

# Article

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## The European Social Model: an exercise in deconstruction

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**Summary** One of the fastest growing European catchwords at the present time – the ‘European Social Model’ (ESM) – is used to describe the European experience of simultaneously promoting sustainable economic growth and social cohesion. The use of the concept of ESM in academic and political debate is characterized by two main and interconnected features: on the one hand, the usually taken-for-granted assumption of the reality of the concept (the reality called ‘Europe’ becomes a naturally occurring phenomenon); on the other hand, the highly ambiguous and polysemic nature of this concept. A clear definition of what constitutes its essence seems to be lacking in most documents on the subject, while a review of some of the most important of these documents reveals that, insofar as definitions are to be found, they do not necessarily converge. This article aims to discuss the concept of the ESM. It analyses and deconstructs the concept in order to identify the main understandings and the various dimensions of the model. It classifies and discusses the ways in which the ESM is most frequently construed and proposes a new approach to understanding this polysemy. We argue that the different dimensions of the concept can be seen as rhetorical resources intended to legitimize the politically constructed and identity-building project of the EU institutions.

**Résumé** ???

**Key words** deconstruction, EU legitimacy, European Social Model

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One of the fastest growing European catchwords at the present time – the ‘European Social Model’ (ESM) – is used to describe the European experience of simultaneously promoting sustainable economic growth and social cohesion. This concept, current in both academic and political discourse, is used to advance thinking about a third way of achieving a society, as opposed to both the neo-liberal path taken by the USA, which leads to social disintegration, and the more recently discredited path of social-regulated markets, which entails economic inefficiency.

This article aims to deconstruct the concept of a European Social Model by identifying the various meanings accruing to it in academic and political debate and analysing the main assumptions underlying its use. By means of a social-constructivist approach to the debate on the europeanization of the ‘social question’, we seek to analyse how speakers, in their use of rhetorical concepts, are not merely saying things, but actually doing things (Wetherell and Potter, 1988). We would like to elucidate how speakers debate, and reach consensus about, what ‘goes without saying’. These are the things which come to be regarded as matters of common sense (Billig, 1987) and, hence, as self-evident. The concept of ESM is often taken for granted in this way, in a manner implying that all further discussion is superfluous.

The aim of this analysis is not solely to show the need for a discussion of its underlying assumptions; it is also to discuss the political status of the concept which, in our view, is associated with the process of constructing supranational regulation and seeking to legitimize the European institutions. Insofar as language shapes reality, the significance of the concept could be interpreted as one manifestation of a political struggle to push certain items onto the political agenda.

We think it is important to draw attention to the ways in which models and identities are reified by researchers and policymakers. In an endeavour to call into question such an essentialist approach, we favour a conception of ESM as a political project. As demonstrated by

Abélès (2002), Europe, regarded as a homogeneous entity, is a process (project) rather than a product and it does not, as such, lend itself to reification. We believe that the EU institutions play a key role in this process of political construction.

The European Social Model is in fact a loosely defined normative<sup>1</sup> concept and, as such, is used with differing meanings in accordance with rather ambiguous definitions. A clear definition of what constitutes its essence seems to be lacking in most documents on the subject, while a review of the most important of these documents reveals, furthermore, that, insofar as definitions are to be found, they do not necessarily converge. The polysemy surrounding the concept might well be found to reflect a lack of scientific precision in relation to its use in the debate on the evaluation of EU policies and on the effectiveness of supranational regulation as a means of challenging the trends towards globalization and europeanization of the economy. But the polysemy associated with the concept may also be understood in rhetorical terms, as a means of moving from one ‘interpretative repertoire’<sup>2</sup> (Wetherell and Potter, 1988) to another, for any one of a variety of purposes (e.g. to legitimize a policy proposal, to construct a sense of belonging, to turn supranational regulation into a need, etc.).

