

The European social model: Between competitive modernisation and neoliberal resistance

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The 'European social model' is a phrase often heard in European discourse. This article describes the remarkable shift in meaning that the term has experienced in the last two decades. While it was first invented to symbolise Delors's vision of a social-democratic Europe, it was then increasingly used to legitimise a predominately neoliberal integration process, before becoming a justification for the cutting back of existing welfare systems. The popularity of the European social model, however, still stems from the fact that it articulates an alternative to US-style free-market capitalism. The concept is therefore also used by left forces in order to formulate their vision of an alternative Europe.

Introduction

What type of social model is it that has 20 million unemployed in Europe; productivity rates falling behind those of the USA; that is allowing more science graduates to be produced by India than by Europe? The purpose of our social model should be to enhance our ability to compete, to help our people cope with globalisation, to let

them embrace its opportunities and avoid its dangers. Of course we need a social Europe. But it must be a social Europe that works' (Tony Blair, 2005). With his speech before the European parliament during the British presidency in June 2005, Tony Blair articulated the remarkable shift in meaning that the concept of the European social model (ESM) has experienced in the last fifteen to twenty years. While initially invented in order to distinguish Europe from the USA and to emphasise the social dimension of the integration process, the ESM is now expected to enhance Europe's competitiveness in a globalised world. Accordingly, the role of the ESM has shifted from symbolising an alternative to unregulated capitalism to legitimising a predominantly neoliberal integration process, to demanding far-reaching restrictions and reforms of national welfare states under the pretence of modernisation. At the same time, however, the ESM is also used by left groups and parties to put forward their agendas for a solidaristic and sustainable Europe. This makes the ESM a highly contentious concept. In this article, we trace the origin of the ESM and analyse its role and the different interpretations of it in the broader process of European integration. We describe the different meanings given to the ESM by quoting from official European documents or the publications of official representatives. We also show how the proposals put forward by modernisers actually put the very nature of the existing social models in question, and discuss what role the ESM could play for the European left. The article ends with some general remarks and a brief conclusion.

The origin of the European social model

The invention of the European social model is commonly attributed to the former president of the European Commission, Jacques Delors. Delors was a supporter of a social-democratic vision of a unified Europe in a globalised world. As French finance minister, he had had first-hand experiences with the failure of President Francois Mitterrand's recourse to Keynesianism in France in the early 1980s. The social-democratic lesson was that after the fall of the Bretton Woods agreement, the subsequent abolition of capital controls and the internationalisation of money markets, it was no longer viable to establish a progressive economic policy at the national level. Instead, social-democratic forces, not only in France but also in other

European countries, increasingly focused on the European level in order to build an alternative to the free-market-style capitalism that dominated Britain and the USA. This does not mean that Delors and fellow social democrats were not in favour of the single market and economic and monetary union. However, they felt that Europe had to be more than simply an economic association (Strange, 2006: 198). As Delors once famously stated, 'you cannot fall in love with a common market'. As part of the social-democratic vision, the ESM was also directed against Britain and the USA, which in the 1980s were both ruled by straightforwardly neoconservative governments. The basic idea was that economic and social progress should be equally important objectives, and that an economically successful union should have an explicit social-policy agenda and strong European-wide social and labour standards. Europe, in short, should take the 'high road' to economic growth and prosperity (Hofbauer, 2007: 40).

Yet although the 1992 Maastricht Treaty included, for the first time, a social chapter allowing for majority decisions in social-policy issues and enabling the social partners to negotiate agreements which would then be translated into binding EU legislation, the social dimension remained marginal and the social-democratic strategy failed. Instead, the forces demanding not only a common market in Europe but also unrestricted trade and capital movement between Europe and the rest of the world prevailed (van Appeldorn, 2001: 78ff). In this process, the institutional framework that gave free-trade proponents such as Britain, Germany and the Netherlands effective veto rights proved of decisive importance. But the specific nature of the market—characterised by mutual recognition rather than supranational harmonisation—also played an important role (Hermann, 2007: 71–2). Such a market could hardly be combined with the social-democratic demand for strong European-wide standards.

