 **Cross-national differences in the contentious politics of**  
6 **unemployment in Europe**  
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8 The contentious politics of unemployment is not an invariant feature  
9 of European societies. This book has followed a cross-national com-  
10 parative perspective with the aim of describing and, to the extent that  
11 this is possible with the present state of the knowledge in the field,  
12 explaining variations across countries in the contentious politics of  
13 unemployment. The various chapters have shown strong variations in  
14 the intervention of actors in the field of unemployment politics across  
15 the six countries of the study. First and foremost, we have observed  
16 important differences in the claim making in unemployment politics.  
17 This certainly holds when we look at the overall claim making in the  
18 field. Thus, significant differences can be observed in the very content  
19 of claims. For example, as Manlio Cinalli and Marco Giugni have shown  
20 in Chapter 1, variations in the main thematic focus of claims point to  
21 a greater role played by issues relating to welfare systems and social  
22 benefits in countries such as France and Sweden than in the other four  
23 countries. Even more striking, the very “stake” of claim making differs  
24 from one national context to the other. The unemployed are obviously  
25 the most important object of claims everywhere, but they are priori-  
26 tized only in France, partly in Italy, and especially in Sweden, while in  
27 Germany and above all in Switzerland and the UK such a priority is  
28 challenged by labor organizations and groups. Similarly, substantial  
29 differences can also be observed in the form of claim making, not only  
30 across countries, with the field being much more contentious in France  
31 than in the other countries, but also across actors and issues, as shown  
32 by Donatella della Porta in Chapter 2.

33 Indeed, beyond the overall claim making in the field, important  
34 differences emerge when we look at specific collective actors. In this  
35 book we have examined the role of three types of collective actors that  
36 are particularly important in the contentious politics of unemploy-  
37 ment: trade unions, civil society actors (in particular, non-state welfare  
38 organizations and groups), and the unemployed themselves. Annulla  
39 Linders and Marina Kalander have shown in Chapter 4 that the unions’  
40 position toward the unemployed, in terms of claim making, varies  
41 in important ways between countries. This can be related to certain

1 general features of the national context such as the larger institutional  
2 arrangements characterizing each nation, but also to aspects more  
3 specifically linked to the field of unemployment politics such as the  
4 different models of social welfare and the institutional arrangements  
5 to deal with unemployment. In a similar fashion, Simone Baglioni in  
6 Chapter 5 maintains that the access civil society actors have to public  
7 debates on unemployment depends on the larger context. While civil  
8 society claims-making in unemployment politics takes the different  
9 forms of the civil society itself, it is to a large extent channelled by con-  
10 textual features such as characteristics pertaining to the policy system,  
11 the form of the state, and the traditional arrangements between the  
12 state and civil society with regard to welfare provisions. Finally, Simone  
13 Baglioni, Britta Baumgarten, Didier Chabanet, and Christian Lahusen  
14 in Chapter 6 underscore the differences, but also the similarities, of  
15 the mobilization of the unemployed depending, among other things,  
16 on the specific configurations of political opportunities in each of the  
17 three countries they studied.

18 In addition, cross-national variations also appear once we look at the  
19 networks between collective actors who intervene in this field, at least  
20 as far as cooperation among actors in Britain, Germany, and Switzerland  
21 are concerned, as shown by Manlio Cinalli and Katharina Füglistner in  
22 Chapter 3. By looking at relationships of cooperation among actors  
23 within the national unemployment field in three countries, they sug-  
24 gest that important variations of opportunities, resources, and culture  
25 will impinge upon actors' decisions and preferences when forging their  
26 networks.

27 Thus, the contentious field of unemployment is structured in differ-  
28 ent ways in different countries. Following a neo-institutional perspec-  
29 tive, we have hypothesized that in part this is due to differences in the  
30 institutional approaches to unemployment characterizing each coun-  
31 try. Although we did not explore this linkage systematically, the analy-  
32 ses offered in this volume point to the role played by both general and  
33 specific political opportunity structures. Chapter 1, in particular, points  
34 to the strong impact of unemployment and labor market regulations,  
35 which are conceptualized, inspired by previous work (Giugni et al.  
36 2009), as forming a specific opportunity structure for claim making in  
37 the unemployment political field.

