

# **The European Social Model and social policies: a formative institutional evaluation**

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## **Summary**

European institutions have an important role to play in the processes of reinforcing the social dimension of the European economies. This article analyses some potentialities and also some limitations of the Europeanisation of the social question as promoted by the European Social Model (ESM). A formative, institutional evaluation of Europeanisation has been carried out, with the aim of examining the process of supranationalisation, and the steps forward and setbacks entailed. Particular attention has been paid to the dual, ambivalent nature of the European Social Model, which encompasses both economic growth and social cohesion, and which is based on an axiological system which values social issues at least as highly as economic ones.

## **Abstract**

European institutions are paramount in the processes of upholding the social dimension of the European economies. This article analyses some of the potentialities and limitations of the Europeanisation of the social dimension which the European Social Model (ESM) promotes. An institutional formative evaluation of such development is carried out with the aim of assessing the process of supra-nationalization and its advances and restraints. The axiological bases of the ambivalent and dual character of the ESM, which integrates growth and cohesion, are regarded as crucial for the combination of both economic and social questions.

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\* Luis Moreno worked on this text while the *NURSOPOB* ('New Social Risks and the Evolution of Welfare Policies') project (National R+D+i, Ministry of Education and Science SEJ2005-06599) was ongoing and drew from the text he wrote for the *Fundación Carolina* (Moreno, 2006). Amparo Serrano, when writing this article, drew from the conclusions of the project 'Qualitative evaluation of activation policies: the limits of active and passive' (Ministry of Education and Science R+D+i project SEJ2007-64604) and the project 'Protection and flexicurity. The modernisation of public employment services' (FIPROS 2008/35 project under the Ministry of Employment and Immigration). The authors would like to thank two reviewers, external to this journal, for their anonymous comments.

**Key words:** Lisbon Agenda, labour activation, European governance, Luxembourg Process, Open Method of Coordination (OMC), welfare regimes.

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## **1. Introduction.**

For two decades the EC institutions have been in charge of one of the most ambitious supranational regulation processes concerning the ‘social question’ to exist since the beginning of the European project. European social strategy envisages the intensification of cooperation between the national and the European levels, with the aim of implementing a coordinated strategy for promoting employment and combating social exclusion. After Economic and Monetary Union, which was officially established in 1988, an evident asymmetry developed between economic promotion policies, which have been predominantly Europeanised, and social promotion policies, most of which continue to be implemented by individual Member States (MS). The economic globalisation processes, to which EMU contributes, reveal the need to reinforce the supranational dimension of social protection. In turn, under EMU, the room for manoeuvre enjoyed by the MS governments to influence the evolution of their economies for socio-political purposes (adjusting the exchange rate, monetary devaluation, potentially deficit public spending, job creation schemes or state aid, to quote some past measures) has been reduced, and also their power to carry out potentially social cohesion-orientated macroeconomic policies within the nation state (Scharpf, 2002). Furthermore there is the risk of downward pressure on salaries, the tax burden, and the Social Security system, given the ease with which companies can relocate (‘delocate’) production.

In view of this situation, there appears to exist a certain consensus regarding the need to reinforce the European social project. But this project is far from self-evident, given the great diversity of the labour markets within Europe and consequently the great variety of industrial relations problems and situations in these plural labour markets. Furthermore, we are confronted by great diversity of types, or ‘welfare regimes’, and therefore not only significant variation in terms of the capacity of the Welfare States to come to terms with the necessary social transfers, but also a variety

of social and cultural values which justify and legitimise the need for these transfers. Furthermore, the transfer of control of the social policies to European institutions would be subject to considerable political resistance if it were carried out rapidly and directly. Social policies are the result of long historical tradition and political commitments on the part of individual Member States, which is why they have not yet developed a trans-national European cultural identity. It is not surprising that the MS have been reluctant to agree to transfer competencies with so much cultural symbolism as social policy to the EU institutions.

Consequently, the European project confronts a significant paradox, which is how to reinforce the social dimension on a supranational level in a context of political difficulties concerning the corresponding regulation. Within this paradoxical framework, the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) was ‘invented’, and this is becoming progressively characteristic of the European social model. This article analyses some of the potentialities but also some of the problems posed by the main instruments and proposals which articulate this European social model (ESM). This is done from the perspective of a formative evaluation<sup>1</sup> of the institutions concerned and therefore is not conclusive with regard to particular social policies. Our reflections, consequently, do not correspond to empirical analyses of programmes or actions, either sectoral or integral to the unfinished evolution of the European Social Model, which is examined in a general way in the next section. It is more a question of examining the social Europeanisation process from a politico-institutional viewpoint. One of the main instruments in this process of Europeanisation is the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), which will be analysed in section III as an instrument of European governance based on the deformalisation of normative resources, deliberative decentralisation, and self-regulation. One of the main potentialities of this mode of regulation is its capacity to disseminate concepts which articulate discussion *frameworks*<sup>2</sup> about the social question at the national level. One of the most important concepts spread by these institutions is that of activation. Subsequently, and in order

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<sup>1</sup> Of the different kinds of evaluations, formative evaluation tries to answer the question: how could the operation being carried out be improved? In contrast to a conclusive evaluation, mostly orientated towards judging the final results, formative evaluation is concerned with the process itself with the aim of calibrating the proposed objectives in the light of changes which are considered to be capable of optimising the activities in progress. (Moreno and Ziglio, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> In the sense suggested by Lakoff (2007).

to illustrate the potentialities and limitations of this OMC, the ambivalent assessment of the new activation paradigm accepted by most European welfare countries and regimes is examined. These analyses precede the evaluations of the Luxembourg Process and the Lisbon Agenda in the following section. Finally, amongst other things, the concluding comments emphasize the dual and ambivalent nature of the European Social Model, which comprises both economic growth and social cohesion.