However, while the neoliberal forces succeeded in the struggle for the future direction of the integration process, the integration process itself was increasingly questioned precisely because of its neoliberal bias and the problems created by its emphasis on monetary restraint and budgetary austerity. Among these problems were low economic growth rates and increasing unemployment. Against a background of rising disillusion and frustration, also known as the 'post-

Maastricht crisis', the ruling political and economic elites in Europe risked losing support for economic and monetary union (Deppe & Felder, 1993). In this situation, frequent references to the ESM must be seen as part of a strategy to maintain support for a predominately neoliberal integration project.

Legitimising neoliberalism

The European integration project is a hegemonic project (Jessop, 2005: 2). As such, it requires a hegemonic bloc that delivers sufficient support to keep the integration process going. On several occasions, this process has been brought to a halt and indeed, it has been threatened with reversal. The rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in Denmark, and more recently the rejection of the European constitution in France and the Netherlands, which is still waiting to be solved two years after the ballot, were two such moments. A hegemonic bloc is built on class and social compromises, and is able to integrate critical views and forces. Most importantly, it must give these potentially oppositional forces a perspective: a vision with which they can identify. As Andreas Bieler (2007) has shown, many of the trade union organisations that supported the European integration process did not do so unanimously and unconditionally. They were aware of and critical of the negative consequences of the Maastricht criteria and the stability and growth pact, but they nevertheless continued to support it. Bieler (ibid. 7) argues that the unions were simply not strong enough to oppose these developments, not least because of the economic crisis and rising unemployment. However, the fact that European politicians and bureaucrats frequently made reference to the ESM, which the unions still associated with social progress and high labour standards, also ensured that trade union representatives would have reason to believe that the current state was only transitional, and even more importantly, that they would have an argument to use against internal opposition. References to the ESM were also important for pacifying left-wing opposition within the social-democratic parties. The fact that the ESM is an ill-defined concept in theoretical and empirical terms has made this task easier.

In 1994, the European Commission published a White Paper on social policy. Therein, the Commission defined the ESM as 'a number of shared values' that included 'democracy

and individual rights, free collective bargaining, the market economy, equality of opportunity for all and social welfare and solidarity' (European Commission, 1994: 2). This stood in stark contrast to the cuts in social benefits triggered by the austerity policies imposed by the Maastricht deficit limits, which were certainly not designed to boost solidarity. However, it wasn't only the restructuring of social-security systems that increased inequality: budget cuts and high interest rates also continued to restrict economic expansion and fuel unemployment across Europe. As a result, France experienced massive demonstrations in 1995 followed by the election of a left-wing government in 1997. The protests in France were followed by demonstrations in other EU member states in the second half of the 1990s, when hundreds of thousands of citizens took part in a series of European marches against unemployment. Unemployment had already dominated the Council of Essen in 1994, and it continued to trouble the national leaders at the Council of Amsterdam in 1997. As a response to the looming employment crisis, the Council adopted the European employment strategy, which aimed not only to create new employment but also to promote social-justice issues such as equal opportunities and non-discrimination in workplaces. Such issues were also seen as important elements of the ESM. However, with the adoption of the employment strategy, access to employment has become not only a crucial feature of the ESM but also a benchmark for its success.

Neoliberal modernisation

European policy-makers continued to legitimise a predominantly neoliberal integration process by repeated references to the ESM. The draft constitution for the European Union that was rejected by French and Dutch voters in spring 2005 included a paragraph on the ESM, while at the same time giving monetary restraint and budgetary austerity constitutional status. The commitment to a solidaristic and socially just Europe, even if it was little more than lip-service together with some improvements in the role of the European parliament, convinced even left-wing representatives in social-democratic and green parties to vote for the constitution.