38 Yet we would be much too naïve if we argued that that all the vari-  
39 ations that we could observe throughout the book are explained by  
40 the specific configuration of political opportunities in terms of unem-  
41 ployment and labor market regulations. Different welfare models or

1 welfare state regimes and, more specifically, different institutional  
2 arrangements to deal with unemployment certainly define the bounda-  
3 ries within which collective actors can intervene in the field of unem-  
4 ployment politics—both in the public domain and in more hidden  
5 policy networks—and channel the political claim making in the field.  
6 However, other factors must be taken into account as well, such as the  
7 more general institutional settings of the country, the characteristics  
8 of industrial relations and the neo-corporatist versus pluralist tradition  
9 of collaboration between the state and organized interest in society,  
10 the structure and degree of flexibility or rigidity of the labor market,  
11 the state of the economy and in particular employment, and so forth.  
12 While we are well aware of the potential impact of these other factors,  
13 in this book we wanted to strike another chord and stress the role of the  
14 welfare state as a source of political opportunities specific to the field of  
15 unemployment politics.

16 At the same time, these important cross-national variations should  
17 not make us overlook the equally interesting similarities across coun-  
18 tries that can also be observed. A first common trait consists in the  
19 very nature of the political field at hand. Although conflicts and  
20 disagreements are not lacking, the field of unemployment politics  
21 is less contentious than other political fields, such as for example  
22 the field of immigration and ethnic relations politics (see Koopmans  
23 et al. 2005). One can see this in the forms of action used by collective  
24 actors to enter the field. The latter is characterized by a low degree  
25 of radicalization. As mentioned earlier, in spite of cross-national vari-  
26 ations as a result of different configurations of political opportuni-  
27 ties for protest, the large majority of claims take the form of verbal  
28 statements and, perhaps with the exception of France, only a small  
29 share of claims are made of unconventional protests. In the same  
30 vein, when we look at the position of claims toward the object or  
31 constituency (either workers or unemployed), overall we observe a  
32 relatively positive position in all the countries. Of course, specific  
33 actors may vary and do vary in this respect, but the general discursive  
34 climate is quite positive. Again, this contrasts for example with the  
35 field of immigration and ethnic relations politics (Koopmans et al.  
36 2005) and is a sign of a lower degree of contentiousness of the field.  
37 An additional common feature across countries is the fact that the  
38 groups whose interests are most directly affected by what happens in  
39 the field—the unemployed—are usually at the center of debates, but  
40 at the margin of the action. This leads me to discuss the next issue,  
41 namely the role of the unemployed.

**1 Unemployed: Objects or actors?**

2  
3 Many different collective interests are at stake in the contentious politics  
4 of unemployment. Most notably, trade unions and employer's organi-  
5 zations surely have much to gain or lose from policy changes in this  
6 field. In the end, however, those who are most directly affected are the  
7 unemployed themselves. To use the terminology we have used in the  
8 study upon which this volume is drawn, the unemployed are the main  
9 object of contention in this political field. While the extent to which  
10 jobless people are placed at the center of debates in the public domain  
11 and of political exchanges through policy networks may vary across  
12 countries as well as over time, the unemployed are always in some way,  
13 directly or indirectly, affected by such debates and exchanges.

14 Yet, as we said earlier, the unemployed are not the only category to  
15 be placed at the center of public debates and collective mobilizations  
16 in the field of unemployment politics. As Chapter 1 has shown, even  
17 in their role of object of other's actions and discourses the unemployed  
18 must face the challenge of another category of actors, namely work-  
19 ers and more specifically workers under threat of redundancy. Quite  
20 understandably, this is all the more true when it comes to claims made  
21 by labor organizations and groups, who tend to privilege their own con-  
22 stituency, namely workers and employees, as pointed out in Chapter 4.  
23 At the same time, it is interesting to note that, once again, the context  
24 matters. Thus, the share of unemployed objects in the claim making of  
25 labor organizations and groups varies considerably from one country to  
26 the other, being very high in a country such as Sweden and reaching its  
27 lowest level in Switzerland and the UK. Far from arguing that this is the  
28 only possible explanation, the specific configuration of welfare in those  
29 countries accounts, at least in part, for such differences.

