Construction and Deconstruction of the “European Social Model”

Vaïa Demertzis

Research Fellow to the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research (FNRS)
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Ms Vaïa Demertzis.
Research Fellow at the FNRS
Université Libre de Bruxelles - Institute for European Studies (Belgium)
Contact : vdemertz@ulb.ac.be

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I. INTRODUCTION

Although the concept of “European social model” has been widely deployed within the existing literature (for a review of the academic literature, see Jepsen & Serrano Pascual 2005), there is no commonly agreed definition but a number of different meanings that have been frequently mixed up. This contribution suggests that the conceptual construction of the “European social model” – and specifically the concomitant evolution of its definitions and references – reveals how the EU institutions (mainly the European Commission and the European Council) have tried to assess – or not – a European social policy and by this way manifests their attempts to found a European community on a shared identity between the member states of which they belong to and are responsible for.

It analyses the social and symbolic construction of the “European social model” by the EU institutions. Though the “European social model” is a heuristic tool for descriptive, theoretical and normative analysis, the concept of “European social model” is basically a political referent in the hands of EU policy-makers. It appeared in the European political debate in the nineties, promoted by the European Commission, and has since become a successful catch-all concept for European as well as national politicians and institutions. However the analysis is restricted to both main actors of the institutionalisation of the concept “European social model” – namely the European Commission which set it up on the European agenda and the European Council which mobilised it to legitimise either the EU economic integration or the national socio-economic reforms.

The first section aims at discussing the institutional conceptions of the “European social model” at the EU level. It principally focuses on the decisions of the European Council meetings which define EU general political guidelines and then constitute the best ground to assess how the “European social model” is a tool for building EU identity. The emergence and conceptual evolution of the “European social model” determines various institutional conceptions of the “European social model” differing according to the content given to the “European social model” and the reference made to the “European social model” in the Conclusions of the European Presidencies. It is asserted that these origins and evolutions of the concept are related to the debate on the development of a EU social policy. Secondly, the implications of the concept of “European social model” and of its various institutional conceptions are analysed. It is suggested that the “European social model” is a key factor in building the EU identity and legitimising the EU institutions. Its attempts to promote a feeling of belonging to the EU political community rely on different methods – the recognition of common values, features or objectives – that underline the different ways to define and achieve EU identity.
II. ORIGINS, SUCCESS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE “EUROPEAN SOCIAL MODEL” : ASSESSING EU SOCIAL POLICY

This first section examines the political definitions and uses of the concept “European social model” in the European debate (not in the national one) from its introduction through the “social dimension of the European Community” up to its re-conceptualisation in view to the so-called “modernisation of the European social model”. The emergence of the “European social model” is emphasized in line with the context of weak EU social integration. The evolution of its conceptual content is then analysed since distinct definitions of the “European social model” have been proposed by the EU institutions between 1994 and 2006. Lastly the references to the “European social model” also varied following the political stakes of its construction – i.e. the assessment of some EU social policy – from the existence of a “European social model” to its “modernisation, “reinforcement”, “preservation” or “sustainability”.

1. Emergence of the “European Social Model”

The emergence of the “European social model” is undoubtely correlated with the implicit recognition of the “constitutional asymmetry (that characterizes the EU integration) between policies promoting market efficiency and policies promoting social protection and equality” (Scharpf 2002 : 646). Economic policies have been progressively Europeanized while social policies remained at the national level and have been constitutionally constrained by European rules of economic integration, liberalisation and competition law. The social field has still been of predominantly national competency; an inclusive European social policy, distinct from the sum of the separated national social policies, was practically absent from the high level political agenda up to the eighties.