## **2. What is the ESM?**

In general terms the European Social Model could be defined as a project focusing on collective solidarity, social equality and productive efficiency. The principles which delimit the ESM are in contrast to other socio-economic systems where re-mercantilizing individualism is the feature characteristic of welfare policies (USA)<sup>3</sup>, or the social dumping model is proposed as an added value of economic growth (emerging Asian countries). The ESM promotes social citizenship, understood as a limitation to social and economic inequality, better protection for the most vulnerable, and an active social partnership. As a strategic objective, the ESM backs sustained economic development and sustainability based on social cohesion (Scharpf, 2002; Adnett and Hardy, 2005; Jepsen and Serrano Pascual, 2005; Giddens, 2006).

On introducing the ideal of social cohesion into economic and social policy, as well as into the institutional welfare organisation, a wide variety of nuances emerge. For the European Trade Union Confederation, for example, the concept of social cohesion implies an improvement in the living and working conditions of citizens based on full employment, quality jobs, equal opportunities, social protection for all, social integration and citizen participation (ETUC, 2005). In the view of those employers less opposed to flexisecurity, cohesion would mean a combination of easier dismissals, though with high benefits for the unemployed, and a proactive social policy regarding the labour market (EuroActiv, 2005). The Assembly of European Regions adds gender equality and universal access to social services and benefits based on solidarity (AER, 2005). Naturally, there are those who deny the

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<sup>3</sup> After analysing longitudinal data from a set of indicators, it was noted that the range of variation within the EU is larger than that between the EU and the USA. However, it is not a question of different European social models but rather of different internal trajectories (Alber, 2006).

plausibility of recommending that a European country should adopt a comprehensive model which could work in several countries, but which in others could turn out to be counterproductive (Munchu, 2005). It has even been suggested that the ESM is gradually being undermined by the reality of global economic change<sup>4</sup>.

The ESM appears to be both a resource and an objective, inherent to the Europeanisation process. Therefore it seems irrelevant to speculate about a future scenario in which the social question could become separated from the economic question in the progressive institutionalisation of the European political arena (Flora, 1993; Flora *et al.*, 1999; Ferrera, 2005). Certainly, concealment of the difficulties arising from the Europeanisation process should be avoided; it is destined to regulate within a framework of political polysemy and geographic diversity and consequently should take into consideration the various welfare legitimacies laid down in the past, and which will be briefly discussed below.

#### *Europeanisation and welfare regimes*

The process of Europeanisation means a confluence of resources, social representations and actions on the part of the EU countries. It is the result, mainly, of the spreading of shared ideas and values, of the processes of structural economic harmonization, of the building of a trans-national system of institutions and of a common concern about the social question. Europeanisation involves countries which share a common inheritance and accept the democratic values of equality and human rights. Nevertheless, the concept of Europeanisation lacks normative precision. It is polysemic and subject to various interpretations. Its dynamic nature is reflected in a certain erosion of the sovereignty of the Member States of the European Union and in the gradual development of common supra state institutions and policies (the Schengen Agreement, the Euro, EMU or the European Court of Justice, for example). The creation of a United States of Europe need not necessarily be the final result of Europeanisation. Undoubtedly, the Europeanising process is characterised by the

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<sup>4</sup> It has been argued that the model could be financially unsustainable in the medium/long term. The high taxation rates could slow down not only investment but also job creation. Consider, for example, that salaried employees without children under their charge in Belgium and Germany pay one half of their earnings in social security contributions and taxes. In New Zealand little over 20% is paid and even less in middle income economies like those of Mexico and South Korea (Shackleton, 2006).

emergence of a European level of governance structures and by the creation of European regulatory norms (Cowles, Caporaso and Risse, 2001). However, an understanding of institutional integration in Europe cannot be based on cultural assimilation and identitarian formation like in the case of the American ‘melting pot’. This functionalist vision has often been spuriously associated with the vertical and hierarchical state organisation of ‘command-and-control’ in the socio-economic organisation of social welfare (Moreno and McEwen, 2005).

Alternatively, there exists another approach according to which European regulations can only be legitimised by taking into account the history and cultural diversity of the mosaic of peoples and polities which make up the ‘Old Continent’. Decentralisation is a vital element of the process, which involves the challenge of optimising the allocation of resources and competencies on the basis of the two guiding principles of the Europeanisation process: territorial subsidiarity and democratic responsibility (Moreno, 2003).