However, with the adoption of the Lisbon Agenda in 2000, discourse on the ESM took another decisive twist. References to the ESM were not only used for legitimisation, but the ESM

was also increasingly deployed in the argument for the radical restructuring and restriction of existing European welfare systems. The general argument went as follows: the EU and its member states are confronted with a number of common challenges and responsibilities that include globalisation and ageing societies. Globalisation forces Europe to be more competitive in an increasingly internationalised world. Accordingly, competitiveness is a precondition for being successful and being able to retain high labour and social standards, and therefore the ESM should be subordinated to the overall objective of competitiveness. Or even better, the ESM should be used as a source for improving Europe's potential to succeed on the world markets—in this argument, the ESM becomes a productive factor. As stated in the 2004 social policy agenda, 'The objectives of employment, solidarity and social inclusion cannot be separated from the globalized economy, where the competitiveness and attractiveness of Europe are at stake' (European Commission, 2005a: 4). With respect to ageing societies, the argument is that existing social-security systems must be reformed in order to guarantee future generations the same level of protection enjoyed by the existing population. As the director of the Lisbon Council, Ann Mettler (2005a: 27), argues, 'Modernising the European Social Model is first and foremost about sustainability and generational justice ... Without reform, pension and social security systems will simply collapse. Without reform, we are consuming the fiscal resources of our children and grandchildren'. Martin Beckmann et al. (2003: 12) call this process of change a transformation from a 'regime of stabilisation' to a 'regime of modernisation'. While the former was mainly based on and supportive of national social regulation, the latter is based more on promoting the transformation of the national social models under the guideline of neoliberal flexibilisation and deregulation.

Aside from the privatisation of pension systems, much of the reform agenda actually centres on labour markets and employment issues. The flexibilisation of labour markets is seen as essential for improving overall competitiveness and saving social-security systems. An influential contribution in this regard was made by the Belgian economist André Sapir (2006). His paper 'Globalisation and the reform of the European social models' was distributed by the British presidency as a background paper for the 2005 Ecofin meeting in Manchester. Therein, Sapir argues that generally there is a

trade-off between high levels of equality and high levels of employment, and that the only model that actually manages to combine both goals is the Nordic model. The Anglo-Saxon model is also sustainable because it puts greater emphasis on employment. The Continental and Mediterranean models may deliver high levels of equality, but they are not sustainable because of their poor employment performances. Sapir's conclusion is that the last two, which account for about two-thirds of Europe's GDP and 90 per cent of that of the Eurozone, must 'be reformed in the direction of greater efficiency by reducing disincentives to work and to grow' (ibid. 381). This sounds very much like the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund, which has repeatedly criticised Europe for its low 'labour utilisation rate' (e.g. IMF, 2004).

Hence, although equal opportunities and anti-discrimination play an important role in the modernisation discourse, the actual policies proposed under the modernisation label are by-and-large employment-centred. Not only that, but they are also exclusively supply-sided, including measures such as lifelong learning, labour flexibility and the promotion of employability and entrepreneurship, as well as the introduction of incentives for working more and for longer. 'The bottom line is that we will only meet the new challenge if people have a new attitude to work and our social systems have a new attitude towards people' (European Council, 2005). Social policy is reduced to employment policy, and the success of the ESM is measured in sufficiently high employment rates — a measurement according to which Europe lags behind the US significantly. Social-justice issues are still mentioned in official documents and speeches, but they play only a subordinated role, if they play any at all. As Jane Lewis (2006: 7) has noted, following the employment paradigm the issue of equal opportunities is reduced to the question of female employment rates, with the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work and other forms of discrimination no longer at stake. In a similar way, gender mainstreaming—the process of assessing the specific implications for women of norms and policies—has been reduced to a method for eliminating barriers to female employment (Hofbauer & Ludwig, 2006: 209).