In the eighties, the Commission Working Paper (1988) introduced the “social dimension” or “social space” of the European Communities – suggesting to take the social field into account in the achievement of the single market – while the Single European Act mobilised the “social and economic cohesion” – considering the social dimension as an instrument to ensure European cohesion by reducing regional disparities – : the economic success would now depend on a minimal equality of development between the European regions and a social homogeneity between the Member States. By suggesting an active social process at the Community level, both concepts argued that the institutional delay in the development of the social field could be an obstacle to
economic integration: the European social (and regional) integration has become a condition of the market.

The idea was to put social policies back in accordance with economic policies in view to legitimise the economic integration. Popular political acceptance of the market particularly hinged on the proclamation of European social values and the recognition of social enforceable rights at the EU level. This social reflection engaged by the European Commission during the Delors’ presidency (1985-1995) finally coined the concept of “European social model” in the mid-nineties (European Commission, 1994) in order to fight against the delegitimation by the economic integration of the social policies. The concept of “European social model” thus emerged at European level and has gradually replaced the term “European social dimension” in view to found a Community intervention in the social field since the European Commission has made explicit reference to the “European social model” in order to advance a common social policy agenda and the inclusion of the social partner in the process.

2. Contents of the “European Social Model”

The “European social model” emerged in that context and has for the first time been introduced by the White Paper on “European Social Policy - A Way Forward for the Union” (European Commission, 1994). Basically it referred to the combination of economic performance and social solidarity, founded on the social consensus and the tripartite negotiations. More precisely, this first definition pointed out a set of common values – namely the commitment to democracy, personal freedom, social dialogue, equal opportunities for all, adequate social security and solidarity towards the weaker individuals in society – what indicates a normative standpoint (Jepsen & Serrano Pascual 2005: 3) in order to found a social intervention at the Community scale.

Furthermore the “European social model” was conceived by contrast to the American socioeconomic model: the identification of a “European social model” was founded on the alternative it constitutes to the American form of pure-market capitalism. Such a normative and contrasting definition of the “European social model” reveals the necessity faced by the European institutions to obtain a large social consensus in view to sustain the implementation of the market integration. The social field remained thus subordinated to the economic integration and the “European social model” only referred to “European values” that would distinguish the European socioeconomic model from the American one. Neither explicit social rights – the recognition of enforceable European social rights still suffers from a half institutionalised promise (Katrougalos 2004) – nor concrete social measures were components of the “European social model” yet: the
“European social model” remained a broadly defined concept that has been required by the necessity to legitimate the economic integration.

After the Delors’ conception of a “European model of society” which stimulated the revitalisation of the integration process in the eighties, the European Commission tried to compensate its lack of legislative competence by the organisation of European networks and high level of expertise on employment and social policies in view to create a European epistemic community on social policies (Palier 2004 : 13). This European epistemic community on social policies has been mobilised at the end of the nineties by the different presidencies of the EU. Both the Portuguese, the Belgian and the Hellenic presidencies asked some leading European scholars to provide them with reports on “the future of the European welfare state” (Ferrera, Hemerijck, Rhodes, 2000), designing a “new architecture for the welfare state” (Esping-Andersen et alii, 2001) or “connecting welfare diversity within the European social model” (Amitsis et alii, 2003).

These reports offered to the European institutions to redefine and recast the “European social model” on the basis of a new coherent vision of social protection built on the double premise that social policy is a productive factor and that there is a cost to not having social policy (Hermans 2006). It considered that economic performance and social cohesion are not mutually exclusive but mutually supportive objectives towards a new equilibrium (Vandenbroucke 2002, Rodrigues 2002) and not only that the social aspects of the single market are a decisive condition of its success. This integrated approach of economic (objectives of competitiveness and dynamism), employment (objectives of full employment and quality of work) and social (objectives of social protection and cohesion) policy hoped to create a virtuous and sustainable cycle of economic and social progress: “for the first time these three policy areas are not to be treated as separate elements but as three sides of an equilateral triangle forming a mutually supportive and balanced policy mix”(Bullmann & Ott 2001 : 75).