Over the last ten or fifteen years, the processes of change and reform in the Welfare States have speeded up, in accordance with the characteristics of their particular ideologies, interests and institutions (Ferrera, 1993; Moreno and Palier, 2005, Sapir, 2005). It should be remembered that by ‘welfare state’ we mean that, in the relationship between state, society and economy, a complex bundle of legal and organisational features are articulately intermixed (Esping-Andersen, 1990). In addition, there is a macrocomparative dimension which makes it possible to group countries together according to their ‘welfare logic’.<sup>5</sup> With the aim of evaluating the historic legacies and the specific institutional inertias or path dependencies within the future configuration of the ESM, below we include a synthetic analysis of the four main welfare regimes in the EU-15 up until 2004.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Naturally the countries grouped into ‘welfare regimes’ possess several distinctive characteristics peculiar to them. The methodological design basically attempts to correlate dependent and independent variables which seek to determine the variability or convergence of the countries (Esping Andersen, 1993, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> The characteristics of the ‘welfare regimes’ and the national intergroup specificities have become contrasted with the integration in the EU of new members from Eastern Europe (Guillén and Palier, 2004). Despite their common history as communist countries under the control of the former Soviet Union, it would be premature to group the Eastern European countries in a new regime other than that of welfare capitalism. In fact differing characteristics can be seen between a more liberal mercantilising

*Continental.* Organised by means of a social security system run according to occupational categories, its aim is to guarantee continued income and the status of the contributing salaried employees. There exists a subsidiary provision of social services by social agents (trade unions, churches, professional associations). These adopt corporate practices of social contracts in the production of citizen welfare, which have the legitimising approval of the state. Universality in social welfare cover depends on achieving and maintaining full employment.

*Anglo-Saxon.* Initially universalist in its vocation (*Beveridge Report*), this system is based on transfers of homogenous public benefits. Normally access is gained to services and benefits of a residual nature through demonstration of the insufficiency of the financial resources of the beneficiaries (means testing). It is assumed that citizens will buy a large proportion of their welfare services in the marketplace. In the last few years there has been an increasing tendency towards greater individual mercantilisation to obtain social welfare, in parallel to growing labour flexibility and deregulation.

*Nordic.* Based on the combination of ideas concerning solidarity with economic growth and full employment, and the minimisation of family dependence. Funded out of general taxes, this system is characterised by a high degree of universal provision of healthcare and personal social services, as well as generous financial benefits. The participation of the market and the family in the production of welfare is relatively low. Equal opportunities and the homogeneity of social groups within a wider middle class legitimise the high level of public intervention.

*Mediterranean.* Shaped by lifestyles in which the family is held to be the essential unit for micro-solidarity and collective welfare. The actions of the family substantially complement state provisions and services offered by both profit-making and non-profit-making private organisations. There is a clear demarcation between the contributing sector, where benefits and services are granted to 'official' workers, and

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cluster on the American model, and another group with a more continental, Bismarkian orientation (Potucek, 2006).

the non-contributing sector, made up of ‘unofficial’ workers and ‘precarious’ or ‘underground’ citizens.

The diversity of the institutional structures and welfare logics of the European social regimes should not undermine the common project for greater institutionalised solidarity. It would appear to be no historical contingency that the Welfare State was ‘invented’ in Europe and has reached a high level of maturity in terms of institutions and social legitimation. The debate as to whether Europe will follow the liberal Anglo-Saxon option, mainly represented by the USA, involving greater individualisation and mercantilisation, remains open. The question of who merits aid and solidarity, (deservingness) has become more intense in relation to some consequences associated with the phenomenon of immigration and with duality ‘us and them’ (van Oorschot, 2006). In this respect a certain change in citizens’ attitudes can be observed, and new emphasis has been placed on citizens assuming responsibility for their own activation and for looking after themselves.

To what extent will the normative and social approaches envisaged in the European social model make it possible to counteract or support ideological tendencies towards the individualisation of social risks? Given this framework of normative and institutional diversity, how would a European social model project take shape? In response to this situation, the Open Method of Coordination has been implemented as the main instrument of European governance.

### **3. The Open Method of Coordination and European governance**

How can we resolve the dilemma outlined above between, firstly, the necessity of reinforcing the supra national regulation of the social question, and secondly, awareness of the great diversity existing within Europe? Regulation, based for example on European directives with criteria extending beyond the modest levels accepted by all the member states, would be extremely controversial. One alternative to such regulation is the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), which has been

defined by some authors as a post-regulatory state and by others as a new paradigm of social regulation<sup>7</sup>.

This regulation is ‘open’, like ‘soft’ regulation, so as to be able to adjust to the new economic conditions, to the huge variety of situations within Europe, and to the principle of subsidiarity which characterises this European project. Thus, this regulation is not based on detailed rules but rather on the establishment of general ‘procedures’ (procedural regulation) which allow greater flexibility, variation and freedom.

The qualifier ‘open’, as applied to the OMC, basically alludes to three meanings: (1) the ‘open’ concept refers to the non-obligatory aspect at the core of this regulation. While it is a question of promoting common objectives and indicators, the means of achieving this is open, and depends on political choices and social situations at the national level; (2) ‘open’ can be understood to mean the opposite of bureaucratic, i.e. open to debate and thus able to adjust to possible changes in the economic or social situation or to the results of evaluations of previous policies; and (3) the OMC is ‘open’ as it fosters the participation of various social actors. It attempts to encourage the cooperation and participation of different actors on various levels: geographic, social, administrative, etc., on the principle of ‘partnership’.

### *Principles governing the Open Method of Coordination*

The complex political status<sup>8</sup> of the European institutions explains the recent shifts in their governing procedures regarding employment and social exclusion. A shift from

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<sup>7</sup> . This method consists of the following stages:

- The European institutions propose a series of guidelines, composed of measures and general objectives, often grouped under concepts like ‘activation’ or ‘employability’, etc.
- These guidelines are transposed into national and regional policy by the member states (National Reform Programmes)
- A benchmarking system is set up for synchronic (between countries) and diachronic (over time) comparison of the evolution of the MS and to identify best practices.
- A process of evaluation, review and monitoring on the part of the peer group and the European institutions is generated

<sup>8</sup> The European institutions are destined to end up negotiating the legitimacy of their actions respecting the great diversity of both political philosophies and labour markets in the Member States. This

regulation based exclusively on legal proceedings (European directives, for example) or institutional economic ones (as is the case of the Economic and Monetary Union EMU), towards a kind of coordination which appeals to the Member States' willingness to cooperate: *soft law*. The means available to European institutions for regulating the social question have become more diverse. Thus, the use of directives has lessened and complementary modes of regulation have been introduced, such as the OMC, peer group pressure<sup>9</sup>, the fostering of social dialogue at the European level and redistribution policies for structural funds.

