The European Pillar of Social Rights: perpetuating asymmetrical governance?

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Introduction

Ever since the re-launch of the EU project in the 1980s, political will manifesting itself in hard law and binding targets has led to the realization of Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Now comprising 19 of 28 European Union (EU) member states, the single currency project has been underpinnned first by the Maastricht Criteria and subsequently the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) to reinforce fiscal discipline among participating states and governments, and without seeking to extend the same logic to the private sector. At the same time and in line with a shift in economic thinking already manifest at Maastricht, the financialization of the real economy took hold and left the EU, and especially the Eurozone, exposed to the whims of a malfunctioning banking and regulatory system (Selmic 2015). The outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008 led quite rapidly to the Eurozone banking and financial crisis first, which then mutated into a full-blown economic crisis with deep political ramifications. The mishandling of the crisis on the part of EU policy-makers, both at national and supranational level (see Parker and Tsarouhas, forthcoming), has led to soul searching and various proposals aiming at reconstituting EMU as currently practiced. Seven years after the outbreak of the crisis and despite the fact that macroeconomic data points to a return to (pre-crisis) normalcy, the systemic reasons that led to the crisis’ outbreak have not disappeared.

The adoption of the European Semester during the crisis reinforced, at least at the early stage of the Semester’s existence, the supremacy of economic and fiscal coordination over other considerations (Costamagna 2013). ‘Social Europe’, on the other hand, achieved EU status in the late 1980s and has been accompanied by various initiatives at EU level, some of which have led to the adoption of social and employment policy Directives. Yet for the most part, ‘Social Europe’ remains an aspiration instead of a reality, with national and supranational modes of policy-making maintaining an uneasy co-existence (Streeck 1995). The crisis has come at a heavy price in terms of socio-economic convergence between and across member states, with poverty and social exclusion on the rise not only in the periphery of the Eurozone but beyond it as well.
In that context then and in an attempt to diffuse some of the simmering tension produced by the rise in poverty and inequality in the EU, the European Commission under the premiership of Jean-Claude Juncker has tabled a proposal for a European Pillar of Fundamental Social Rights. This paper aims to assess and critically evaluate the recent Commission proposal, which is meant to form part of a broader effort towards a ‘Genuine Economic and Monetary Union’ that will acquire a stronger social dimension. Famously, the European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker is ambitious enough for the Union to achieve a ‘Social Triple A’, (Juncker 2014) and it is within this context that the (still evolving and as yet not finalized) Pillar initiative ought to be conceptualized.

The paper places the debate on the Pillar and its viability/appropriateness/applicability within the larger context of the ‘Social Europe’ debate on the one hand, and the economic and financial crisis of recent years on the other. The two are interconnected on several fronts, not least because of the negative (and, for some member states, devastating) effects that the latter has had on the former. In fact, it is the widely accepted recognition of the fact that ‘Social Europe’ has been among the primary victims of the crisis that led Jean Claude Juncker to announce his intention of launching a Social Pillar in 2015. The starting point of this paper is the identification of a major asymmetry in EU governance pertaining to economic and monetary policy on the one hand, and ‘Social Europe’ on the other. Though this asymmetry is at least partly the logical outcome of integration itself, its existence is proving nevertheless costly in terms of EU legitimacy and popular acceptance, especially in those states most heavily affected by the crisis and its repercussions.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section discusses the emergence of Social Europe and the concomitant debate, which dates to the 1980s. It points to successes as well as limitations of the attempt to strengthen the social dimension of EU integration, and questions the extent to which Social Europe is compatible with the political priorities adopted by the EU and its institutions in recent years. The next section analyses the proposed Pillar of Fundamental Social Rights in terms of its ability to rebalance the EU’s constitutional asymmetry, bringing into focus the most recent debates on the subject and the role played by various EU actors in the process. In doing so, it situates the pillar within the broader hierarchical context of EU economic governance and problematizes its ideological content to ascertain whether, and to what extent, the pillar EU social policy away from moves is post-2010 neoliberal paradigm. The concluding section summarizes the main argument and articulates possible ways forward in the ways in which the Pillar is to be understood, including the ramifications of its possible implementation on EU integration.
The Single Market and ‘Social Europe’ as a compensation mechanism

The initiation of the Single Market project in the 1980s proved a turning point in European integration. It entailed massive regulatory change to harmonize rules on a whole series of goods and, later on, services delivered between and across member states. Beyond its technical side, however, more important proved to be the political and economic consequences of this gigantic project. It soon became clear that the Single Market’s success was premised on its continuous expansion to more policy fields, underpinned by the judicial competence of the European Court of Justice as well as the market-friendly policy inclinations of the vast majority of member states. It is by no accident that the UK under Mrs. Thatcher fought hard for the Single Market to become a reality, aware of how domestic economic and social policy reform would only be sustainable if Brussels resistance to it proved futile or ineffective. The project soon gathered pace and became the flagship policy of the EU, hardly ever contested as a major success and a driver of growth and employment.