Moreover, this concept is based, to a very large extent, on a host of assumptions, most of which have not been empirically established, and the discussion is frequently built up without any serious examination of the main tools used to construct it. However, in spite of the variable ways in which the concept is used and/or constructed, the definitions do share some common assumptions, and these require discussion in order to avoid the predominantly normative character which characterizes this debate. The first such assumption relates to the implicit reference to a dichotomy between the American and the European economy, on the one hand, and a distinction between two chronological phases of economic development on the other hand. One important feature is the concept’s symbolic reliance on the

American model, to which it implicitly or explicitly refers, while at the same time clearly assuming its own superiority. Implicitly, many authors and/or policymakers take the USA as a (negative) reference pole – or ‘counterexample’ – from which Europe is to be distinguished. These rhetorical contrasting poles – the USA versus the EU and past versus future – set the boundaries within which differences are constructed (Abélès, 2002) and trap research using this concept within a fixed analytical framework. It is our belief that these implicit references and assumptions constitute a snare, in that they serve to inhibit further thinking on the subject.

A second common assumption relates to the interlinked nature of the economic and societal dimensions. Economic success and maintaining the social quality of Europe are presented as interrelated goals (see for instance Vobruba, 2001). The key question in this discussion is what type of conditions, within the analytical framework of societal change, are conducive to both economic success and the social improvement of living conditions. The arguments and claims underlying this discussion are indeed highly controversial, relating as they do to fundamental aspects such as: the extent to which Europe actually does share ‘common’ foundational features (Robbins, 1990); whether ‘knowledge’ is more important in the knowledge-based society (KBS) than in any other society; the lack of empirical evidence supporting the assertion of a real increase in global trade (Petit, 1999; Hay, 2002); the problematic description of globalization as a non-negotiable external economic reality (Hay, 2002); the questioning of the much-touted correlation between the use of new ICTs and increased productivity (Petit and Kragen, 1999); whether the ‘new’ economy promoted by the KBS really is all that new (Wolf, 1999; Evans, 2000; Visco, 2000); the extent to which these economic processes really do involve an increase in work-related qualifications; the real impact of these processes on organizational changes (Brödner, 2000); the need for a radical change in labour-market institutions (Manning, 1998) and so on.

Our purpose is not to discuss these assumptions here but simply to point out how important it is to avoid taking these things for granted. How is it to be explained that, despite the controversial underlying conceptual assumptions and the multiple meanings of the ESM concept, this notion has acquired such hegemony in the debate about intervention paradigms? We wish to discuss the ‘invention’ – by Salais et al. (1986) – of this concept in the framework of the building and institutionalization of supranational entities.

This article aims to discuss the concept of a European Social Model as it is understood in the academic literature as well as in the discourse of the EU institutions. As has been stressed by several authors (Alonso, 1999; Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999; Muntigl et al., 2000; Crespo Suárez and Serrano Pascual, 2005, etc.), political discourse and research are intertwined. This is particularly the case with the EU institutions. On the one hand, political proposals from the Commission are supported by research for purposes of legitimation. This technocratic exercise (‘expertocracy’: Weis and Wodak, 1998) may be explained by the lack of clear legitimacy of supranational regulation, and by the need to make (controversial) political arguments pass for (objective) scientific conclusions. The goal of this technocratic exercise is to resort to epistemic communities in order to appear politically and ethically neutral (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). As Darmon underlines, ‘recourse to expert opinion tends in fact to overshadow the highly political nature of the decisions being made’ (Darmon, 2001: 97). On the other hand, the EU institutions, in particular the EU Commission, play a key role in the circulation and dissemination of the concept and, therefore, in framing the terms of the debates on employment policies at European level. They play an important persuasive role in providing concepts which structure the current political and scientific debates. Furthermore, their discourse is presented as being based on conclusions emanating from scientific debates, which are in reality political options.

This paper will analyse and deconstruct the concept in order to identify the main understandings and the various dimensions of the model. The second section summarizes, classifies and discusses the ways in which the ESM is most frequently construed and proposes an alternative approach to understanding this polysemy. The third section examines the conception of the ESM as a political project and argues that it is a key factor in legitimizing the European institutions. The conclusions can be found in the final section.