The spread of these modes of governance has taken place in the context of the emergence of new social regulation principles, with a common feature: opposition to more centralised, bureaucratic modes of regulation, as these are considered to be too rigid, or unsuited to the conditions of normative and economic diversity which characterise the member countries of the European Union. It is a question of mobilising and multiplying the alternative coordination resources, which are designed to promote *decentralised self-regulation*, like benchmarking procedures, the exchange of best practices or the promotion of partnership (Walters and Haahr, 2005).

The OMC proposes regulation leading to convergence in terms of results, once general principles and common indicators have been collectively agreed upon, but leaves the Member States (MS) the 'open' possibility of choosing suitable instruments for implementing these objectives, and of adjusting them to the variety of political choices and social situations involved at the national level. Only the definition of the objectives is performed at a *central* level, while implementation is carried out in a *decentralised* way. These objectives, proposed by the European institutions, consist of general principles rather than specific proposals. These general proposals are transposed by the MS into national policies and in some cases into regional policies.

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legitimacy is composed of three cornerstones: technical legitimacy (based on the search for efficacy), political legitimacy (democratic deepening) and social legitimacy (offering political opportunities to diverse members of civil society).

<sup>9</sup> The results of national employment policies are subjected to public examination by the other MS, facilitating explicit comparison with the results of different countries, based on a series of previously approved indicators.

Thus the OMC consists of a new mode of governance implemented around three basic ideas: (A) as opposed to the substantive formalization of a norm, deformalisation and desubstantialisation of regulatory resources (procedural regulation); (B) as opposed to regulatory centralisation, deliberative decentralisation (multi-level internormative governance); and (C) as opposed to exogenous regulation, the mobilisation of alternative resources with which to promote self-regulation.

With regard to the *first* aspect (A), the OMC involves an agreement between the MS, not so much with respect to the contents of the social precepts, but rather to their application and procedures, to the mechanisms and systems of negotiation of these precepts, so that these are subject to a process of progressive reinvention. Procedural regulation (the dissemination of procedural routines) is being encouraged, and this consists of the establishment of a series of ‘rituals’<sup>10</sup> for spreading epistemical paradigms structured around concepts disseminated at national level; as we will see further on, with the specific example of activation.

The dissemination of these concepts helps to provide a framework for the Member States’ debates on the questions of employment and social cohesion, and thus exerts a significant socio-cognitive influence<sup>11</sup>. This regulatory power, held by the European Union, consisting of its capacity to harmonise political ideas, representations and aims (Palier, 2001), explains the key role played by the European interpretative framework in the rearticulation of the social question at national level. Therefore, the nature of European regulation in the spheres of society and employment is based on its capacity to disseminate paradigms of conception and articulation of the social question. The particular regulatory force the European institutions have lies in their capacity to intervene in a policy of subject production. Thus, “... Power works according to the means and ways by which we govern ourselves, encouraging us to adopt such subjectivities as the active job seeker, empowered citizens or the discerning consumer ...” (Walters and Haast, 2005: 13).

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<sup>10</sup> See note 7.

<sup>11</sup> For an examination of the syntactic and semantic changes inherent in the paradigm of activation, see Serrano Pascual (2004)

The *second* feature (B) characterising the OMC is its internormative nature (multi-level governance). Promoting this mode of governance permits a response to the democratic legitimacy crisis faced by European institutions. This is replacing a centralised perspective based on a formal model of subordination with a new mode of regulation which seeks the involvement of a great number of actors in the decision-making process and thus reconciles such a wide range of political perspectives and social interests. With this multi-level governance model, the European institutions negotiate legitimacy not only on the political level (thus responding to the profound democratic deficit of which the European institutions stand accused), but also on the technical level (statistical performance and social efficacy).

Therefore, the core objective is the promotion of a reflexive state designed to foster *dialogues between policies* and the creation of spaces for *mutual deliberation and constant negotiation* between various social actors and groups. It is a question of stimulating cooperation and participation at various levels --geographic, social and administrative-- under the principle of 'partnership' (governance on multiple levels, both vertical and horizontal). The mobilisation of diverse levels and actors pursues the consensus-approved and negotiated attainment of the agreed aims. The idea is to drive social policies towards a reflexive state and thus foster a political learning process.

This call for the plural participation of a great number of social and political actors in order to establish their proposals allows these to be openly adjusted to possible changes in the economic or social situation or to the results of evaluations of previous policies. This model of regulation could thus be described as applying 'deliberative invention' to a normative order, in accordance with multiple registers, which explains why the proposals are contingent and subject to continuous review.

These processes of deliberative internormativity promote the reflexive negotiation of the procedures and methods, as well as of the contents of the proposals. In this way the proposals could be understood as political commitments between asymmetric voices, which explains the terminological creativity and fertility of the European institutions as well as the hybrid nature of their concepts (as in the case of 'flexisecurity', for example).