By the same time the socioeconomic paradigm was moving towards an integrated approach, the concept of “European social model” has been mobilised by the European Council, thanks to the reports provided. The Vienna European Council in 1998 firstly used it in a broad sense, reminding the basis of the “European social model” (“real opportunity for people and combating poverty and exclusion effectively”, §26) but without defining it. Two years later, the European Presidencies Conclusions of Lisbon (March), Feira (June) and Nice (December) put the “modernisation of the European social model” on the agenda of the European Council. Nevertheless the discussions on the “European social model” have since been restricted to the Spring Councils devoted to socioeconomic questions (set up by the Lisbon European Council in 2000) – except the Laeken
European Council (December 2001). And only three European Councils exactly defined the “European social model”: the Nice Council (December 2000), the Barcelona Council (March 2002) and the Brussels Council of March 2005.

The Nice European Council portrayed the “European social model” as “the indissoluble link between economic performance and social progress” and made of it a crucial point of the Social Agenda 2000-2005 (§15 of the Conclusions of the French Presidency, Nice, December 2000). The Nice Treaty precisely defined the “European social model” on the basis of common values (§ 11 et 23) in the same line than the Delors’ Commission, mentioning that “the European social model, characterised in particular by systems that offer a high level of social protection, by the importance of the social dialogue and by services of general interest covering activities vital for social cohesion, is today based, beyond the diversity of the Member States’ social systems, on a common core of values” (§11). Two years later however, Europe’s political leaders tried to specify the characteristics (and not the values anymore) of the “European social model”, considering that it “is based on good economic performance, a high level of social protection and education and social dialogue” (§22 of the Presidency Conclusions of the March 2002 Barcelona European Council) and moreover on the “full employment and greater social cohesion” (Brussels March 2005 : 29). The content of the “European social model” has then varied from shared values to common features, a definition of the “European social model” less constraining for national social policies.

Because at the EU level, a common social policy is not on the agenda : the social field remains a national prerogative subject to the principle of subsidiarity. Since the Lisbon European Council in March 2000, the national diversity of welfare states is acclaimed. The harmonisation of social matters at EU level subordinating domestic policy to EU directives is not at stake : the political issue rather focuses on joint policy learning and cooperation between national social policies. A new model of cross-national policy-making has been inaugurated in March 2000 to respond to this issue, promoting a convergence by objectives more than a convergence by policies: the so-called Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC), whereby domestic policy actors respect national differences while accepting commonly agreed guidelines, that is to say common objectives decided at the EU level. This new method does not aim at achieving common policies but rather at sharing policy experiences and practices through monitoring and benchmarking. Policy choices remain at the national level but specific policy problems are defined as common concerns and national governments agree to be compared and evaluated in an organized iterative process (Pochet 2001 ; Telò 2002 ; Radaelli 2003 ; Goetschy forthcoming).
The “European social model” would then be characterised by a set of agreed policy objectives (Hemerijck 2002). Across the European Union a clear convergence of employment and social policy objectives can be observed over the past decade: all member states explicitly intend to raise employment, promote social inclusion, invest in the productivity and skills of future workers and enhance innovation in view to establish a competitive knowledge-based economy (Hemerijck 2002). The Treaty establishing a European Constitution itself – which does not mobilise the concept of “European social model” – lists a large number of common social policy ambitions: full employment, development of human capital, social justice, sustainable development, social integration, social dialogue, high level of social protection and especially fight against social exclusion. This convergence in objectives and ambitions reflects shared aspirations and also a common concern with the pressures on the advanced welfare states in the European Union, not only due to global competition but also to particular internal reasons (e.g. Ebbinghaus 1999, Hemerijck 2002).