The erosion of the European social models

Contrary to official European policy discourse, there are not one but many European social models. In several respects,

differences between states within the EU are greater than differences between the EU average and the USA, especially following the EU enlargement into central and eastern Europe (Albers, 2006). This should not surprise us, since social policy is still essentially a national issue, with welfare-state provision substantially lower in southern Europe than in the north, and even lower in the new member states. The EU has adopted a number of directives that deal with social-policy issues. But these directives hardly harmonise existing social-policy legislation: instead, they introduce an absolute minimum level which has no effect in most member states, because it is well below the national standards. And in the case of more ambitious policy initiatives such as those in the field of employment, failure to meet their respective targets is not threatened by sanctions, as the failure to meet the convergence criteria has been. The employment strategy has therefore been criticised as a 'soft-law approach'.

However, despite important differences, the various (western) European social models share a number of common traits based on the expansion of European welfare states in the decades following the second world war, when the cold war was still forcing western elites to make concessions. First, European welfare systems are universalist. This means that citizens are *in principle* entitled to support in case of need. It does not mean that all citizens receive the same benefit, nor that everybody can demand a decent standard of living — the insurance-based welfare systems especially tend to reproduce inequalities. In most countries, furthermore, there have always been groups of people that were excluded, and their number has increased as a result of the recent welfare-state reforms. But the level of coverage is still substantially higher than in the USA, where a significant part of the population has no access whatsoever to benefits. Second, the state plays an important role in the provision of the necessary means for reproduction. This is the case not only if citizens should need financial support, but also more generally, through the provision of public services such as utilities and public transport, health and education. Following Gosta Esping-Andersen's (1990) argument, universal access to social benefits and subsidised public services has a decommodifying effect in so far as it makes citizens less dependent on market forces. The establishment of progressive limits to commodification is, therefore, a third major characteristic of European welfare systems. Decommodification, is of course,

not confined to Europe. But Europe and especially the Nordic countries have reached a degree of decommodification that is unknown elsewhere in the capitalist world. This is particularly true in terms of the use of labour power. As Richard Hyman (2005: 11) has argued, 'there are substantial statutory limits on the way labour (power) can be bought and sold'. Limits are imposed by employment legislation and collective agreements, including, most notably, protection from dismissal. Yet collective agreement on wages and standardised working hours also protect workers from market-related instabilities. It is this protection from market forces that, more than anything else, has been questioned by proponents of the modernisation agenda. In the eyes of the modernisers, Europeans should be more responsive to market forces. In this respect, the shift from a welfare system based on social rights to one that offers conditionally temporary support, the privatisation of public services and pensions systems and the flexibilisation of labour markets must be understood as an attempt to recommodify the livelihoods of European citizens, and thereby alter the relationship between the market and society.

In short, while making references to the ESM, the political and economic elites in Europe are threatening the very foundation of European welfare systems. 'Social policy', as Birgit Mahnkopf (2007: 98) writes,

'no longer aims at a correction of the primary distribution through the market, and is also not intended as a publicly guaranteed legal right to a form of living independent of the market. The concept of the welfare state is thereby turning almost into its opposite. The requirement of "modern" welfare statism is no longer the targeted, socially effective redistribution in favour of weaker population groups and regions, but the promotion of entrepreneurial action and the protection of business property—because this, it is said, stimulates the individual's readiness to work'.

Instead of protecting people from the market, social policy is increasingly seen as an instrument for helping them adjust to the market (Jepsen & Serano Pascual, 2005: 238); or, even better, to succeed in the market (Urban, 2004: 4). 'In the past, social policy has enabled the European Union to manage structural change ... In the future, modernising the European

social model and investing in people will be crucial to retaining the European social values of solidarity and justice while improving economic performance' (COM, 2000: 6).