Given the considerable symbolic power in the hands of European institutions, various actors are fighting for political space at the heart of European discourse. The European arena can therefore be understood as a space for political struggles, which are necessarily cognitive battles for the power to impose a vision of the social world, as well as of social representations and the categories under which national problems are perceived. Political conflicts are articulated, to a certain extent, like semantic conflicts. The supranational space becomes a forum for the conflict of ideas and political confrontation between different *voices*.

The *third* characteristic (C) of this coordination method is that of addressing the promotion of self-regulation. This mode of governance could be perceived to be inspired by the new business management ethics (Alonso, 2007). Metaphors from the financial world have been introduced, especially those describing the new organisational management modes for attitudinal regulation, such as the concepts of benchmarking or best practices. It is a question of implanting a competitive statistical performance logic in the MS (Salais, 2006) and of awarding spaces of autonomy with the aim of improving efficiency.

The objective is to stimulate a social performance optimisation logic within the EU. This set of metaphors imported from the world of business are expressed in its particular mode of object-driven management. A series of indicators are established, which quantify the objectives with the aim of quantitatively *measuring* the evolution of the different MS towards achieving these and a period is set during which the objectives must be met<sup>12</sup>. The visibilisation of ‘social performance’ is enhanced by means of comparative graphs and charts which help stimulate a self-governing strategy. In this way the European institutions promote a competitive logic between the MS, subjecting them to a continuous competitive process of self-improvement and establishing a method of continuous progress assessment and systematic

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<sup>12</sup> A series of indicators have been defined with which to measure and regulate the evolution of the labour markets in the MS, e.g. an employment rate of 67 % in 2005 and of 70 % in 2010; a female employment rate of 57 % in 2005 and of 60 % in 2010 and an employment rate of 50 % for older workers (55 to 64 years old) in 2010; every unemployed person should have access to aid within the first six months of unemployment in the case of young people and the first 12 months in the case of adults, in the form of training, re-education, work experience, a job offer or employability assessment, combined, if necessary, with assistance in job seeking; in 2010, 25% of long-term unemployed will be participating in an active programme, either training, re-education or another kind of employability measure.

comparison<sup>13</sup>, diachronic (between countries) and synchronic (over time) in order to monitor the MS' evolution. The point is to encourage European institutions, in the widest sense, to turn into 'learning' organisations (Walters and Haahr, 2005).

Consequently, given the particular mode of governance existing in Europe, this method in fact has three main potential instruments: a persuasive and socialising capacity, the possibility of awarding political opportunities and strategic resources to different members of civil society, and finally the capacity to provide methodological instruments to stimulate the efficiency of these policies (statistic tools, new institutions, etc)<sup>14</sup>. An emblematic example of the way the OMC works is the spread of the activation paradigm. A meta-analysis of this principle will allow us to draw some conclusions about the potentialities and limitations of this kind of regulation.

#### **4. The new activation paradigm and its ambivalent evaluation**

The particular political status of the OMC and the European institutions, and the internormative character defining European proposals, as well as the significant symbolic power wielded by these organisations, explains the polysemic and ambiguous nature of the greater part of the concepts articulated. The hybrid character of these proposals explains the paradoxical nature they adopt, as we shall see in the case of European discourse on activation.

This dual nature, polysemic and paradoxical, can be studied as revelatory of the polyphonic character of the European proposals, being the result of the plurality of autonomous voices existing behind the concepts, in such a way that political philosophies and disparate accents can be transverse to the proposals concerned.

This interaction of polyphonic voices explains the mixed nature of a considerable number of these concepts. It is not only a question of the mix of *plural voices*, but also of the co-existence of conflicting points of view. For example, mixing the ideas

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<sup>13</sup> European strategy encourages Member States to compare their results with those of other countries, so that actors can be driven to collectively redefine the objectives and policies. The aim is to organise a dissemination process of knowledge and social representations at European level. This exercise permits comparison of each country's results with those of its peer group, and the use of indicators is designed to foster the continuous improvement of these policies.

<sup>14</sup> For an examination of how these potentialities are put into practice in the case of the promotion of equal opportunities and integrated gender perspective, see Serrano Pascual (2008).

of flexibility and security as the concept flexicurity does, and thus evoking two dichotomic labour regulation frameworks, actually serves to show the endurance, in one concept, of point and counterpoint<sup>15</sup>. Similar hybrid words perform an important semantic task. Where there was only one thought, the institutions produce an unfolding and a ‘Bajtinian’ shift in meaning. In this way, a notion is appropriated: security, alien and opposed to the discourse of flexibility, and by integrating this into their own discourse, the institutions make it bi-vocal and thus confer another semantic orientation on the notion of flexibility.

In this way, the core notions of European discourse respond to various points of view and reflect the particular mode of regulation to which we referred above, based on multi-level governance. The references made to the world of science, and to so-called ‘experts’, for the deliberative formation (and justification) of the social proposals of the European institutions constitute an illustrative example of this regulatory mode. This reference to the scientific world makes it possible for the proposals to appear politically neutral.