Implementing the single market, however, was well known to come at a cost, especially for those member states less capable of dealing with the competitive challenges it brought about. Calls for a compensation mechanism through market-correcting policies at EU level grew louder with time, but have always been plagued by an oxymoron. On the one hand, the idea that social policy at Community level should be strengthened, and that the common challenges faced by EU states battling high levels of social exclusion and poverty necessitate a form of Europeanised response, is very popular (Begg and Berghman 2002: 180). The economic crisis and its socially disruptive consequences reinforce the need for more concerted action on the social policy front at supranational level.

On the other hand, however, there is strong resistance among many member states to the idea of a Europeanised social policy and the uploading of policy competences to the Union, as these national-level competences have been negotiated over a long time, are associated with the nation state and its obligation to serve citizens’ welfare, and have thus acquired a nearly untouchable status. Moreover, EU social policy has always had a meaning different from the one attributed to it at national level. Rather than centred on income redistribution, services provision and social protection, EU social policy has traditionally meant labour market regulation, anti-discrimination legislation and regions-based income support. In recent years, social policy has gone beyond labour market regulation and anti-discrimination rules to embrace a more comprehensive understanding of social policy. EU action is nowadays a mix of legislation, regulation and policy coordination.

The latter has been increasingly adopted in an attempt to address problems common to member states without removing the latter’s competences. This process has with time led to new debates as to whether some sort of latent or ‘creeping’ Europeanisation may be on the cards, especially since ‘soft’ methods of policy coordination, primarily the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), were adopted in policy areas such as pensions, healthcare and social
exclusion. According to an optimistic reading, this enhanced the scope of EU activism in social policy beyond the labour market and emerged in parallel to the Union’s adoption of a citizenship-based perspective in its understanding of social policy (Threlfall 2007).

Until the 1980s and with the exception of the Social Action Programme (Daly 2007: 2), social policy received little attention within the Community. At a time when welfare capitalism was on the ascendancy across Europe, the notion of a European social policy framework was of secondary importance to trade liberalisation, which constitutes the essence of European economic integration to this day. After all, the belief that market excesses should be corrected at the national level was part of a national settlement and cross-party consensus on the role of the state in economic policy. For the founders of the Union, social policy thus remained a national concern (Tsoukalas 1993: 151). This was despite the fact that the Rome Treaty had in places explicitly addressed social policy issues, going as far as envisaging social systems’ harmonisation at some point in the future. However, the social policy acquis was largely confined to employment regulation and anti-discrimination laws, implemented with varying degrees of success in the member states.

Commission President (1985–95) Jacques Delors played a decisive role in giving a push to Europe’s Social Dimension, starting off the debate on (the need for a) ‘Social Europe’, which remains unresolved until today. Delors made use of the new opportunities offered by the Single European Act, and especially Article 118a that foresaw the possibility of majority voting on health and safety issues, bypassing national vetoes. This reinforced the acquis on health and safety issues over time and broadened the scope of employee protection. In addition, Delors sought to give a powerful say to the social partners on employment regulation and social issues by initiating the European Social Dialogue (Hantrais 1995). Today, agreements reached between the two sides go some way towards offering a solid regulatory layer over employment conditions and include agreements (which in some cases have become Directives following TEU provisions) on parental leave, part-time work, flexi-work, tele-work, stress at work and violence at work. It is doubtful, however, whether these achievements ever went beyond adding a regulatory layer to cross-border mobility and labour market regulation as an indispensable part of free movement, the cornerstone of the original Rome Treaty.

