

# Editorial

This is the first issue of a new journal devoted to the analysis and discussion of contemporary social issues in Europe. The launch of an academic journal is always a challenge, especially in the field of human sciences, with so many journals of high quality focusing on European sociological or social policy areas, such as the *European Journal of Sociology* or *The European Journal of Social Policy*. Moreover *The European Journal of Social Quality* aims to provide analysis and a debating forum around a theme, social quality, which did not even exist five years ago. Indeed, social quality is just starting to establish its legitimacy as an analytical tool as well as a normative principle. We are quite convinced, however, that *The European Journal of Social Quality* has good prospects to become a distinctive platform for important ideas and analysis that will have an impact on European societies and citizens at the turn of the century.

## Why The European Journal of Social Quality?

This optimistic assessment is based on three factors. The first one is the potential of the social quality idea, introduced below, as an overarching concept which allows the discussion of many of the social and sociopolitical issues that are crucial to the future of European societies. The best definition of social quality can be found in Alan Walker's article, which sets the scene at the start of this issue:

Social quality can be defined as the extent to which citizens are able to participate in the social and economic lives of their communities under conditions which enhance their wellbeing and individual potential.

Especially, social quality binds together components of social experience, often separately approached, which are the wellbeing of the individual person on one side, and social cohesion, integration and participation on the other. This complex approach of the social experience also emphasises the deep interactions between the 'macro' and the 'micro' perspectives, as well as those between formal social structures and the informal communities and groups of civil society. In practical terms, the focus on social quality will also be the conceptual and methodological glue that will help the journal to develop as a true interdisciplinary vehicle.

Second, the journal is launched at a time when European societies have yet to digest the series of shocks which since the 1980s have completely changed the social experience of European citizens. The sociopolitical upheavals in central and eastern Europe since the late 1980s were followed by even more traumatic social difficulties as these regions confront the harshness of the transition to the market

economy and the arduous task of reconstructing a democratic polity within a balanced civil society. In the western parts of Europe, the social crisis of the 1980s has left a legacy of widely increased inequalities and social exclusion that has considerably weakened social cohesion. This is occurring in the context of a never-ending 'economic restructuring' in the name of competitiveness, accompanied by the EU monetary integration, European-wide market deregulation, and the acceleration of the so-called 'globalisation' of capital and information flows. There is therefore an urgent need to reconsider the articulation between the hegemonic economic sphere and the dependent social framework and practices. There is undoubtedly a place for social quality, as a normative paradigm and as an analytical tool, to be used in the analysis of such momentous events and trends.

A third factor that gives us some confidence is the amount of support that we feel able, as editors, to draw from across a wide community of academic colleagues, experts and practitioners in the social field. Especially, the journal is published in collaboration with the European Foundation on Social Quality, several leading members of which have accepted a place on our editorial board or our international advisory board. The Foundation, since its launch in 1997 has shown by its successful and swift development the interest and potential of the social quality idea. It has developed a network of social scientists and experts from all over Europe, from Lithuania to Portugal, including the thousand or so signatories of the 1997 Amsterdam Declaration, which was the launching pad of the Social Quality Initiative. The Foundation, and its host organisation SISWO (the Netherlands Institute for the Social Sciences) will also provide support for the preparation of some thematic issues of the journal. Alongside the Foundation we can also rely on a strong international advisory board which includes academics and researchers from many countries around the world including North America and Asia, with experience relevant to social quality and encompassing fields such as urban culture, social policy, European politics and economics, etc.

## **Social Quality: A Normative Concept**

Social quality is first and foremost a normative concept. The social philosophy underpinning this definition is clearly stated in the 1997 Amsterdam Declaration, which starts by denouncing in strong terms the unacceptable social problems that plague contemporary Europe:

Respect for the fundamental dignity of all citizens requires us to declare that we do not want to see growing numbers of beggars, tramps and homeless in the cities of Europe. Nor we can countenance a Europe with a large number of unemployed, growing numbers of poor people and those who have only limited access to health care and social services. These and many other negative indicators demonstrate the current inadequacy of Europe to provide social quality for all its citizens.

The Declaration went on what should be a society providing social quality:

We want, in contrast, a European society that is economically successful, but which, at the same time, promotes social justice and participation for its citizens. This would be a Europe in which social quality is paramount. Its citizens would be able and required to participate in the social and economic life of their communities and to do so under conditions which enhance their wellbeing, their individual potential and the welfare of their communities.

