Editorial

Social Quality, Values, Convergence and the European Social Model

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Unlike the last issue of the *European Journal of Social Quality*, which dealt entirely with social quality in individual nations, this issue focuses exclusively on the European dimension with particular emphasis on values associated with social quality in both an historical and comparative context. A central question running through several papers relates to convergence: are European societies converging and, if so, then to what are they converging? Is the European Social Model still viable or is the enlarged EU moving inexorably towards a 'race to the bottom' in the context of trying to reach the Lisbon goal of becoming the world's most dynamic and competitive economy in the dog-eat-dog political economy of an unstoppable globalisation?

Central to the historical context in this issue is Vernes' discussion of Rousseau and social quality. Here the fundamental values of social quality, particularly its emphasis on a fair and just society (Beck et al. 1997) can be seen to be highly consonant with Rousseau's enlightenment values. Rousseau's formulation of the general will and the social contract also address the central theoretical issue of social quality, the notion of the social, a theme taken up in three other papers here.

The comparative context is always present in discussions of Europe and the EU but the issue that looms large here is the impact of the enlargement that has taken place in the EU and the potential impact of further enlargement. This not only affects the practicalities of harmonisation and compatibility between institutions, policies and procedures but also the extent to which there are common values or even a vision of what such values might actually be.

Three interrelated themes run through the papers in this issue. These relate to: values; convergence and divergence; and the tension between the European Social Model and globalisation.

Values

Taking the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of ‘value’ in philosophical and social science settings – ‘the principles or standards of a person or society, the personal or societal judgement of what is valuable and important in life’ – it is clear that social quality is deeply embedded in the perspective expounded by Rousseau that money and price-value are overrated as measures of values in society; indeed a primary motivation for the development of the whole social quality theoretical perspective was exasperation at the common equating of levels of Gross National Product in financial terms with levels of satisfaction with quality of life (Phillips 2006: 175–76). More specifically, Rousseau’s linking of the notion of the general will with social cohesion and thus national identity provides a starting point for either sharing or jointly moving towards creating expressions of European values and identity both in terms of European nations and European people(s).

The relationship between national and European identity in the context of globalisation is addressed in Berting’s paper along with issues arising from traditional versus modern value perspectives and tensions in modernity between rationality and autonomy, universalistic rationality and historicism, and rationality and sentiment. Berting reminds us of the challenges in achieving commonality in values that are inherent in the different meanings that values such as liberty have in different social settings, each with different value clusters. In other words, he reminds us, values always have a specific social context and that there are missing links in most value discussions, namely the context of economic, social political and cultural developments.

On a more positive note Berting postulates the existence of, first, a modern European culture in the making and, second, an – admittedly weak – European identity incorporating consciousness of both what Europeans have in common and their cultural variety. In similar vein Bouget asks whether a new way of life awaits a Europe with putatively converging values. Berting ends his contribution with an exhortation to include among primary European values the insistence on social and political rights in the *Amsterdam Declaration of Social Quality* (see Walker 1998).

Convergence and Divergence

The central question here, though, is whether Europe *is* or if it *might be* converging towards such a set of specifically European social values. Perhaps more cynically, one might ask whether such an eventuality is even

a practical possibility, given the impetus of globalisation, discussed in the next section. Bouget is adamant that there are no grounds for a deterministic conclusion here because of what he sees as a permanent tension between forces tending towards both convergence and divergence. Berting is also clear that there is no consensus on values and poses the question whether modern society is disintegrating in value terms. This may appear unduly dramatic but there is no doubt that the wider the EU net is thrown over central and eastern Europe – and particularly if it ultimately incorporates Turkey – then the more cultural and value-diversity it will have to embrace. In this context Juhász notes that, on the negative side, there is no clear welfare model in the post-accession countries and, on a more positive note, the standard of living in these countries is expected to increase towards the EU average due to both redistributive flows from the other EU countries and the economic benefits of membership.