Other achievements during that era are the 1989 Fundamental Social Rights of Workers (that excluded the UK) and the Social Protocol annexed to the Maastricht Treaty. Both documents marked progress in the social policy field (O’Connor 2005: 347), yet their minimalist and strictly voluntary character narrowed the room for manoeuvre available to the pro-social policy coalition. The definition of social policy remained circumscribed, and the headline goal of EMU overshadowed ‘Social Europe’.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the EU was still busy seeking to establish new legislative norms in the field of social policy and promote institution-building in order to respond to popular pressure for a stronger social dimension (Tsarouhas 2007: 33). Although some member states wished to see social policy emerge as an autonomous actor in policy-making, a
move beyond employment policy was not seen as particularly necessary. One pertinent example is the refusal by the Council to adopt the 4th Poverty Programme, which was premised on a serious funding increase compared to the previous one (Larsen and Taylor-Gooby 2004: 185). During that time, the realisation that institution-building was becoming more difficult led to the adoption of a policy coordination approach. The concept of social exclusion was introduced as persistently high unemployment rates marginalised large parts of the population and an attempt to introduce a more holistic approach to social issues began.

The 1997 Amsterdam Treaty was a step forward in that it made social exclusion policies subject to QMV voting. Three years later, the Nice European Council set particular objectives for the Union in combating both poverty and social exclusion and set out to do so by mobilising all relevant actors, facilitating employment participation, assisting the most vulnerable and preventing the risk of exclusion (Daly 2006: 466). This constituted a major development, to the extent that poverty now became an integral part of Union policy, at least in rhetorical terms, in contrast to the limited and under-funded anti-poverty programmes of the past. What is more, social policy was explicitly recognised as a productive factor, as well as an instrument to tackle inequalities and social exclusion (Larsen and Taylor-Gooby 2004: 188).

More significant yet was the incorporation of social exclusion in the EU’s flagship Lisbon Agenda in the year 2000. ‘Lisbon I’ was premised on the assumption of a virtuous circle guiding the relationship between jobs, growth and (preventing) social exclusion. Using clearly defined objectives and based on common guidelines, the EU made a leap forward in its perspective. It ceased conceiving social policy in labour market terms only, and broadened its scope insofar as it spelled out a comprehensive approach marrying employment opportunities with ‘rights, resources, goods, services, helping the most vulnerable [and] preventing social exclusion’ (Daly 2007: 5). This was a social rights approach that conferred a new dynamic to social policy. To implement the new approach, the EU relied on the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), a system previously tried out in economic and employment policy.

In the year 2000 it was decided that poverty and social exclusion policies would be subject to the OMC, a ‘soft law’ approach to social policy based on numerical and qualitative targets debated and agreed upon by member states and with the Commission playing a coordinating role. Essentially this stands for fixing EU Guidelines and setting implementation timetables; translating these into policy initiatives based on national peculiarities and institutional traditions; setting benchmarks to assess best practice and follow these up by use of periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review. The goal would be to facilitate policy learning (Zeitlin and Pochet 2005) by incentivising countries to imitate best practice followed elsewhere without evoking the stick of legal sanctions if they were to fail to comply.

Eighteen indicators to measure progress and reduce social exclusion were first agreed upon at the 2001 Laeken Summit, and elaborate definitions of poverty were developed. Action Plans were formulated by member states but the process appeared to be running out of steam following the midterm review of the Lisbon Strategy and the publication of the 2004 Kok
Report. Its unflattering conclusions on EU progress towards meeting the Lisbon objectives (High Level Group 2004) led to a fundamental change in approach. Social exclusion was merged with the pensions and healthcare OMCs (both had been initiated in 2004) and the term itself was replaced with ‘active social inclusion’, making the previously loosened link with labour market activation stronger yet again. In addition, efficiency has become a dominant theme of the new policy approach replacing the previous emphasis on prevention as the best way to tackle social exclusion (Daly 2007: 7).

Soft law in general and the OMC in particular are reliant upon cognitive Europeanisation understood as ‘the shaping and reshaping of the perception of and attitudes towards social problems and the way to tackle them’ (Guillén and Alvarez 2004: 286). In addition to the implementation of the acquis and its transposition into national law, this is an alternative way to judge the effect of the EU on member states and candidate countries’ policies. It relies less on hard evidence and more on discursive changes related to the design and conceptualisation as much as the actual legislative changes introduced by states.

The Commission’s Social Pillar Initiative

By the time Jean-Claude Juncker became Commission President following the 2014 European Parliament elections, the debate on ‘Social Europe’ had become limited and its successes were minimal. Some earlier achievements of the social acquis were still in place, such as the Directives on leave for different occupational categories, and they were complemented by primary law such as the Charter of Fundamental Social Rights. Increasingly, however, Social Europe sounded more like an aspiration than a reality. ‘Soft law’ methods had been practiced for a long time but in the absence of binding mechanisms had been producing meagre results, while ‘hard law’ provisions were either not implemented or in need of adaptation to a changing labour market reality across the member states. To top it all, the ongoing economic and financial crisis had led to increasing Euroscepticism and most EU citizens, even in those states not directly affected by austerity and cuts in social services, thought that the Union was moving in the wrong direction.