In defence of the European social model

To speak of a 'European social model' only makes sense in comparison with other social models (Hermann, 2006). As mentioned above, the idea of an ESM was devised by Delors in order to distinguish Europe from the USA. It is this distinction that is responsible, to a large extent, for the appeal of the term 'European social model' and its continuous popularity in large parts of the population. Many European citizens do not want to give up the welfare state and dislike the US lifestyle, based as it is on long working hours and obsessive mass consumerism. Paradoxically, the European elites are playing with these resentments in order to put forward a modernisation agenda that brings Europe a good deal closer to the USA. But this cannot hide the fact that the ESM is also a critique of neoliberalism, which is believed to have its ideological roots and its strongest political and institutional support in the USA. Even if the EU is, in several respects, more neoliberal than the USA, including in its austerity policy of Maastricht-imprinting, neoliberalism is nevertheless frequently identified with US economics and politics. And it is this critique and the belief in the possibility of an alternative to neoliberalism that makes the term 'ESM' attractive for oppositional forces on the left, including radical groups in the US which see Europe as an alternative to their native social model. Groups such as ATTAC and social-forum activists, and also left-wing parties and trade unions, have used the notion of the ESM to put forward their agenda for an alternative and sustainable Europe based on solidarity rather than on market fundamentalism. Solidarity goes further than simply providing the minimum means of existence: it is 'a principle of "asymmetrical mutuality" according to which contributions are indeed raised according to the ability of the individual to work, but assistance is nevertheless granted according to the need ... The market cannot offer such asymmetrical mutuality, because it reacts exclusively to the signals of purchasing power and ability to work' (Mahnkopf, 2007: 99). According to ATTAC and other groups, solidarity, moreover, should not only characterise social relationships within Europe but also those between

Europe and the rest of the world, especially between Europe and the global south.

Hence what we are currently witnessing is a political struggle over the meaning of the term 'European social model'. This struggle is part of a larger confrontation over the future of Europe. It is a struggle over a 'post-neoliberal order' (Brand, 2006: 169), or over the formation of an 'alternative historical bloc' to neoliberalism (Strange, 2006: 210–11). In this confrontation, it 'will be crucial that trade unions ... work together with social movements in order to stem the neoliberal Anglo-American model and re-establish a European social model of capitalism' (Bieler, 2006: 33). Yet it is also a highly unequal struggle, with the elites controlling the political apparatus and the mainstream media, and therefore a large portion of public opinion. However, their dependence on such an ambiguous term as 'European social model' to create sufficient support for their political agenda also makes them vulnerable. Because a hegemonic project is built on consent more than on force, it can never exclude dissent. The rejection of the draft constitution in France and the Netherlands provided a dramatic example of the scale of the dissent and disillusion that lurks beneath the surface (hence the European elites were quick to blame national peculiarities for the failures). The ESM is a highly contentious concept, but one that the left could turn into an expression of dissent, and thereby drive cracks into the neoliberal bloc. Michael Krätke (2005: 92) suggests that the European left could use the ESM as a trademark for a new political project. 'In most European countries the concept of the welfare state, which is not just obliged to the owners of capital but to all citizens, still enjoys the widest support. The neoliberal idea of the minimal state, which goes back to pure relief of poverty, is a long way from having won, even if the market ideologies that are part of it dominate the minds of the so-called elite' (ibid.).

Conclusion

In its document 'European values in a globalised world', the Commission stated, 'European citizens have greater expectations of the state than their equivalents in Asia or America. The public sector tends to play a big role, either through regulation or government spending, in the organisation and financing of national systems. In addition,

