

***Social Europe: From vision to vigour*, Björn Hacker, Brussels, 2023, Publisher: Foundation for European Progressive Studies, ISBN: 978-3-8012-3105-7**

Book Review by **Klára Fóti**¹

This book, authored by Björn Hacker, was published by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), within its *Primer Series*, in November 2023. It came out well ahead of the European Parliamentary elections – with the obvious purpose of contributing to public debates before the election campaigns. Therefore, its publication was well-timed. Its explicit aim, however, is actually more ambitious: to offer “guidance for those who would like to understand better how social policy at the EU level is made, what are the main tools, who are the most important actors, and when this policy field has been more or less successful in recent decades”. This “pedagogical” aim fits well the requirements of the Primer Series whose educational purpose is explicitly expressed.

As regards the methodology, the author has adopted a largely descriptive approach. Yet, the way he presents the development of the social policy at the EU level brings additional insight into the topic – and this is especially true for the analysis of the lines of conflict.

The first chapter, entitled “Social Europe: model or promise?”, describes the initial approaches to the concept of “social Europe” in the early years of European integration. It presents the visions of influential politicians, including Willy Brandt, who had suggested that the economic and social integration should go hand in hand. Thus, the economic and social issues would have been given equal importance. The socialist and social democratic parties of the other Member States of the European Economic Community (EEC) have embraced this vision, and so the concept of what Willy Brandt called the “European Social Union” was developed. This approach has contributed to elaborating the Community’s first Social Action Programme, adopted in 1974. The latter has failed due to the collapse of the Bretton Woods system and the economic disruptions triggered by the first and second oil crises that led to a rising unemployment rate. These developments and the ensuing neoclassical and monetarist ideas, which praise the potential “self-healing powers of the market”, are also briefly described in the first chapter of Hacker’s book. In this context, the author highlights Jacques Delors’ presidency and his role in enhancing the Single Market with a social dimension. Hacker clearly explains the economic and political reasons for the gradual expansion of the social dimension, which has included issues like occupational health and safety, more funding for social cohesion, and the consolidation of the social dialogue. Later, however, important developments enabled the broadening of the supranational social policy competencies: though the United Kingdom did not

¹Klára Fóti, is Lecturer at the ELTE University, Budapest, Faculty of Social Sciences.
E-mail: klara.foti@tatk.elte.hu.

sign the Social Protocol of the Maastricht Treaty, “a high level of employment and of social protection” was introduced among the existing objectives of the then European Community. Moreover, the Social Protocol has been instrumental in enhancing the social partners’ role in shaping social policy at the European level, by empowering them to elaborate directives.

Additionally, in the first chapter, the author provides a clear and concise overview of the different interpretations assigned to such a complex theoretical concept as the European Social Model (ESM). The different perspectives on the ESM are also illustrated in a graph. Subsequently, Hacker explains briefly other important terms: the European Social Union, the European Social Dimension, and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).

The second chapter focuses on the lines of conflict that emerge between social policies at the national and European levels. After describing various welfare models, the author points out the first line of conflict: the diverse pathways of the national welfare states do not tally with the need to integrate common European elements into the national social policies. The author emphasises the Member States’ efforts to retain control over their social policies (as part of preserving their national sovereignty). The second line of conflict is linked to these efforts, which go against the deepening of the economic integration that requires more social policy regulations at the EU level. The third line of conflict is the outcome of the asymmetry of the European integration where economic issues, supported by “constitutional specifications” (i.e. Treaty provisions), prevail over social ones. The progress in economic aspects has always preceded that in the social field. Therefore, a controversy surrounding the supremacy of market freedom and the different welfare state arrangements emerged. The evolution of the EU Directive for posted workers is a case in point: when the free movement of services was applied in the Single Market, the issue of social dumping surfaced due to wide disparities in welfare state arrangements in the countries of origin and the host countries. Consequently, the Directive had to be changed, and the fact that its change has taken such a long time reflects the sensitivity of the issue. The fourth line of conflict is connected to the solid bias towards the austerity measures in the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis that triggered the Euro crisis (2009/2010-2015). Instead of adopting a Keynesian approach to regulate the markets in a socially useful way, the EU leaders have preferred the neoliberal doctrine, which depicts the European Union as a big market, where interference is not acceptable. The fifth line of conflict underlines that social and spatial disparities have persisted, and inequalities have increased in the wake of the recent economic crises, despite the importance of the EU’s cohesion policies meant to ensure economic, social, and territorial convergence at the EU level.

The presentation of the lines of conflict between the social policies at the national and EU levels is convincing: Hacker’s arguments are clear, and his approach seems innovative. However, the individual sections do not go into much detail and lack necessary updates. For instance, when the different welfare models are discussed, there are no examples that might explain why certain countries of the “post-communist welfare world” (e.g., Slovenia and the Czech Republic) can be regarded as conservative. As for the data provided, it is useful, but it should have been updated: *Figure 4* illustrates the social protection expenditure as % of GDP in 2019, but the book was published

towards the end of 2023. It would have been more interesting to capture its evolution between 2019 and 2022, to see whether the COVID-19 crisis had any impact on the social protection expenditure. The map showing the regional variations in terms of GDP per capita (*Figure 5*, pg. 42) suits the text, but is difficult to read; more colours should have been used – not just black, dark grey, and light grey, when the legend lists 7 different options.