Given the complexity of the political philosophies within the EU, and the diversity of the interests predominating amongst the actors who are participating in this project, the European institutions are subjected to a constant insistence on neutrality. A substantial part of European legitimacy is based on the establishment of deliberative spaces which transform European space into a forum where the battle of ideas between different social actors (voices) is performed. It follows therefore that the European institutions have to appear to be neutral receivers of the ideas resulting from the dialogue and deliberation between these actors, and their multi-level interaction. Thus, the complexity and diversity of power centres within the European institutions has helped different lobbies and think-tanks become incorporated as a part of European bureaucracy. Terms like ‘expertocracy’ or ‘femocracy’, used in the analysis of these supranational regulation processes, denote the contribution of this plurality of groups of professionals in the production of ‘discourses’ in the EU. This plurality of powers at the heart of the European project explains the importance of understanding

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<sup>15</sup> As Bajtin observes (1979/2004), when he highlights the way in which Dostoevsky’s heroes converse with caricatures (Ivan Karamazov with the devil, for example).

supranational governance as “...a problematising activity [as] political struggles are also conflicts about meanings...” (Walters and Haahr, 2005: 6).

The asymmetric participation of plural voices explains the peculiar nature of a considerable proportion of the Europeanising concepts. At the heart of these concepts lie paradoxical notions [flexi-security, activ-a(c)tion, employ-ability] which, however, by supporting frameworks which refer to individual emancipation, introduce policies which can in some contexts turn out to be profoundly regressive. Such is the case of the concept of activation.

### *The meaning of activation and its characteristics*

By activation we understand a kind of social intervention on the part of the public authorities aimed at the mobilisation and enhanced adaptability of the workforce in general and the unemployed in particular. The paradigm of intervention based on activation is basically characterised by three features: its individualising perspective, an emphasis on employment and the importance of the principle of contractualisation<sup>16</sup>. This paradigm of intervention involves a process of progressive individualisation in the resolution of the problem of exclusion from the work market, in two senses. (1) The individual subject is made the core focus of the interventions (and therefore part of the problem), and (2) the tendency --typical of this kind of paradigm-- of fostering the participation of the individual in their own integration process is becoming more widespread<sup>17</sup>. Both aspects, however, have this in common: they place increasing emphasis on the requirement that the ‘clients’ or ‘users’ should behave like responsible citizens.

This paradigm leads to a transformation in the allocation of responsibilities regarding the social question and re-orientates the scope of the questions liable to be problematised. As opposed to a State which guarantees social rights (entitlement state), a State which aims to facilitate the adaptability of the individuals (enabling

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed examination of the paradigm of activation, see Serrano and Magnusson (2007).

<sup>17</sup> In the case of Spain, this tendency was reinforced after the Employment Law of 2003, which stressed the conditionality of unemployment benefit, and obliged job seekers to participate in active measures after signing a *commitment to activity* by which the unemployed vouch for their availability.

state) is required; its function would fundamentally be that of making citizens responsible and providing them with instruments for increasing their own employability. The reference to solidarity (collective responsibility), as a legitimising factor of public action, is being replaced by a growing emphasis on the responsibility of the individual. This increasing appeal to individual responsibility awards legitimacy to the co-active nature which these activation programmes frequently acquire. The grounds for this are supported by the moral (and therefore universal) principle arising from the duties each individual (citizen) undertakes in his or her 'contract' with the State and the community.

This originates from a psychologicistic conception of social relations, according to which activation consists of an individualising project aimed at the autonomisation of the subject (Franssen, 2003). In this discourse about dependency and responsabilisation, the language of 'rights', articulated with regard to the provision of social security as a collective responsibility, is being progressively replaced by a discourse which appeals to the ethic of responsibility (Dean, 2003). The individual appears to be becoming the only one to blame for the poor decisions he or she might take (Bauman, 2001).

This kind of practice contains a double complementary component of exogenous and endogenous pressures. On the one hand, it is a question of influencing, by means of sanctions (for example, limiting access to social protection), the behaviours of the subjects, but on the other hand, it is a question of biopolitical practices aimed at the production of 'normalised' subjects. This production of subjects is carried out based on three practices, consisting of (a) disciplinatio/normalisation, (b) surveillance and (c) therapeutic intervention.

The subject, object of the intervention, is considered liable to possess a series of shortcomings, in terms of training in some cases, and/or of willpower or personality, in others. In this way a paternalist intervention model, basically characterised by therapeutic medicalisation, is spreading to a large number of European countries (Schram, 2000). Dependency is starting to be seen as a pathology.

Economic and political problems are turning into questions of personal motivation and will, which stimulates the *depoliticisation* of social conflict management. The emergence of the socio-political nature of social exclusion is neglected when the causal nexus which can be established with relation to power and domination is repressed<sup>18</sup>.

### *The paradoxical nature of activation*

This notion, like others which articulate the discourse of the European institutions, has a significantly paradoxical character. This paradoxical aspect is the result of its semantic location in an intertextual space, as explained above. As a result of this intertextual process the discourse of activation is adapted both to social-democratic registers and a neo-liberal style. Thus, this discourse maintains a hybrid position between, firstly, reference to empowerment frameworks for individuals versus institutions, and, secondly, defence of intervention models which in many cases do not provide a greater power of intervention than the adaptation to market laws. To activate would therefore be to facilitate personal adaptability, the availability of the subject<sup>19</sup>.

First of all, the notion of activation explicitly evokes an ontological concept according to which the subject is morally autonomous and self-determined, independent and responsible, governed by free will, i.e. a self-governed subject<sup>20</sup>. However, on the other hand, an implicit distrust of the real motives guiding the subject is also posited and makes him or her vulnerable to the pitfalls of welfare. In consequence, the idea of the subject as morally autonomous is questioned. This conception thus requires ‘activated’ subjects: individuals financially motivated by positive or negative sanctions. It is a question of a ‘passive’ adaptation which really implies the capacity to react, and which assumes the subjects are *motivated by external factors*. This

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<sup>18</sup> For an interesting analysis of the emergence of the social categories which polarised the debate about ‘involuntary’ exclusion from work, and the social and political character which the problem thus acquires, see the reflections of Salais *et al.* (1986) and Topalov (1994).