Strengthening the social dimension became part of the Political Guidelines that Juncker put forward in the summer of 2014. A year later, along with the heads of the other major EU institutions (Council, Parliament, the ECB and Eurogroup), the Commission called for a ‘Social Triple A’, clearly pointing to the need of reinvigorating the Social Dimension (Juncker 2015a), and achieving convergence between as well as within member states. The latter would be necessary to preserve the ‘European model’, whatever the term stands for. Better (in EU parlance ‘decent’) jobs, growth and social protection should stand at the heart of this ambition. Then in September 2015 Juncker announced the Pillar of Social Rights as a new initiative by the Commission, which should be owned equally by the Commission, member states as well as the social partners. The goal was for the Pillar to serve ‘as a compass
for the renewed convergence within the Euro area’ (Juncker 2015b) and two things became immediately clear. First, and although other member states would be free to join in, the Pillar was primarily targeted at Eurozone countries. The pains of austerity and the economic crisis had led to new thinking about how the Social Dimension could look like in the context of the European Semester and member states’ fiscal obligations. Second, talk of the need for convergence highlighted the basic public policy problem at the heart of the Eurozone construction, which had become apparent after the crisis hit: a virtuous process of socio-economic convergence between the core and periphery of the Eurozone had given place to rapid divergence, feeding into national egotisms, stereotyping and the near break-up of the single currency. This is also the reason for placing convergence at the core of the Five Presidents’ Report.

In March 2016 the Commission published its Communication on the Pillar of Social Rights, with the explicit aim of thereby contributing to the deepening of EMU in line with the Presidents’ Report (European Commission 2016). The Communication was further accompanied by two staff working documents on labour market trends as well as the current state of the social acquis. The Communication makes clear that social policy is (should be?) a productive factor, and that member states with the more advanced welfare and social protection arrangements also tend to be the most competitive and dynamic economies in Europe. In the next few pages of the Communication, and despite the references to the social cost of the economic crisis, the Commission spells out what is essentially a repertoire of ideas that could had been taken directly from a late 1990s/early 2000s policy document. It justifies the launch of the Pillar initiative on grounds of the globalization challenge, now updated to include the need for sustainable development in an era of environmental degradation. It highlights the challenges faced by traditional welfare states due to demographic pressure, new life-work arrangements by mobile professionals and the inability of welfare states to address social issues without paying prudent attention to macroeconomic (im)balances. Finally, it seeks to revive the flexicurity debate, and calls for new attention to be paid to the concept as it could potentially be a satisfactory answer to the needs of employers and employees alike (European Commission, 2016: 3-5). An annex to the Communication highlights the three main headings along which the Pillar is to be structured. These are: a) equal opportunities and access to the labour market by means of stressing the employability of individuals, b) fair working conditions that will allow for decent jobs whilst maximizing flexibility for firms to respond to market needs and c) adequate social protection to ensure citizens’ full and unhindered participation in society (ibid, pp. 7-8). References to the Social Dialogue are many, and the Commission appears to be placing high importance in incorporating the views of the recognized social partners not only in the feedback through the consultation but in creating a set of more concrete objectives in the context of the Pillar. Nevertheless, the 2016 Communication was from the outset meant to be merely the beginning of the process. The consultation that followed lasted until the end of 2016, and developments since have been numerous.

In December 2016 the European Parliament’s Committee on Employment and Social Affairs published its own-initiative report on the Pillar. The Committee’s rapporteur was the S&D
Vie-President MEP Maria-Joao Rodriguez, former Employment Minister in Portugal and current President of the Foundation for European progressive Studies (FEPS). The report welcomed the Commission’s initiative, embracing the Pillar but went beyond the Commission’s position. It asked for concrete action on the part of the Commission by way of enforceable, legally guaranteed rights to be offered to working people and vulnerable groups, and for action to be adopted in sync both at the European and national level (European Parliament 2016). The report contained a host of concrete proposals, including inter alia the need for a new Framework Directive to ensure decent working conditions for all employees, adequate income for all, a Child Guarantee enforceable across all member states as well as the portability of social rights within the EU (ibid.). A high-level conference that followed the month after attracted a lot of attention, with hundreds of delegates representing member states, EU institutions and associations as well as the social partners and associations. At around the same time and following the tight schedule that the Parliament had endorsed, the Parliament considered the Pillar Report with an overwhelming majority (votewatch.eu)