3. References to the “European Social Model”

The first uses of the “European social model” by the European Commission only pointed out the existence of a “European social model”. But the notion of “European social model” has increasingly been invoked (by the Commission and the European Council) in the sense of “a political trade-off when it has been a matter of pushing through new adjustments between the (neo-liberal) economic system and the (traditional) social system, requiring difficult reforms” (Goetschy 2006). Despite the absence of a clear definition of the “European social model” in March 2000, there was indeed a paradoxical consensus to call for the “modernisation of the European social model” at the Lisbon European Council. At the same time the “European social model” was moving from the European Commission agenda towards the European Council agenda, the reference to the “European social model” has moved from the existence of a European social model to preserve towards its required modernisation.

Facing common socioeconomic challenges (Ferrera, Hemerijck & Rhodes 2000; Scharpf & Schmidt 2000), the member states finally raised on the EU agenda the necessity for the EU to become “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (§5 of the Presidency Conclusions of the March 2000 Lisbon European Council). Achievement of this goal requires an overall strategy primarily focused on preparing the transition to a knowledge-based economy and society; modernising the “European social model” by investing in people and
building an active Welfare state in view to combat social exclusion (§24-§34)\(^1\); sustaining the healthy economic outlook and favourable growth prospects. Similarly, the Nice European Council in December 2000 ratified the necessary modernisation of the “European social model” considering that the Social Agenda 2000-2005 – adopted at the same time – “constitutes a major step towards the reinforcement and modernisation of the European model” (§15 and point IV of the Social Agenda). In the same way, the Stockholm European Council in March 2001 (§3, point V: §25-33) and the Brussels European Council in March 2003 (§10, point C: §41-52) both also refer to the “modernisation of the European social model”. Such an objective of “modernisation of the European social model supports the view that the “European social model” is a political project in that the EU has a key role to play to orient economic and social renewal (Jepsen & Serrano Pascual 2005).

More progressist is the viewpoint developed in the Nice European Council which in complement to the necessity of modernising the “European social model” (§7-13 and point IV of the Social Agenda) invited also to strengthen it (§12, §26), while the Conclusions of the Barcelona European Council (§22) and of the Brussels European Council in March 2005 (§29) invited to reinforce it. In that way, the Nice European Council focused on the fact that the “European social model” still does not involve excluded people and that it requires to deepen and extend the “European social model” to the whole society. However the “reinforcement of the European social model” claimed by the Barcelona and Brussels European Councils was less progressist since it referred to the reinforcement of the “European social model” as characterised by the Lisbon Council in terms of mutually supportive goals of economic, employment and social policies – and not in terms of broad extension of the social cover.

Nonetheless since 2004 the “European social model” is not anymore referred to in terms of modernisation: its preservation and sustainability have become the main associated purposes. Indeed preserving the “European social model” is twofold. On the one hand, it would involve the obligation to precisely defend the high protection standards of the “European social model” (Barcelona European Council, §31). The European social model is then conceived as a set of social acquis. On the other hand, and following the goals set up by the Lisbon strategy (2000-2010), preserving the originality of the “European social model” (Brussels European Councils of March 2005, §22 and 2006, §57) is considered as an advantage that would help the EU in the global competition of the new knowledge-economy. The second understanding of the “preservation of the European social model” is the most widespread and is often associated with the problem of its

\(^1\) Also included in the Conclusions of the Feira European Council in June 2000 (§32-37).
viability, facing the ongoing globalization pressures and internal socio-economic challenges of the national welfare states.