all member states have played a strong role in the delivery of high quality services of general interest which have been a key feature of economic and social development' (European Commission, 2005b: 4). The Commission is right, and the struggle over the European social model is essentially a struggle over expectations—what do European citizens expect from life, and what do they expect governments at a national and European level to provide in order to allow them, their friends and other citizens a decent existence? As we have shown in this article, expectations of the ESM on the parts of official bodies have changed remarkably since its introduction into public discourse in the 1980s. While initial expectations were ambitious, including demands for the creation of a social union that was supposed to complement the common market and set the course for a high road to growth and prosperity, they have been scaled back significantly in the last ten to fifteen years. As the head of the Lisbon Council notes, 'Europeans must realize that they are not born with a God-given right to one of the world's highest standards of living' (Mettler: 2005b). According to the European elites, citizens can no longer rely on long-term state assistance to cope with sudden and unforeseen changes in their lives, to give them a break or enable them to pursue their own non-commercial interests—or simply in order to not have to take bad jobs offered on the labour market. They can, furthermore, no longer rely on public pensions—at least, not solely — and they can expect to pay fees for education and health services. In short, they can no longer expect the state to compensate for the disruptions and dislocations immanent in a market economy, and for the fundamental contradictions of a capitalist society. This is, indeed, the situation in the USA, where the vast majority of the population has given up expecting anything positive from the state. The critical task for the European left, and especially for its more radical branches, will be to defend still-existing expectations in the various European populations, and to strengthen and expand them. Europe, after all, is one of the richest areas in the world, and it is much richer now than it was fifty years ago. Even given decreasing birth rates, it is difficult to comprehend why we can no longer afford those things today that we could afford following the second world war (unless we take into account the uneven distribution of wealth). The European social model has the potential to be a label for articulating and raising expectations, and thereby challenging the status quo. Yet in

order to be able to do so, the label must be backed up by concrete demands, such as for public pensions that permit a decent standard of living, and for free education and health services and other freely accessible and high-quality public services. These demands must be shared by a broad coalition of political groups including left parties at the European and national level, progressive trade unions, NGOs such as ATTAC, and also grassroots movements, and they should not be limited for reasons of political pragmatism. The European Public Service Union's campaign for 'high quality public services accessible for all' and the related demand for a directive for services of general interest—EU terminology for 'public services'—is a good example of the kind of articulated expectations we mentioned earlier. In short, the future of the European social model depends on the ability of the left to associate it with strong and meaningful expectations. If this cannot be achieved, then there is not much sense in sticking to the term.

Notes

We would like to thank the participants of the Concepts of the European Social Model Workshop held in Vienna on 9 June 2006 for inspiring contributions and important insights. The workshop was part of the EU funded academic network Privatisation and the European Social Model. More information at www.presom.eu

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Global Restructuring, State, Capital and Labour Workshop

Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice,
University of Nottingham
12 October 2007

Globalisation and the related restructuring of the state currently comprise one of the most widely discussed issues in the social sciences, across disciplines that include political economy, historical sociology, state theory, European politics and political geography.

It is also the subject of a one-day workshop to be held in Nottingham on 12 October, as part of a joint initiative by Greig Charnock and Stuart Shields from the Centre of International Politics at the University of Manchester, and Andreas Bieler and Adam D. Morton from the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice (CSSGJ) at the University of Nottingham's School of Politics and International Relations. The workshop's objective is to discuss issues of global restructuring and state theory from within the varied traditions of historical materialism. Specifically, the initiative has been raised in order to focus on the ideas and conjecture on these issues contained in the following publication:

Andreas Bieler, Werner Bonefeld, Peter Burnham and Adam David Morton (2006) *Global Restructuring, State, Capital and Labour: Contesting Neo-Gramscian Perspectives* (Palgrave).

The book is itself embedded in the rich body of literature on state theory, global restructuring and capital–labour relations associated with the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE) debates in *Capital & Class*. The workshop will be structured around nine papers dealing with aspects of those early debates, as revisited and developed within the book, and we are now accepting papers for consideration as part of the workshop, which will be divided into three sessions containing three papers each, followed by short responses by the authors and a general discussion.

The workshop will take place on **Friday, 12 October, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.** Registration is free, and lunch and coffee will be provided. Travel expenses for those giving papers will be subsidised provided they send in an electronic copy of their paper (ca. 4000 words) prior to the workshop. All papers will be published on the CSSGJ website. The workshop is limited to a maximum of 25 people, and places will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. If you are interested in giving a paper or simply in attending, please email: Adam.Morton@nottingham.ac.uk