The normative nature of social quality clearly appears in this text (which also provides a long list of the basic conditions that a society should fulfil in order to enhance social quality for its citizens). This text, and other more recent publications from the European Foundation, also reveals that social quality is a complex idea that is still in development. There have been many theories or concepts, either normative or operational, which have appeared in the last three decades and have established themselves in bringing something new in the search for wider understanding of social issues that would not compartmentalise the social experience. One could, for instance, recall the considerable work done in the 1970s around social indicators, or, in the field of development policies, around 'basic needs'. Soon after, the irruption of the 'social exclusion' paradigm allowed the linkage of deprivation factors with issues of social cohesion and integration, as well as setting new policy frameworks. Social quality undoubtedly owes much to previous developments in social analysis. Although it is still in its early days, we believe that it has the potential to trigger important debates and eventually to influence social policies, a process to which this journal hopes to contribute.

We refer the reader to articles in this double issue, and especially to the first one by Alan Walker, for a clear introductory analysis of the concept of social quality. Cutting across disciplines and areas from economics to politics and, obviously sociology and social policy, it is also an analytical tool, which will help to develop ways of measuring the quality of life in society. But its radical edge is in the ways it integrates citizenship and participatory democracy as a core element of social quality. This vision of the polity sees the individual (and the community) as a complex identity construct, and social quality will only progress as far as citizens are directly involved in social choices.

Reclaiming the central place of the social experience is central to the project of the journal – indeed, the 'social quality' idea reclaims the normative and methodological autonomy and primacy of the social sphere. This is especially important, as the European integration project has been focusing increasingly on economic efficiency in the context of global market competitiveness. Social structures have to be 'adapted' to economic efficiency, and workforce, taxpayers and consumers become the social archetypes of the dominant discourse, rather than citizens and social individuals with complex identities.

The temptation is great for a new idea to seek acceptance from the hegemonic economic framework – but this should be resisted. The cautionary experience of

European social policies in the 1980s should warn us of such a danger. When attempts were made to develop a real social agenda for Europe, in order to establish what Jacques Delors called an *espace social*, it literally dissolved through attempts at justifying it down for the paymasters and economic lobbies. This occurred when the social project was presented as a way to improve economic competitiveness and economic growth, rather on its own merits in terms of social progress and cohesion. In other words, the social field became a functional instrument of the dominant economic and financial spheres; this signals a failure for Europe to build a common societal framework providing opportunities for improving social quality. We hope that the developments around social quality in the next few years will contribute to the definition of counter-strategies that will firmly aim for the primacy of the social.

## **Towards a Mission Statement**

Although the focus of the journal may already be clearer, it will still be useful to state our aims.

*1. A quality international academic journal:* Even if this appears to state the obvious again, our first aim is to publish an interdisciplinary academic journal built on the high quality of contributions and directed at a wide, informed readership. We will work at presenting rigorous research on contemporary social issues and debates, that will contribute to developing the body of empirical and theoretical knowledge of the social process, within the background of the social quality approach.

*2. A focus on social quality:* the journal will follow a broad thematic approach in which social quality will constitute the binding paradigm. Because of the characteristics of social quality, this will allow the journal to cover a wide range of themes and topics that have an impact on the quality of life of European citizens, from culture to welfare, from local community politics to international economics.

*3. Delineating the real social experience:* The journal will focus on debates on specific themes that are of particular importance for contemporary European societies, and that are relevant to social quality as experienced by citizens in their daily life. At the same time, it will endeavour to give as much room as possible to the analysis of experiences and practices in the European social body that are delineating alternative, new and positive ways of improving social quality.

*4. An interdisciplinary forum as well as a reference journal:* The journal will strive to provide informed analysis and stimulate debate on all the issues that have a bearing on social quality. Within its thematic approach, it will also provide

reference articles presenting state of the art analysis. The scope of the journal is European, understood in its widest meaning – more than a journal focussing solely on the European Union, it will nevertheless take a special interest on the Union given its importance for the life of European citizens.

5. *An independent journal*: the editorial board intends the journal to stay fully independent, not only in the usual terms of academic objectivity, but also in giving a voice to differing approaches and views of social phenomenon across Europe. As noted earlier, the journal and the Foundation are independent entities, and our collaboration will not signify that our views will always coincide. Articles which do not reflect, or are critical of the social quality approach or offering alternative views will be welcome, if they meet academic standards, focus on social issues and broadly share the same normative outlook as the social quality approach.

6. *The journal will not be afraid of tension and conflicts*: we do not expect social scientists, practitioners and citizens to agree on everything – the idea of social quality allows a wide rainbow of interpretations and discussions. We will devote a section, that we have entitled, with some lack of imagination, ‘Forum’, to shorter articles that will provide space for critical papers, irate responses, opposing views, thinking in progress, and alternative visions.