Both the Brussels European Councils of March 2004 (§17) and 2006 (§69) precisely states the necessity for the “European social model” to be sustainable. The Kok report on the mid-term review of the Lisbon strategy (Kok 2004) and the Commission package to the Spring 2005 European Council – aimed at deciding if the Lisbon strategy had to be confirmed, revised, buried or attenuated – also emphasize this new reference to the “European social model”. The political context explains the re-orientation of the Lisbon strategy and thus of the “European social model”: the June 2004 elections had led to the instauration of a newly elected European Parliament, in November 2004 a new European Commission had been appointed and both the new European Parliament and Commission had had to finalise the institutional consolidation of the May 2004 enlargement. In that perspective, the content of the “European social model” is under pressure and recast in view to adapt it to the liberal requirements. The new leitmotiv was that social progress, cohesion and solidarity would be the trickle down effect of economic performance. It implicitly rejects the view that “the Lisbon goals can only be brought about by balanced efforts on both the economic and social fronts” (§22, Barcelona 2002). The Kok High Level Group report on the Lisbon strategy argued that Europe’s “disappointing delivery is due to an overloaded agenda, poor coordination and conflicting priorities” (Kok 2004 :7) and that requires for the EU and member states “to focus on growth and employment in order to underpin social cohesion and sustainable development” (Kok 2004 :39). Priority is given to employment and growth which become again conditions to the access to other objectives (Hermans 2006).

III. THE CONCEPTUAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE “EUROPEAN SOCIAL MODEL” : SHAPING EU LEGITIMACY AND EU IDENTITY

The first section has demonstrated that the European social model – rather than an external reality to be discovered – is a social and political construct promoted by the European Commission and the European Council since the mid-nineties to deal with current socio-economic challenges. Understanding the object and stakes of this conceptual construction are the main purposes of the second section which asserts that “the European social model is a way of legitimising the notion of a European social policy (…however it is…) far from being an exogenous factor, very much a political project aimed at fostering a European identity” (Jepsen & Serrano Pascual 11). To uphold such an assumption three arguments are going to be underlined in this section: the academic
assertion supporting the inexistence of a single concrete European social model in the EU; the political function of the European social model in shaping EU legitimacy on European essence or common challenges; and the symbolic role of the European social model in building a European social bond – as the core of the EU identity – on contrast, similarity or diversity.

1. **Does a Single and Concrete “European Social Model” Exist?**

The European social model has grown out of a particular historical context since the national welfare states are based on strong and persistent national roots as the concept of “path dependence” suggests it. Thus it doesn’t exist one single and concrete European social model because of the European integration is built on a “variable geometry” (Ebbinghaus 1999: 2). Indeed the European social model is not an achievement of European level institutions but a creation of the separate European nation states, acting independently but in parallel since the European post-war period.

The academic literature stresses on what distinguishes the member states in social matters and would constitute distinct “European social models”. Comparative research (e.g. Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1999; Ferrera, 1996; Ebbinghaus, 1999; Merrien, 2000; Palier, 2005; Scharpf, 2002) emphasizes the diversity of national social systems in Europe and classifies them in three (or more) ideal types according to their approaches (objectives) and institutions (tools) of the social protection. In a recent and highly discussed study for the think tank Bruegel, the economist Sapir recapitulates those authors’ typologies in assessing that “the notion of a single European social model is largely unhelpful for thinking about reforms” (Sapir 2005 a,b) since four European social models coexist in the EU: the Nordic/Scandinavian/Social-democrat model; the Cooperative/Continental/Corporatist model; the Liberal model and the Mediterranean/Southern one. The national social systems vary according to their specific social traditions, social benefits and cultural heritage, notably concerning the role of the state, market and family in providing social protection. Hence, each system of social protection has a different capacity to ensure and organise the collective solidarity at the national level. The instruments vary as well as the recipients of solidarity: there are great differences in transfer systems, tax-benefit systems and social welfare policies within EU member countries.

In contrast to the reality of the various European welfare states, the expression of European social model has firstly been used in the EU political debate to designate the essence of a pre-existing European social model in view to found a EU social policy.

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2 This concept explains the relative immobility of national social policies by the relevance of inheritance which determines the possible choices and changes in the future. It has emerged with Pierson (1994, 1996) and is now commonly used in the welfare state literature.
2. Political Function of the “European Social Model” : Shaping EU Legitimacy

Most of the policy-makers that use the concept of European social model defend a European project in this way. More than an expression shaping the development of EU social policy, the European social model has a fundamental legitimacy function in the EU integration. The analysis of its political definitions and uses by the European Commission and European Council emphasizes two conceptions of EU legitimacy : the first one exploring the European essence while the second one requiring a European response to common challenges. Nevertheless both approaches are often presented as complementary (the need for reform of the European social model in order to preserve it).