<sup>19</sup> For a more detailed examination of the paradoxes of activation, see Crespo Suárez and Serrano Pascual (2007).

<sup>20</sup> The subject required by this discourse is an analytic person capable of deciding which is the best alternative in a creative and interdependent context, with a high level of control over personal initiative, and who acts according to their own convictions and principles, their own ethics.

discourse on autonomy, mobility and job quality contrasts with the co-active instruments which have been established to increase the activity rate and persuade subjects to work. Activation is beginning to be interpreted as the supervision of behaviour and as an instrument of social discipline.

Secondly, this discourse activates contradictory political frameworks. On the one hand the metaphor of activation refers to the citizen's emancipation as the main objective. Thus, this discourse is rich in metaphors linked to struggle and combat (the fight against unemployment, combating poverty, or the battle against exclusion, let's say) in order to reinforce the dogma of dynamism on which the discourse of activation is based. However, on the other hand, strategies aimed at individual psychological change, changes in motivations, attitudes and behaviours are drawn up. In this way the policies are turned into therapeutic procedures aimed at motivation and psychological change. Thus this discourse on activation is characterised by the naturalisation of the change, the financial conditionants, using a large quantity of abstractions (Serrano and Crespo 2007). The shift towards a knowledge-based society is presented as a *fait accompli* which one has no choice but to accept. The only political response would be to try to take advantage of this situation as far as possible. Aspiring to self-sufficiency, involvement and autonomy is in contrast to the reference to pragmatism, to the need to adapt to a new and paradoxical passivity.

Thirdly, the socio-political implications of this discourse are also contradictory. On the one hand, economic activation is defended, but at the same time political passivity is encouraged. The market is set up as a law, and this promotes the disappearance of the political conditions necessary to exercise autonomy, such as spaces free from mercantilisation, and can facilitate insecurity and vulnerability within the market (Alonso, 2007). The concept of dependence is used to disqualify previous forms of intervention (dependence on the State); however, this use of the concept only represents one way of interpreting dependence. In fact the inappropriately named 'passive' policies were generated as emancipating spaces, free from mercantilisation; providing freedom from the conditions of heteronomy and vulnerability which characterise labour relations governed by the laws of the 'free' market. Therefore, the so-called 'active' policies allow economic dependence (on institutions, the family) to be fought, but, in turn, they promote political dependence (on the market).

The discourse about activation seems to be aimed at the promotion of economic dynamism, but at the same time it could lead to resignation and political passivity. In other words, the subjects have a high degree of autonomy in terms of adapting to the changing rules of the game, but this autonomy does not allow them to question these rules. Certainly, this kind of proposal can be capacitating and empowering when the institutional and ideological configuration of a country supports the position of the worker and therefore an emancipating semantic orientation. But when the balance of power is unfavourable to the worker they can also contribute to his or her fragilization. This situation exposes one of the most significant limitations of the Europeanisation process: the possession of a considerable power to disseminate and problematise ways of referring to the social question, but little power to transform the institutional configuration and the (im)balance of power in a particular country. This situation is aggravated by other questions which could contribute to the fragilization the European Social Model, as will be discussed in the next section.

##### **5. The Luxembourg Process and the Lisbon Agenda: European objectives and national means.**

The Open Method of Coordination and the paradigmatic shift towards labour activation are milestones of recent Europeanisation. Both are reflected in terms of programmes and institutions in what have become known as the Luxembourg Process and the Lisbon Agenda (or Lisbon strategy). Certainly, the European Union's attempt to reconcile general outlines and national approaches has constituted the most decisive action to ensure participation in the sphere of social policy at the EC level and, in particular, in that which concerns social inclusion. As indicated above, the institutions of the EU constitute a crucial arena in the fight for signifieds and signifiers. Thus, the capacity to influence the ideas of the national ambits has shaped a European community strategy which gives priority to politics and policies related to social welfare.

The Luxembourg Process, started in 1997, and the Lisbon Agenda of 2000 inaugurated a new kind of EC intervention concerning policies for employment, social inclusion and pensions. The object was not so much to harmonise national institutions

and legislation, but rather to share conceptions, knowledge, ideas, guidelines and visions with a view to achieving the convergence of national programmes. Therefore, it was a question of gradually reaching a common political approach regarding social protection within the European Union. Nevertheless, the form the framework took did not rule out the possibility of attaining specific goals. Already in 1999, just before the introduction of the single currency, the European Commission published a document renewing the EU's commitment to extend cooperation existing at EC level. There were four areas identified as vital for the deployment of an agreed strategy: (1) promotion of social inclusion; (2) *making work pay* and providing income security; (3) guaranteeing pensions and making pension systems sustainable; and (4) ensuring the high quality and financial viability of healthcare services (CEC, 1999).

With regard to the Luxembourg Process, at the Lisbon Council of March 2000 all the MS undertook a commitment to increase total national employment rates (like ratios between the total employed population and the active working population aged between 15 and 64) to a minimum of 70 percent by 2010 (60 percent for women). At the Council meeting held a year later in Stockholm, a similar agreement was made with the aim of reaching a percentage of at least 50 percent in employment rates for people aged between 55 and 64 by the year 2010<sup>21</sup>.