This potential economic realignment, as Bouget reminds us, is reminiscent of Clark Kerr's original convergence thesis based on the notion that industrial maturation would lead to increasing similarities in political and social institutions among nations. He points out that while there has been a convergence in economic and fiscal policies because of the Single Market, Maastricht and macro-economic convergence criteria, this has not led to GDP convergence, even with EU subsidies. And paradoxically, the lack of any clear European welfare model leads to divergence in social policy institutions whereas the post Maastricht representation of social protection as an economic burden has led to some convergence in policies and levels of expenditure.

The bigger question than 'Is there convergence?' is 'convergence to what?' There are two contenders for this purported convergence. The first, is towards the specifically European vision enshrined within the European Social Model (ESM). A goal of this *social Europe* is not only to work towards European solidarity but also to build common social rights throughout Europe, with southern, eastern and central Europe converging towards the continental model. The second, international heavyweight, contender is the ubiquitous economically liberal model of globalisation within which the European ideals of social protection and social rights are seen as highly uncompetitive and thus redundant.

The European Social Model versus Globalisation

Putting it baldly, it seems that there is little hope for the ESM vision in the cut-throat world of globalisation. This is particularly so because globalisation, as Berting tells us, is presented not just as an ideology or a model but

as an unassailable scientific fact of life. Herrmann too presents a case that the ESM, although impressive, can be seen as meaningless because as a vision it is open to so many interpretations: in order to become substantively meaningful it needs to be embedded in historical reality, firmly linked to political vision and to have a clear and unambiguous analytical perspective.

Juhász and Korver and Oeij take a more positive perspective on the achievements of the ESM so far. Juhász praises the ESM for its achievements in promoting social solidarity and protecting pensioners, people in secure jobs and more generally promoting the economic and social welfare of women. Similarly, the ESM in its combination of employment, social and economic policy has been remarkably stable according to Korver and Oeij, but they, along with Juhász, express concern about its sustainability in the face of demographic trends, fierce global competition, particularly from low-cost economies, and EU expansion. In particular they stress the pragmatic difficulties of striking a balance between flexibility and security to achieve 'flexicurity' truly compatible with the ESM in the post Lisbon era where the EU is striving to become the world's most dynamic and competitive knowledge-driven economy by 2010.

Juhász is particularly concerned about the potential impact upon the ESM by the widening of EU membership. Following Ferge (2002), and echoing Berting's concerns, he notes that issues central to the continuation of the ESM have been sidelined by the more practically pressing issues of political, market and legal reforms necessary for membership and, rather depressingly, he claims that the World Bank played a more active role in shaping the social policies of east-central-Europe than the EU did in the 1990s. A worrying consequence of all this, for the ESM both as a vision and a practical model, has been the barriers to free movement of workers from the post-accession countries put in place by most of the EU fifteen.

Now that these three themes have been introduced and commonalities among the papers in this issue have been identified, it is apt to preview the papers themselves.

The Papers

Vernes' paper, 'Social Quality in Rousseau', traces the value antecedents of social quality to its Enlightenment roots. Of particular relevance to the holistic nature of social quality, which reaches far beyond material and need-based formulations, is Rousseau's insistence that meeting the common good entails far more than merely meeting needs. While it is essential to combat material inequality, for Rousseau the essence of the common

good lies in the combination of the requirement for community and respect for individuality. This formulation is closely matched in the ‘realisation of the social’ within the social quality theoretical framework via the interaction between individual self realisation and the development of collective identities (Beck et al. 2001). A link with social quality is the importance of trust, central to social quality’s social cohesion dimension. A further element in Rousseau’s thought of central importance to the development of the social quality construct is his emphasis on spatial and locational aspects of life epitomised in the notion of the garden city. Vernes concludes that social quality in Rousseau’s work depends on the benevolent dispositions of individuals who trust in the benevolence of others.