The first political definitions of the European social model – e.g. the Delors’ conception – were expressing a truly a-temporal and pre-existing European essence either as common values which would be by essence part of the European civilisation or as historical acquis which would be common to the national social protection systems of the European welfare states in terms of institutions (redistributive social protection, coordinated interest organisations and resolution of social conflicts by consensual means) and results (wider social security coverage, more equal wage and income distribution). And this European essence should be preserved. However such an essentialist definition of the European social model is problematic for EU legitimacy. On the one hand, it implies an apolitical standpoint, de-connecting social rights and policies from their national histories and identities and thus denying the political conflict that surrounds the share-out and redistribution of resources (Gobin 2005). On the other hand, it implies a static perspective, suggesting that the European social model is pre-existing what does not take into consideration the political debates surrounding its construction. But it is questionable to what extent the European social model even exists given the variety of welfare state systems encountered in Europe (see supra).

By contrast, in the second round of political definitions, the European social model is regarded as a particular way to deal with common problems (Jepsen & Serrano Pascual 2005 : 5-6). The demographic trends and the process of globalisation produce a variety of common pressures (economic, technological, social…) which are presented as inevitable. A “natural” response consists of a common agenda of reforms which is proposed in the call for a social and institutional “modernisation of the European social model” (structural reform, training for new technologies, knowledge-based society, etc.). As underlined by Pochet (2001), this perspective puts forward neither on institutional mechanisms nor on values but very much on common objectives responding to common challenges – as stressed in the Lisbon strategy. The expression European social model is
then intended to “indicate the preferred approach to coping with the challenges deriving from the process of social change” (Jepsen & Serrano Pascual 2005 : 6) and to legitimise national social reforms. This political function explains why even those who so far have been considered rather reluctant to engage in further social integration – e.g. the British government – have begun to refer with greater ease to a concept such as the European social model (e.g. the Hampton Court Summit organised by the British presidency in October 2005).

3. **Symbolic Role of the “European Social Model” : Building EU Identity**

The European social model has been politically built up as a common concept symbolizing a shared identity between the national social systems of the European Union in view to gather European citizens. Indeed the European social model does not only consist of the acquisition of social rights or the establishment of social policies at EU level ; it is primarily concerned with the creation of social bond at EU level, looking for what can bind European citizens. Despite the diversity characterising the conceptions of the European social model, condensing the particularities of an economic and social region into a few number of common values, common objectives or supranational features can be seen as aiming towards the goal of constructing a EU identity – either in the confrontation with internal and external dimensions or in the opposition between similarity and disparity.

The debate on the European social model is based on the implicit reference to a dichotomy between the American and the European socio-economic model and the contrasting statement that EU member states have welfare systems that the USA does not. Since the first definition of the European social model by Delors’ presidency, the identification of the European social model has been implying an external confrontation with alternative regional models – such as the relatively deregulated American one and the more developmental South East Asian one (Hay, Watson & Wincott 1999) – from which the EU has to be distinguished. In comparison of those regional models, some European common features between the national social systems may be identified.

In the first cluster of definition, the European social model incorporates a set of specific common core values such as democracy, individual rights, free collective bargaining, equality of opportunity for all, social welfare and solidarity. These values and principles of the European social model are due to both instruments or policies developed within individual member states (Vaughan-Whitehead 2003) and Community instruments or policies : EU social policy does produce a reallocation of values in European society (Hix 1999: 224) by choosing values that are preferred by certain groups of citizens. This identification of core European values precisely corresponds to the
process of constructing EU identity although European Social Surveys show no evident consistency of EU identity based on the identification of common values to all European citizens.