After the EP and other stakeholders gave concrete feedback to the Commission’s initiative, the Commission presented the Pillar in April 2017 through two different legal forms. On the one hand it published a Commission Recommendation and on the other proposed a Joint proclamation (by the three main institutions), which is meant to be a political endorsement of the Pillar and is expected to be approved by the Commission, parliament and Council at the EU Social Summit in Gothenburg in November 2017. The Recommendation’s Annex builds on the three main headings identified a year earlier and uses a rights-based language to outline the 20 principle son which the Pillar ought to be based. These range from equal opportunities and non-discrimination in the labour market to adequate social protection, encouraging social dialogue, the right to a healthy work environment and adequate income as well as long-term care, unemployment benefits and access to essential services (European Commission 2017). It is important to stress that the Recommendation has been accompanied by a parallel process of a string of initiatives to complement the Pillar and work in tandem with an attempt to consolidate, and occasionally expand, the social acquis. The process entails the creation of a social Scoreboard, whereby 12 indicators are used to measure labour market access, poverty and social exclusion, inequality (including gender-based discrimination), living conditions, childcare, healthcare and digital access (European Union 2017). Moreover, the Commission has been active through 2016 and 2017 in proposing the revision of the Posted Workers Directive to better fit current labour market conditions and employee rights, has put forward a proposal for a European Accessibility Act to allow disabled people to fully benefit from the Single Market and has put forward a proposal to revise the 2004 regulation on coordination of social security regimes within the European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland.
The Pillar’s Normative and Practical Aspects: an Assessment

The debate on the Social Pillar is only now beginning and developments over the short- to medium-term will be crucial in determining its efficacy. The analysis below takes stock of current developments and evaluates the Pillar based on available information as well as the track record of relevant institutions in the field of social policy.

The launching of the Pillar on Social Rights is potentially an important step in European integration. The discussion above confirms that the European Union’s Social Dimension has returned to the mainstream of the EU debate and is increasingly seen as an inescapable policy item, a policy field over which disagreements may persist but with which all major EU institutions will need to engage. The European Council’s Rome Declaration on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaty highlighted Social Europe as an essential element of the EU in the 21st century (European Council 2017). In two important respects, however, the return of Social Europe on the agenda was an inevitable result of two major developments.

First, the deepening of the Single Market and the rapid progress made towards economic and financial integration has further upset the already existent imbalance between ‘the economic’ and ‘then social’ in European integration. For a prolonged period of time, the free movement principle has trumped social consideration in order to smoothen the functioning of the Single Market and fully reap the benefits of its existence. This has had a number of effects, with the possibility of wage dumping being one of them. The role of the Court of Justice of the European Union has been controversial in this regard, but this raises the thorny question of competences at EU level, the division of labour between member states and the Commission as well as the political direction of the EU as a result of national elections and a shifting power balance between progressive and conservative forces.

Second, the economic and financial crisis has exacerbated already existing tensions across different member states, confirming malfunctioning parts of the classic welfare states and led to accelerated divergence between member states’ performances in key social indicators such as poverty and social exclusion (Fernandes and Rinaldi 2016). Divergence is much more than a word, and has had clear repercussions in the EU, threatening to derail the process of integration altogether. Though it is difficult to find a direct causation between the said divergence and the rise of Euroscepticism as well as xenophobia in most EU member states, the majority of Europeans have until recently been overtly sceptical about the direction of the European Union and the set of priorities it sets for itself. Making sure that the Social Dimension is protected and enhanced appears to be a certain way of alleviating at least some of those concerns and encouraging a more fruitful debate as to what the EU can, and cannot do, at a time of rapid technological change and major socio-economic and political upheaval. Linking the Union to social rights and the protection of the most vulnerable in society, be they minorities, the disabled, precarious workers or the struggling middle class, alleviates a lot of
existing concerns and makes integration a more welcoming prospect than has hitherto been the case.

Given the above, the future of the Pillar could prove of crucial importance to the future of the European Union. The challenges ahead are as follows:

1) **Clarity as to the ultimate goal**: early on, the Commission suggested that its Pillar proposal would serve two main aims. First, it would act help consolidate the existing social acquis and second, would complement existing legislation where necessary and in full respect of member states’ competences. Yet is this degree of ambition adequate, given the nature of the social problems faced by most Member States, as well as the growth of horizontal policy problems, such as the rise in inequality? The Parliament, through its Report, makes clear that the goal should be more and better legislation on the social policy field, clearly asserting the need for binding policies for all participating countries. For the time being, this point remains mute but its consequences are very important for many stakeholders, not least those representing the interests of employees.