Herrmann’s paper, ‘Social Quality – Opening Individual Well-Being for a Social Perspective’, although not mentioning Rousseau by name, continues the theme of the social contract with a particular emphasis on ‘the social’. In this context he provides a detailed and elegant dissection of the corpus of social quality in contradistinction to the notions of well-being and social justice. Then he applies this to debates on the future of the European Social Model. As an example of the challenges in pinning down the meaning of the ESM he presents an engaging analysis of some of Tony Blair’s pronouncements on the subject. These themes are all drawn together in his presentation of the dialectical interaction of what he characterises as the objective and subjective factors of social quality in the context of concerns for the future of the ESM.

As noted above, Korver and Oeij are also exercised by the future of the ESM. Their major fear is of its potential sidelining in the race to try to ensure the EU becomes the world’s most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy. They see a potential resolution to this problem by utilising the ESM to enhance employability in cutting edge knowledge-based sectors of the economy through concentrating EU energies and resources on training. Their analysis highlights a potential advantage for the EU over more economically liberal, globalised economies where solely employer-funded training in transferable knowledge-based skills is not economically efficient due to free-rider outcomes in the labour market, thus leading to under-investment in training and labour market failure. They argue that covenants, primarily between government, employers and employees, are a form of institutional empowerment (one of the ‘objective’ social quality factors) which can strengthen employability, enhance the knowledge-based economy and simultaneously strengthen the ESM.

The ESM is also central to Juhász’s contribution: ‘Exporting or Pulling Down? The European Social Model and Eastern Enlargement of the EU’. This is a thought-provoking paper, which highlights the complexities and lack of homogeneity in social policies in the post-accession countries and

their relative poverty in comparison with the EU fifteen. Using Hungary as an example he identifies three types of influence the EU has upon social policy in east-central-European (ECE) EU countries: (i) procedural, including civil society dialogue, which has been weak in the ECE countries with governments using financial support for political purposes; (ii) institutional and administrative, but this had only a minor effect because of the strength of the pre-accession administrative structures and the weakness of the EU guidance; and (iii) substantive changes, including diluting the pension and health services through introduction of private provision. However, Juhász notes that these changes were due more to a consequence of ‘cognitive Europeanization’ than the impact of the EU *per se*.

Bouget’s paper, ‘Convergence in Social Welfare Systems: from Evidence to Explanations’, also addresses issues relating to this cognitive Europeanisation. He explores the extent to which convergence has taken place and the varied reasons lying behind both convergence and divergence in EU and OECD nations. He concludes that there are at least five sets of theoretical accounts that can be given for the social and institutional changes leading to convergence or divergence. The first he identifies as rather simplistically predicting convergence towards a liberal model but ignoring the complexities of national history. The second is more in tune with the ESM: movement towards the gradual creation of a new EU system, a ‘proto-society’ for a future stable system. The third relates to a dichotomy between the policy outcomes and institutional dimensions of national systems: the former have gradually converged while the latter have largely retained their diverse identities. The fourth is the putative victory of convergent outcomes over divergent institutions where the latter eventually have to change, probably in an evolutionary way, but possibly suddenly. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is a permanent tension between divergence and convergence which will prevent a deterministic conclusion.

Berting’s paper, ‘Uniting Europeans by Values: a Feasible Enterprise?’ also confronts the prospect of European convergence and neatly complements Vernes’ discussion of Rousseau. The central themes here relate to the nature of national vis-à-vis European values and identity in these times of ongoing globalisation. Berting reminds us of the long and complex history of the common values inherent in European democracies. He is also convinced that this common heritage provides the basis for a fledgling European culture and identity, which incorporates consciousness of both what Europeans have in common and of their cultural variety. His paper ends, appropriately for this journal, with an exhortation that the value orientation of this European identity should include the social and political rights that are central to the *Amsterdam Declaration on the Social Quality of Europe*.

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