Yet the creation of a common EU identity through the European social model has progressively shifted from the recognition of common values – challenged the disparities between the national social models that underpin the European social model – to the share-out of problems and intervention solutions (Jepsen & Serrano Pascual 2005: 9-10). The production of European statistics (Eurostat) or promotion of benchmarking in EU social policy developing a number of indicators (through the OMC) invite EU member states to “share common problems – by which they are “threatened” – and to produce similar key recipes to fight against these (socially constructed) common problems” (Jepsen & Serrano Pascual 2005: 10). The EU member states thus share a utility to face these collective challenges in common what might induce a feeling of belonging to the same EU community and thus foster the construction of a common identity. EU identity is not produced anymore by the recognition of specific European values but by policy paradigms and cognitive convergence.

Another way of identifying the European social model lies in that utility for modernisation and adaptation to changing economic conditions: the European social model might be perceived as a European project with a specific distinctive supranational mode of socio-economic regulation. In that perspective, it is important to assess and evaluate the claim that a distinctive trans-national European social model is emerging at the EU level, describing the supranational and trans-national mechanisms implemented at the EU level during the last fifty years: can tendencies towards the emergence of a coherent trans-national European social model be identified (Goetschy 2006)? It raises the question of a potential supranational identity in order to investigate “whether EU membership is likely to result in the modification of existing welfare institutions to bring them more in line with a trans-national European social model (existing or emergent) and whether the development of pan-European social institutions implies the replacement of national welfare provision by that at a supra-national level” (Hay, Watson & Wincott 1999). However, within the context of this distinctive European social model, a variety of rather more specific national models of social provision have been identified (the British, the Swedish and the German perhaps being paradigm cases) (see supra). And compared with the ordinary ingredients of a national social model (well-structured social stakeholders, social law, collective bargaining, worker representation, right to strike, social protection and redistributive policies, public service policies), the European social model is more fragmentary and does not form a coherent entity (Goetschy 2006).
IV. CONCLUSION

The concept of European social model has been understood by the EU institutions as a particular set of common European values; as a particular set of common national social institutions and as a particular way to deal with common problems. The variety of these conceptions is related to the emphasis either on homogeneity or on heterogeneity between EU member states. The singular expression puts the stress on what gathers the member states on social matters and would constitute a distinctive “European social model” while the plural form stresses on what distinguishes the member states in social matters and would constitute distinct “European social models”. The processes of post-socialist institution building in the new EU member states might reflect the development of a trans-national European social model or might contribute to the creation of distinctively new social models adding to the diversity of existing national welfare regimes in the EU (Hay, Watson & Wincott 1999).

It has been demonstrated that the concept of European social model is a mobilisation term for policy-makers, especially when it comes to envisaging, constructing and implementing a common social and employment policy agenda at European level and to legitimising the necessity of national social reforms at the EU scale. In both perspectives, the European social model then clearly consists of an issue of political relevance for European integration. On the one hand, the concept of European social model needs to be understood rather as a political project by means of which the EU institutions are seeking to increase firstly the legitimacy of European economic integration and then the legitimacy of national social reforms (keeping in mind that the conceptual construction of the European social model also enhances EU institutions legitimacy). On the other hand, the European social model reveals the difficult attempts to build EU identity on stable foundations which have moved from the search for shared social values and features between the European welfare states to the preservation of national social diversity. In this last way, the European social model discussion and the tools associated with the concept of European social model are contributing to the construction of common challenges for Europe and to the building of a consensus as to how these are to be faced and tackled.

The study of the European social model enables us to understand the analysis of EU identity as the analysis of processes and logics of construction (constructivist approach) more than immutable realities (substantialist approach); it also make possible to conceive EU identity in global terms since the social feeling of belonging to a European community is at the core of the construction of a political identity.
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The Presidency Conclusions are available at http://ue.eu.int/showPage.asp?id=432&lang=en&mode=g (31 March 2006).