

If anything, “social Europe” has long been the subject of intense discussions. In a chapter of a [forthcoming book](#), we argue that looking at the discourses produced about social Europe in historical perspective reveals how the understanding of the “social” in the European Union [has been framed](#) – and that this casts light on some of its shortcomings today.

Since the 1980s, two concepts were widely used to describe the European social dimension: the European social model and the social market economy. A chronology of the occurrences of both terms in the plenary debates of the European Parliament (EP) reveals that both concepts have emerged as successful ways of defining social Europe roughly at the same time, starting from the late 1980s, and have been widely used until today (even if since 2003 European social model seems to have become more used than social market economy). Our research finds that while these two concepts were used at the beginning with different – and even conflicting – purposes, they increasingly converged towards a de-politicized and economized conception of the “social”, whereby the primary aim of social policy becomes the promotion of employment.

Social Market Economy vs. European Social Model

While the idea of developing a social dimension of European integration was of course not born in the 1980s, the expression “social Europe” started to be increasingly used in European debates at that time. Against the backdrop of economic crisis, the limited ability of Member states to deal with the economic and social problems at national levels opened up new opportunities for developing the social dimension at European level. Moreover, such a project was seen as a promising tool in order to re-build the lost legitimacy of the Community.

In this context, an important way to talk about the social dimension of European integration started to gain ground: the definition of the European Economic Community (EEC) as a social market economy. The concept of social market economy had emerged in post-war Germany as a tentative equilibrium between economic freedom and social concerns. Its origins are to be found within the Ordoliberal School, a group of scholars who played a crucial role in German politics after the War. In a nutshell, their basic idea was that the best social policy was a sound, market-oriented economic policy. Interestingly, in the German debate of the 1950s the concept was regularly opposed to the EEC economic policy, supposedly reflecting the model of French planning. But, over time, social market economy became a more consensual watchword in German debates, and escaped its original

promoters. With the reunification debate, it started to be used to define a core element of the German national identity. In this context, it made its way to the European debates about social Europe. In the EP, during the 1980s, it was supported by conservatives, by liberals trying to avoid a “socialist Europe”, and by many Germans seeing in social market economy the key to the European social question.

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However, this was not the only available vocabulary that circulated at the time to define the much-wanted social Europe. Another concept was introduced and promoted in the 1980s, namely that of European social model. It was first circulated by the European Commission, as an element of a broader strategy of re-legitimizing the EC, developed under the new leadership of Jacques Delors. The aim was to reconcile the idea of a necessary step forward in European integration and of the preservation of the national social arrangements of the past. The European social model was thus [very loosely defined](#) as “a balance between the rights and obligations of society and the individual”. However, it was presented as a distinct counter-project to social market economy and supported by the reformist left. **In the European Parliament, during the 1980s and early 1990s, the first and only users of the concept were to be found in this social-reformist stream of thought. Hence, these two concepts represented two distinct projects for social Europe.**

Social Europe Beyond Partisan Politics

Both concepts were nevertheless to be increasingly associated during the following years. This change can be observed in the policy documents produced by European institutions throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s. For instance, while in its White Paper on social policy (1993), the European Commission insisted on the need to “preserve and develop” the European social model, mainly understood as a set of values involving “in particular the rights and responsibilities of the individual”, the report never

mentioned social market economy. When in 2006, the Committee on social affairs of the EP produced a report on "[a European social model for the future](#)", it restated that "the European social model is first and foremost a question of values". But these values, it was said, were precisely those embedded in the defunct draft constitutional Treaty - where they were subsumed under the concept of social market economy.

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The European social model and social market economy thus started to function together. This made room for a trans-partisan endorsement of both concepts. For instance, it is striking to notice that most left-wing MEPs who used the term of social market economy in 2003 did it in a positive sense, while most conservatives and liberals who talked about European social model approved the concept. Political differences may have explained the inclination to use one term rather than the other, but they did no longer account for the approval or criticism of the concepts. The initial opposition line of social democrats defending the concept of European social model, on the one hand, and conservatives and liberals defending social market economy, on the other, had been almost completely blurred.

Social Europe: De-politicization through Economization?

The convergence between the discourses on the European social model and the social market economy was not only a rhetorical one. On the contrary, it was connected to the rise of a more substantial conception of Social Europe, which is reflected and further strengthened in more recent European initiatives, such as the Lisbon Strategy, Europe 2020 Strategy and the Social Investment Package (adopted respectively in 2000, 2010 and 2013).

This substantial conception seems to involve a specific interpretation of the relations between the social and the economic: rather than working against each other, the social should facilitate the functioning of the economic, improving the opportunity for all to participate within the market. Thus, a crucial aspect of this conception is the reconciliation between social and economic goals – a reconciliation that involves a high degree of [de-politicization](#). Indeed, contrary to the post-War compromise, **the process of reconciling the social and the economic dimensions is not seen as a task for democratic politics and social movements but rather for “experts”** – a technocratic issue involving the search for “[policy solutions](#)” aimed at addressing “challenges”, such as increased international competition and the emergence of the “knowledge-based economy”. Welfare reform becomes a matter of adaptation and reform proposals are not presented as possible political options but rather as part of an inevitable “modernization” process that the new conditions make necessary. In this way, the development of social Europe is withdrawn from the political debate and from social struggles.

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In particular, the reform path aimed at the “modernization” of welfare states implies that the main goals of social policy become those of promoting paid employment and enhancing people’s human capital. Thus, the reconciliation of social and economic goals occurs mainly through the *economization* of the social: from being a limit to the economic logic, social policy has been reframed as “[social investment](#)” – an economic asset, positively contributing to competitiveness and economic growth. From this perspective, the de-politicization of welfare reform and the economization of the social go hand in hand: the development of the European “social dimension” is identified with technically finding an equilibrium between social and economic objectives – an equilibrium that involves the subordination of the former to the latter.

Can Social Europe be re-politicized?

Yet, the economization of the social is not a neutral or merely technical process. Rather, it has deeply political implications. It requires to reform welfare states focusing on promoting employment, shifting social policy priorities away from protection from the market and de-commodification towards inclusion in the market and “[recommodification](#)”. But growing inequalities and precarity within the labour market increasingly undermine the legitimacy of re-commodification policies. In this context, it seems that re-establishing the legitimacy of the European project and overcoming its (in)famous “democratic deficit” require – among other things – the re-politicization of the relationship between the economic and the social. Given the central role that paid employment plays in reconciling economic and social goals, it seems that this re-politicization entails initiating a democratic debate aimed at re-discussing the place that work – and what kind of work – should have in contemporary Europe.

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