## Thinking the Social Quality Approach

This first double issue is devoted to the exploration of the concept of social quality. Other recent publications from the European Foundation on Social Quality have set a path in this respect – first in delineating its context and purpose, then looking at different policy and disciplinary angles. In this issue, social quality is approached in several ways, but our main purpose, apart from introducing it further, is to display the versatility of the concept and at the same time its usefulness in terms of policy assessment.

A first series of articles summarises the development of the concept of Social Quality and how it fits in the current social climate in Europe. Especially, the key article by Alan Walker provides an incisive introduction to the framework in which the concept of social quality appeared, emphasising its potential role in renewing the debate about the autonomous nature of social policy in relation to the economic context. Walker sees social quality as giving sense again to such projects as Delors’s *espace social*, which, as noted earlier, has lost much of its impetus and relevance in the current EU politics. The article details the preconditions for a new approach, and tentatively points to a conceptual framework for social quality. It approaches it as an open, complex concept underpinned by two sets of tensions. One is between the micro (individual life experience) and the macro (societal processes) levels of social life, and the other between the informal (civil society

and its communities and social groups) and the formal (institutions such as firms, public services and the state). As such social quality is a process that is always in construction, as is citizenship itself.

This is echoed by Beck and van der Maesen. Their article focuses on citizenship, arguing for a participatory European democracy, which could give to the European idea the legitimacy and effectiveness it presently lacks in the context of global networks and uncertain identities. This would require the construction of a new European project, in which social quality (rather than mechanistic subsidiarity) could find its place as a mediating agent. The paper by Ota de Leonardis focuses on a core issue of the European polity – what is the purpose of institutions and especially those making up the ‘welfare mix formula’ to be found in most European countries. Confronted to the ‘marketisation of the social’ which threatens social cohesion, and what Habermas calls ‘the privatistic retreat from citizenship’, the welfare systems are confronted with the breakup of public service philosophy and practices. De Leonardis argues that institutions have to change and adapt in order to restore their ability to be part of a socially cohesive structure enhancing social quality.

In a fourth article Berting and Villain-Gandossi argue for the need to reaffirm the autonomy of the social, whereas the last two decades have seen society increasingly becoming a marketplace in which a great majority of the population, now integrated in an unstructured middle class, has lost the means to resist the risks of social exclusion. Given that anti-exclusion policies merely alleviate symptoms and protect dominant interests against civil unrest, the authors argue that the only way of getting out of this conundrum would be to make social policies the affair of the ordinary citizen and the community. To conclude this first set of articles, Svetlik tackles the political significance of measuring social quality – making some important points about how social factors can be assessed and scaled when assessing social quality. Interestingly, Svetlik refers to the ‘social indicators’ tradition, but also more controversially to the application of TQM (Total Quality Management) to public services, before tentatively building up a set of indicators of social quality in health issues, as a pointer to possible future developments in measuring the extent of social quality.

The discussion of the concept of social quality as a theoretical construct and a reference framework would be quite sterile if it was not used in the analysis of real social situations, practices and policies. A second series of papers explicitly or implicitly deals with this, applying the concept of social quality to specific communities or issues.

Especially, social quality is experienced at the level of our daily lives as individuals, as members of various communities and networks such as family or workplace, as well as citizens. Exploring the ways in which these various aspects of our social existence are interwoven in our daily lives is the theme that Sue Yeandle develops in her article, which analyses changes in our use of time, from daily patterns to our whole life course. These changing time-management and life

courses, also structured in terms of gender and generation, are crucial factors that should be taken into account in policy strategies and assessments concerned with social quality. Indeed, Yeandle insists, they are ‘critical underpinnings of social solidarity, social inclusion and economic security, as well as of the empowerment and autonomy of individual citizens.’

From the individual to the institution: indeed, the theme of several articles in this volume is the necessary reassessment of institutions confronted to change, in order to enhance social quality. Institutions are themselves processes, and in the last two decades, European institutions of all kinds had to cope with much changes in their environment and their role. Amongst these institutions, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), or non-profit bodies as they are sometimes called, have become a symbol of these changing roles and features. It is interesting in this context that two of the articles in this volume are devoted to the analysis of the changing role and features of NGOs. Peter Herrmann looks at the interaction between various types of institutions and NGOs in countries of Western Europe such as France, Great Britain or Germany, in which different traditions and models for non-profit organisations have brought different reactions to the events and social trends of the last few decades. He also ponders whether it is possible to foresee the emergence of a European model of non-profit organisation that would take place in the range of institutions tackling social issues. In a further article, Zsuzsa Széman examines the evolution of key social policies in Hungary since the beginning of the 1990s, and shows how the role of NGOs took a dramatic turn as they had to take over many welfare functions of democratic public institutions, since those, devoid of resources and unable to adapt to the new context of the post-1989 transformation of society, themselves started to rely on the fast developing network of NGOs. Széman shows the NGOs suddenly trapped in replacing public institutions (especially local council and welfare institutions), making the best job out of a difficult political situation. This created new problems of legitimacy and social cohesion, and Széman explains the ways in which the two sides have tentatively worked towards each other to improve social conditions.