Having started the fight against poverty and social exclusion at the Lisbon summit, and after the Council of Nice of December 2000, two Joint Reports on Social Inclusion were drawn up which incorporated the results of the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion. Subsequently annual Joint Reports were written from 2005 to 2008 (CEC, various dates).

Along general lines the Joint Reports sought to increase the efficacy of the MS' social policies on the promotion of social inclusion by encouraging collaboration between policy-makers, social agents, NGOs, academics and the excluded themselves. After various years of implementation, the Luxembourg Process and the Lisbon Agenda have generated critical evaluations of various kinds.

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<sup>21</sup> The employment rate does not only seek to lengthen the working lives of employees but also to postpone the 'effective' date of retirement. At the Barcelona Council of March 2002, for example, Italy undertook to raise 'real' retirement age by five years before 2010.

Reproducing, in a way, the dual vision expressed by Directorate Generals II (Economic and Financial Affairs) and V (Employment and Social Affairs), the political evaluation of the Luxembourg Process and the Lisbon Agenda rests to a fair extent on the diverging macroeconomic approaches of both Directorate Generals. On the one hand emphasis has been placed on the vision of the supply-side economic policies along the lines of what has been expressed by other international organisations, such as the World Bank or the OECD, since the ‘Washington Consensus’ (Trubeck and Mosher, 2003). Thus, it has been claimed that the ‘Lisbon Strategy’ would fail institutionally because a method of governance based on ‘morality’ (‘government of wills’) is neither sufficient nor efficient. Similarly, it has been pointed out that the MS should not be rewarded for being ‘virtuous’ or punished for being ‘vicious’ according to their performance (Creel *et al.*, 2005).

On the other hand, the ‘soft’ and ‘friendly’ nature which the political and institutional initiatives must necessarily have in this phase of the long process of Europeanisation attention has also been underlined. Furthermore, it has been highlighted that the Luxembourg Process and the Lisbon Agenda or strategy have favoured a mobilisation of both involved actors and European multiple governance organisations, which have exchanged information (Moreno *et al.*, 2003; Ferrera, 2005). In some cases an ‘emulation effect’ or ‘catching up’ has been stimulated --though indirectly-- as the spectacular increase in rates of female labour-force participation indicate in the case of Spain<sup>22</sup>.

## **6. Final comments**

The strategies promoted by the European institutions to regulate employment and social cohesion undoubtedly have potential, in terms of political efficacy and social cohesion. First of all, the European institutions have stimulated certain representations regarding the social question and have injected a certain vocabulary into national

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<sup>22</sup> From 1995 to 2006, the Spanish female employment rate achieved the highest growth in the EU (22.5 points, from 30,7% to 53,2%). For a comparison of the dynamics of growth of formal female employment between the northern ‘vanguard’ and the ‘rear guard’ composed of southern European countries, see Moreno, 2008.

political discourse (employability, partnership, activation, integrated gender perspective, for example), enabling, in some cases, political and public sensitisation regarding the situation of certain groups in the labour market (women, older workers, the socially excluded). This has made it possible for such expressions to appear labelled with ‘problem’ status, which is a necessary preliminary condition for political mobilisation. Secondly, the strategy seems to have facilitated the provision of political tools for some groups of civil society (for example, women’s movements or those of social agents in some countries). Finally, this strategy has encouraged a certain consciousness-raising regarding the need to possess suitable methodological tools (better statistical indicators, the development of structures and institutions for following up these policies, and the evaluation of employment policies). These three cornerstones, which represent the potential of the OMC for employment policy, also provide the European institutions with technical legitimacy (based on the pursuit of effectiveness), political legitimacy (democratic deepening) and social legitimation (public sensitivity).

However, there are also considerable areas in which the strategy shows significant weaknesses: for example, the fulfilment procedures of the European proposals can turn into a mere formal exercise; also their excessively ‘open’ nature: they are too dependent on national attitudes, unstable, asymmetric, and potentially open to deregulation. The limited room for manoeuvre granted to third-party actors, a reduced capacity for being carried out transversely, with the cooperation of various administrative departments, or the difficulty of transferring ‘best practices’ also constitute considerable challenges to be met. Out of all these, we have mainly concentrated on four. Firstly, the OMC promotes general objectives based on paradoxical ideas. As there is hardly any margin for intervention in the institutional framework the (asymmetric) power relations existing in a particular country are reinforced. The concepts proposed and their polyphonic nature, rather than reinforcing the dialogue between policies, frequently legitimise the hegemonic *voices* and representations.

Secondly, an orientation almost exclusively aimed at influencing labour supply is maintained, which contributes to the dissemination of an individualizing framework of representation of the social question. If European strategy seems to have played a

central role on questions like employability and activation, as well as equal opportunities, at least regarding the orientation of public debate and political discussion, its impact has been very limited in other aspects like organisational change, taxation policies, job quality and job creation.

Thirdly, it seems to be necessary to reinforce the participation of other social agents and encourage cooperation between the different actors involved, as the process unfortunately tends to be excessively hierarchical and bureaucratic, thus contributing to fuel the accusations made about the 'democratic deficit' of the Europeanising process.

Finally, excessive emphasis on quantitative criteria predominates, to the detriment of criteria like job quality and living conditions. It should be reiterated that, in general, the European Social Model concerns both dimensions, relating to economic growth and social cohesion. Therefore, the legitimacy of the processes of changing social policies in the European Union is dependent on adherence to an axiological system which values the social dimension at least as much as the economic dimension. Or which simply does not separate the two.

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