30 But, beyond being objects of others' actions and discourses as well as  
31 of state policies, are the unemployed also able to become active political  
32 actors? In other words, can the organized unemployed take their destiny  
33 in their hands and perhaps even become agents of change? Previous  
34 work has often pointed to the obstacles and barriers unemployed  
35 people must face to become involved in politics (see Giugni 2008b for  
36 a review). They may have a poor interest in politics and therefore in  
37 engaging in politics. They may lack the "objective" condition that gives  
38 rise to grievances about their situation, therefore lacking the numbers  
39 necessary to form a social movement. As the framing approach to social  
40 movements has emphasized (see Benford and Snow 2000 and Snow  
41 2004 for reviews), they may be hard to motivate for action, to identify

1 causes and consequences of a given problem, to define unemployment  
2 as an unjust condition, to blame the political authorities or someone  
3 else for this condition, and so forth. They may lack a strong collective  
4 identity to be politically engaged, an important aspect for forming  
5 a social movement, as shown by the social movement literature (see  
6 Polletta and Jasper 2001 for a review). They may lack internal resources  
7 (both in terms of the organizational infrastructure supporting mobili-  
8 zation and the networks of interpersonal relations that facilitate the  
9 formation of collective identities as well as the creation of shared under-  
10 standings of their situation), a crucial factor for political mobilization,  
11 as shown by resource mobilization theory (see Edwards and McCarthy  
12 2004 for a review). But there may also be an absence of favorable politi-  
13 cal opportunities preventing unemployed people from expressing their  
14 grievances publicly, as shown by political opportunity theory (see Kriesi  
15 2004a and Meyer 2004 for reviews).

16 Thus, for a number of reasons, the unemployed are a politically  
17 marginalized collective actor, often confined to their role as object of  
18 public debates as well as the actions of other, more powerful actors.  
19 The analyses provided in this book largely confirm that. Yet the unem-  
20 ployed are sometimes able to transcend their marginalization in order  
21 to organize and mobilize collectively. This often occurs at the local  
22 level (Baglioni et al. 2008a) rather than at the national level, where  
23 constraints are even larger. In addition, as works on political mobiliza-  
24 tion by the unemployed have stressed (see Giugni 2008b for a review),  
25 marginalized groups tend to engage in spontaneous and unorganized  
26 rather than in more conventional and structured forms of political  
27 activism. Regardless of the locus of action and the form it takes, Chapter  
28 6 has pointed to a number of conditions under which protest by unem-  
29 ployed people become more likely: when previously granted rights or  
30 goods are threatened or even withdrawn; when an infrastructure for the  
31 protest can be created by organizations; when there are political allies  
32 and entrepreneurs that can spur the action; when the mass media and  
33 public opinion are in favor of their demands; and when activists are  
34 able to exploit available opportunities or to surmount existing con-  
35 straints through empowerment and collective learning.

36 Perhaps more interestingly, in spite of all the obstacles mentioned  
37 earlier that constrain their action both locally and nationally, jobless  
38 people are sometimes able to mobilize beyond their national borders,  
39 as discussed by Didier Chabanet in Chapter 9 (see further Mathers 2007  
40 and Royall 2002). Although the impact of this mobilization is far from  
41 being crystal clear, the European marches against unemployment, job

1 insecurity, and social exclusion of 1997 have sent an important mes-  
2 sage to social movement scholars and policy makers alike. The former  
3 were made aware, if they needed to be, that even improbable collective  
4 actions can indeed occur. The latter were perhaps sensitized toward  
5 the problem of the unemployed given the important mediatic impact  
6 of that campaign. This transnational mobilization was made possible  
7 also thanks to the work of a small number of entrepreneurs who seized  
8 the political opportunities presenting themselves to build a movement  
9 at the European level. In addition, the movement gained visibility by  
10 adopting a specific kind of action—the march—pointing to the impor-  
11 tant of strategic choices for movement leaders and participants. But  
12 how open and accessible are the public domain and the policy networks  
13 for civil society actors in this field? I address this issue next.