The third chapter presents the various social policy competences at the EU level and describes how they are exercised. It provides an overview of the legal foundations of those competences (with a special focus on the primary legislation, i.e. the relevant Treaty articles). Then it elaborates on the regulatory social policy and lists those social policy fields, that have EU competences to enact legislation. Subsequently, the author presents the various funding instruments, then deals with the social policy coordination, and details the evolution of the annual European Semester. This chapter depicts briefly the social dialogue envisioned at the EU level in 1985. It details how the social dialogue was developed out of the “Val Duchesse process”, and mentions the steps taken to obtain information and consultation rights, which helped shape the European social policies. Thus, two sorts of agreements between social partners have been made possible. Moreover, this “instrument [the social dialogue] gives the social partners legislative power in social policy matters covered by Article 153 TFEU [Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union]. In 1998 this was expanded to the sectoral level”. To provide a complete overview, the chapter ends with a systematic list of all the important actors (partially mentioned before) that also describes concisely their tasks and role in shaping the European social policy.

The fourth chapter lays out the various stages of European policy development from the start of the European integration process (1958) up until today. Understandably, this chapter includes some facts already mentioned in the previous chapters. However, the summary of the major developments is useful and so is the author’s decision to include one or two milestones for each of the five stages listed below (with the milestones of social Europe in brackets):

1. Accompanying economic integration: 1958-1972 (1st milestone: The European Social Fund).
2. Implementing labour law and occupational safety: 1972-1989 (2nd milestone: Improvement of living and working conditions).
3. Initiating social dialogue and majority voting: 1989-1997 (3rd milestone: Information and consultation; 4th milestone: The European Social Dialogue).
4. Embarking on the policy coordination track: 1997-2010 (5th milestone: Gender and antidiscrimination rights; 6th milestone: The Open Method of Coordination).
5. Torn between austerity and collective solidarity: 2010-today (7th milestone: The European Pillar of Social Rights).

The longest and most detailed section is the last one. It points out that the Europe 2020 Strategy, with its aim to achieve “smart, sustainable and inclusive growth”, tried to strike a balance between economic and social progress (an idea

already considered during the 1990s). The Member States, however, preferred an open coordination setting to binding legal regulations, obligatory pressures, and sanctions. Consequently, the employment and social policy coordination became looser than the coordination of budgetary policies. The Euro crisis reinforced the emphasis on budgetary concerns, and, despite the proposals that stressed the importance of the social objectives, within “the European Semester social policies were viewed through an economic lens. They had a role, but as a cost factor that supposedly hindered consolidation and competitiveness”. Nevertheless, later on, the importance of the social dimension of the EU was acknowledged. In 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker, the then President of the European Commission said: “I would like a Europe with a social ‘triple A’ rating. A social triple-A is just as important as an economic and financial triple-A”. The proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017 is indeed an important milestone: with its 20 principles it has served as a reference point in the EU’s legislation concerning social affairs. Moreover, many subsequent developments (for example, the revision of the Posted Workers Directive in 2018, the adoption of the Work-life Balance Directive in 2019, etc.) also demonstrate a reinforcement of the EU’s social dimension. The EPSR plays a vital role in the distributive part of the EU’s social policy “through its incorporation as an objective in the funding period 2021 to 2027. But its principal application is via its integration in the European Semester as a policy coordination tool” (pg. 88).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU chose a course of action entirely different from that pursued during the financial and economic crisis that affected the Eurozone. It decided to “rais[e] capital on the financial markets with a long repayment period until 2058”. This has allowed the EU “to provide a total of 750 billion euros in financial transfers and loans. The bulk of this will be allocated to Member States through the newly established Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)” (pg. 89).

Although the fifth chapter is not the last one of this book, the author draws important conclusions when outlining the key challenges to a social Europe. For example, he underlines that “the social framing of economic integration is not sufficiently developed”. The lines of conflict, explained in the second chapter, underpin this statement. Each socioeconomic crisis augments the risk of reversibility of the positive developments meant to facilitate convergence. To attain convergence, the author recommends “a renewed focus on cohesion”; the integration of EU’s economic and social policies, also considering the social impact of the austerity measures before deciding to adopt them; more emphasis on minimum standards guaranteed partly by new regulative instruments in EU law, partly by giving the Member States “some leeway in implementation, as with the recent directive on adequate minimum wages”. Another important challenge is the social framing of the twin transition. Several questions should be raised and addressed to reduce the social costs the twin transition (green transition and digitalisation) entails. The most affected groups and regions have to be identified to address their needs. Additionally, the social consequences of labour reallocation between the “old” and “new” sectors should be tackled, etc.

In the last chapter, after summarising the attempts “to give Social Europe more substance”, the author concludes that a breakthrough was possible due to the proclamation of the EPSR with its Social Scoreboard in 2017. The EPSR has been

strengthened by the adoption of an action plan for its implementation, with social headline indicators and quantitative targets to be achieved by 2030. The chapter ends with the key results of an opinion poll on the importance of social Europe, which suggests that “European citizens both desire and need more Social Europe” (pg. 107).

This book may serve indeed as a useful guide to those who want to learn more about social Europe. A final editorial review would have been useful to improve the presentation: some typos and small mistakes could have been avoided (e.g., on pp. 39, 82). Nevertheless, the aim of the publication was achieved, so we highly recommend the book to students, academics, policy experts, and other people interested in the subject.