NGOs are interesting in relation to social quality as they stand between civil society and the formal institutional sector. But more traditional institutional frameworks and their operations similarly have a direct impact on social quality. A typical case is public budgetary redistribution – either through tax and benefits, or allocation of local budgets versus national ones, etc. This redistribution influences not only the wellbeing and welfare of people but it also organises the role of public services within the market economy. When dramatic sociopolitical events occur, the fiscal and budgetary institutions can find themselves on the forefront of social change. In his article Thomas Lenk considers the consequences of the policies adopted in the aftermath of German reunification. This dramatic episode was the context of a massive financial redistribution in order to bring social wellbeing in eastern Germany somewhat closer to western levels. The aim was to soften the blow of the irruption of markets in a fast-collapsing material

economy, and therefore work towards more social cohesion. In his study of the first years of reunification, Lenk shows that state-based redistribution had an important role in improving the situation of citizens in eastern states, somehow helping to preserve social cohesion, but this is not yet sufficient and redistribution will need to be pursued for many years to come.

Earlier the importance we attach to debating social analysis and social policy themes was underlined. This is especially – but not exclusively – the task of the shorter articles of the forum section, which will be designed to seek and provoke reactions and debates. Göran Therborn, in the first and longer piece of this forum, an edited version of an address given in 1997 at the launch of the Social Quality Initiative, deeply criticises the lack of democratic participation in the whole European Union integration process. According to him, this goes further than simply the widely recognised ‘democratic deficit’ – the way citizenship is considered at European level is flawed. It is urgent to define new goals for Europe, based on an ‘horizon’ perspective rather than on a ‘minima’ targeting perspective – as social quality is a process rather than a set target. This would require a revolution in social policy, including the development of a participatory democracy framework. Sagardoy de Simón in his short paper gives a contrasting view of the social situation in Europe. He sets out also to examine the conditions in which the current social policy framework of the EU can be adapted for resolving the current disaffection and opposition to Europe. Although he recommends a revision of the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties, his assessment of the prospects of current institutions to find ways of resolving European social issues is more positive than Therborn’s. According to him many existing problems are mostly due to the psychological and political difficulty experienced by European citizens in accepting and adapting to the sheer pace of change. This is especially the case in the labour market and in the ways identities are being structured and defined. He recommends policies of accelerating flexibility in the labour market and providing better information to citizens, among others, but, in what is an optimistic appraisal, he is broadly confident that the European framework is solid enough to provide a lead for such reforms.

This range of articles, written by academics and researchers from nine different European countries, from Sweden to Hungary, Spain and Slovenia, is only covering a symbolic fraction of what could already have been written on social quality. However, it is sufficiently diverse to point out to the range of possible debates which will develop in further issues, either through thematic articles or through the Forum.

## **Developments and Future Issues**

This first issue sets the scene in relation to social quality. The next issues will discuss specific themes – and we hope that they will fulfil expectations, offering a range of thought-provoking articles and providing reference material on the state

of thinking on the particular topic covered in each issue. The first one to come will be devoted to 'Age and Autonomy'. Older age groups have and will continue to grow in numbers across Europe, and their place in society is fast changing. Although social trends indicate a more autonomous and active old age, it is nevertheless the case that for an increasing number of older people with some level of incapacity will need support during the next decades. This dichotomy – increased activity and participation, and growing need for support, will be explored in articles that assess recent changes in social policy concerning old age, the growing body of experience of participative and inclusive programmes directed towards older citizens, etc. The following issue again will approach a topic that provokes considerable debates, that is, 'Social Quality and Work'. Workplace and employment, indeed, occupy a central place in our lives; working conditions, and the ways in which work fits in our life experience, are obviously central factors to social quality, and affects all other aspects of quality of life of European citizens, from health to community life.

This first double issue has been solely devoted to introducing ideas around social quality. Further issues will have a more developed format. Especially, the forum section will take a more important place, and there will be a review article complemented by shorter reviews. Many ideas are being developed for future issues, which may cover the involvement of people with their own environment across Europe, or deal with cultural themes, or childhood, or migrations, or transport: the range of possible themes is wide. We hope that our readers will find reading the journal a worthwhile exercise, and that it will entice more people to participate in social debates in Europe.

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