#### 15 **The multilevel game of the contentious politics of** 16 **unemployment**

18 Social policies and, more specifically, measures aimed at fighting unem-  
19 ployment are traditionally enacted and implemented at the national  
20 or subnational level. Yet in this field trends toward transnationaliza-  
21 tion can also be observed. In particular, since the 1990s, the European  
22 Union has taken various policy initiatives, most notably the European  
23 Employment Strategy, and made steps toward a common social policy  
24 with the aim of fighting unemployment and social exclusion. Although  
25 we are far from a transfer of competencies from the national to the  
26 supranational—European, in this case—level, at least the seeds of a  
27 trend toward what we may call a “multilevel governance of unemploy-  
28 ment” have been planted. In such a multilayered configuration of insti-  
29 tutional competencies and policy measures the European Union and its  
30 member states must increasingly interact to find the best solutions to  
31 the challenges posed by unemployment. This holds to some extent also  
32 for a country such as Switzerland that is not member of the European  
33 Union, but is in some way forced to abide to the rules and regulations  
34 adopted by the latter following a process of autonomous adaptation  
35 (Sciarini et al. 2004).

36 This transfer of competencies, or at least this increasingly important  
37 role of the European Union, creates new opportunities from above for  
38 collective actors to engage in political claim making on issue relating to  
39 unemployment and, more generally, social exclusion. Recent scholar-  
40 ship on social movements has stressed the importance of supranational  
41 opportunities for the transnationalization of protest (della Porta and

1 Tarrow 2005; Smith 2004; Tarrow 2001, 2005) and more specifically  
2 with regard to the European Union (Imig and Tarrow 2001c). As we  
3 have seen, in some occasions the unemployed were able to exploit such  
4 opportunities to mount an important movement. Yet Europeanization  
5 not only creates new opportunities, it also poses constraints. More  
6 precisely, it opens up opportunities for certain actors, while shrinking  
7 them for others. Inversely, it softens the constraints for some actors,  
8 but at the same time it also increases them for others. As is shown by  
9 Paul Statham and Manlio Cinalli in Chapter 8, the Europeanization of  
10 debates has led to an empowerment of the already powerful executive  
11 actors, at the expense of parties and actors from civil society. Similarly,  
12 the multiorganizational field of unemployment within policy networks  
13 at the European level is dominated by institutional actors from above,  
14 with little if any access for civil society actors.

15 In such a context, the less powerful actors have little room to  
16 intervene through institutional channels and must resort to less con-  
17 ventional forms of actions, including protest. Yet, as Chapter 1 and  
18 especially Chapter 2 and Chapter 5 have shown, if this does not occur  
19 very often it is also because the political opportunities, both general and  
20 specific, for protest by civil society actors (including social movements)  
21 are not always present. Again, cross-national differences are important  
22 in this respect.

23 That we are far from witnessing a scale shift in the public debates on  
24 unemployment is made clear by the longitudinal analysis provided by  
25 Christian Lahusen, Marco Giugni, and Michel Berclaz in Chapter 7. At  
26 least for the period examined in this volume (1995–2002), the claim  
27 making in unemployment politics remains firmly anchored at the  
28 national or subnational level. Similar to what has been observed for  
29 the field of immigration and ethnic relations politics (Koopmans and  
30 Statham 1999b; Koopmans et al. 2005), the bulk of the claims made  
31 in this field still address the national state, have a nationally bounded  
32 scope, are made by national actors, and deal with national issues.  
33 Furthermore, no significant trend toward something resembling a shift  
34 from the national to the supranational level could be observed (again,  
35 limited to the period under study), but rather punctual increases in cor-  
36 respondence to specific initiatives taken at the European level.

37 Thus, while we hardly deny that a multilevel game of the contentious  
38 politics of unemployment in Europe has emerged, the best cards are still  
39 largely in the hands of the nation. This has a number of implications,  
40 at both the theoretical and practical level. On the one hand, scholars  
41 interested in this field of studies should pay much attention to both the

1 similarities and differences that exist across countries in the ways public  
2 debates and policy deliberations in the unemployment political field  
3 are spelled out. To be sure, they do not have to overlook the pressures  
4 from above and the changes that the latter may bring to the field, but a  
5 careful analysis of the contentious politics of unemployment in Europe  
6 and elsewhere also requires consideration of the important impact of  
7 national opportunities and constraints. On the other hand, practi-  
8 tioners and policy makers alike should be aware that national states  
9 continue to be crucial points of reference to evaluate where opportu-  
10 nities and constraints for policy making are located. The fight against  
11 unemployment, which is among the most important policy aims across  
12 Europe today, cannot operate in abstraction from the evidence we have  
13 shown in this volume.

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15 **Note**

16  
17 I would like to thank Manlio Cinalli for his careful reading of a previous draft.  
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