2) **Scope**: given the Commission’s desire to use the Pillar so as to make EMU function better, it is little surprise that the aim is for the Pillar to become operational for Eurozone members only, at least for a while, and leave the option to other Member States of joining in on a voluntary basis. This then throws out into the open the discussion on differentiated integration, which is complicated and difficult to resolve in a way satisfactory to all (Holzinger and Schimmelfennig 2012). However, and this is linked to the first challenge identified above, shouldn’t the Union’s Social Dimension be a horizontal policy issue that will not become compartmentalized? The Rome Declaration, though vague and general as such documents tend to be, appears to suggest that ‘Social Europe’ is a common concern for countries inside and outside the Eurozone. Building up mechanisms of flexibility down the line may be a sensible way to go given the heterogeneity of member states’ preferences, but the danger of a two-speed Social Europe is present if the decision of whom to include and exclude is taken in advance. Related to that point is the operationalization of the Pillar in relation to the European Semester. The latter remains contested (REFERENCE) and one of the main points of criticism against it is the absence of a link between macroeconomic policy goals and social policy. Settling the Social Scoreboard independently of the Semester will not hell in alleviating those concerns.

3) **Policies**: a large part of the Pillar’s focus based on the Commission’s Recommendation is preoccupied with addressing labour market bottlenecks, especially on the supply side of labour. This is understandable given the Commission’s mandate, but past experience can serve as a useful guide for future policy-making. The EP Report and many stakeholders in the field of social and economic policy endorse a comprehensive agenda of decision-making towards the establishment of a common set of policies, including a minimum wage, an unemployment insurance scheme as an automatic stabilization mechanism (Andor et al., 2014), a Child Guarantee and more. The Commission appears reluctant to
endorse such an agenda, possibly in anticipation of reactions by member states and/or employers. Yet it also has to be recognized that the scale of the challenge now faced by policy-makers is of an entirely different magnitude compared to the late 1990s and early 2000s. ‘Soft law’ methods based on the principles of the Pillar is likely to make a positive contribution in upscaling national performance on Social Indicators, but the absence of bold policy initiatives through hard law instruments and the absence of political pressure to translate those into concrete action will limit the Pillar’s appeal among those concerned with the direction of social policy at EU level. In the same vein, financial incentives and instruments can make a big difference on the ground (Fernandes and Vandenbroucke 2017) – and this is fully compatible with both the current needs of different states and regions (especially those suffering from high unemployment and poverty) and the Single Market. The launching of the European Social Fund (ESF) in the early 1960s is a good example of how free movement and the tackling of regional and occupational problems can go hand in hand.

Conclusion

The social dimension of the European Union first came to prominence in the 1980s by the European Commission and its then President Jacques Delors. The range of laws, initiatives and recommendations that followed, including the consolidation and institutionalization of the European Social Dialogue, was part of Delors’ attempt to make Europeans appreciate the benefits of integration. The arrival of the Single Market and its deepening over the years has been a double-edged sword: its contribution to growth and prosperity for many in the EU is undeniable and the consolidation of the free movement principle is today taken for granted by many and is seen as a crowning EU achievement. Nevertheless, the Social Dimension as originally envisaged never came to pass: loose regulatory arrangements in social policy have failed to incentivize policy-makers enough to cushion EU citizens from the effects of an economic downturn. When the crisis hit, the social toll was high and the crisis’ effects long lasting. Furthermore, the EU appeared preoccupied with economic and financial integration at the expense of social policy considerations for a prohibitively long period of time.

The launch of the European Pillar of Social Rights has unleashed a fruitful debate on social and employment policy which, however, goes way beyond that particular policy area. It is often, and rightly, linked to the very future of integration as it has the potential not just to re-introduce an old debate and update the current social acquis but to respond to the contemporary needs of policy-makers and citizens alike at a time when technological change and socio-economic upheaval challenges established ways of working across the EU and beyond. To fulfil its potential, the Pillar and its principles need to be put into practice both at European and national level, acquire some form of concrete implementation mechanism and be designed in a way that reinforces the virtues of existing welfare states while challenging
the sets of policies that evidently do not work. Close cooperation among a heterogeneous group of actors is required and the stakes are sufficiently high to make such cooperation possible.

REFERENCES