### Main conceptualizations of the ESM

Jacques Delors was one of the first to popularize the term 'European Social Model' in the mid-1980s by designating it as an alternative to the American form of pure-market capitalism. The basic idea of the ESM is that economic and social progress must go hand in hand; economic growth, in other words, is to be combined with social cohesion. However, after nearly 20 years of discussion of the ESM in both academic and political circles, the term remains, in the face of analytical scrutiny, sorely imprecise.

One of the first definitions of the ESM appears in the 'White Paper on Social Policy' (European Commission, 1994). There it is defined as a set of common values, namely the commitment to democracy, personal freedom, social dialogue, equal opportunities for all, adequate social security and solidarity towards the weaker individuals in society.

In the literature on the European Social Model more generally, the term is used in many different contexts and many different definitions can, accordingly, be identified. These definitions can be grouped into the three categories listed below (based on those developed in Hay et al., 1999). The categories are not mutually exclusive; hence a definition given under one heading may well also be applicable under another.

In the first cluster of definitions the ESM is considered as the model that *incorporates*

*certain common features* (institutions, values, etc.) that are inherent in the status quo of the European Union member states and are perceived as enabling a distinctive mode of regulation as well as a distinctive competition regime.

The second cluster of definitions establishes the ESM as being *enshrined* in a variety of different national models, some of which are put forward as good examples; the ESM thus becomes an ideal model in the Weberian sense.

The third way of identifying the ESM is as a *European project* and a tool for modernization/adaptation to changing economic conditions as well as an instrument for cohesiveness. Under this cluster of definitions, the ESM is an emerging transnational phenomenon.

#### *The ESM as an entity (common institutions, values or forms of regulation)*

The most commonly encountered definition is that which refers to the common features shared by the European Union member states. Under this heading, definitions range from quite vague to rather detailed and they tend, by and large, to suggest a normative approach. The ESM is often referred to as enshrining 'common views and principles on different social issues and their importance within the EC construction' (Vaughan-Whitehead, 2003: 4; Servais, 2001). It is described as a specific common European aim geared to the achievement of full employment, adequate social protection, and equality. Another way of defining it is via the institutions of the welfare state and in terms of a capacity for political regulation of the market economy. Vaughan-Whitehead (2003) proposes a lengthy enumeration of components constituting the ESM. These factors encompass labour law on workers' rights, employment, equal opportunities, anti-discrimination, and so forth. He stresses that the ESM is not only a set of European Community and member-state regulations but also a range of practices aimed at promoting voluntaristic and comprehensive social policy

in the European Union. Scharpf (2002), following a similar line of reasoning, sees the 'identity marks' of the ESM as generous welfare-state transfers and services together with a social regulation of the economy: '... countries and interest groups that had come to rely on social regulation of the economy and generous welfare state transfers and services are now expecting the European Union to protect the "European Social Model" ...' (Scharpf, 2002: 649).

These translate into the provision of social assistance to the needy, universal provision of education (primary and secondary) and health care, a complex nexus of social insurance and social services, as well as an elaborate system of industrial relations. In Hay et al. (1999) the ESM is defined as a group of welfare regimes characterized by extensive social protection, fully comprehensive and legally sanctioned labour-market institutions, as well as the resolution of social conflict by consensual and democratic means. Statistically speaking, there might seem to be a grouping of identical welfare states in Europe; this is, however, as demonstrated by Esping-Andersen (1990), no more than a statistical artefact, and this author argues that European welfare capitalism encompasses different worlds of welfare state. This is a position also followed by the supporters of path-dependency theory.

### *The ESM as an ideal model*

In the second strand of literature, specific national models are identified. The UK, Sweden and Germany are put forward as paradigm cases and certain countries are pinpointed as showing the way towards an ESM that successfully combines economic efficiency with social justice. Esping-Andersen (1999) endorses this approach. Ferrera et al. (2001) describe – and implicitly define – the key features of the model as being extensive basic social-security protection for all citizens, a high degree of interest organization and coordinated bargaining, and a more equal wage and

income distribution than in most other parts of the world. 'The basket of requisite policies for sustaining the European social model and ensuring an equitable trade-off between growth and social justice ought also to include, not only a minimum guarantee and health protection guarantee, but also a universal human capital guarantee, providing access to high-quality education and training' (Ferrera et al., 2001: 18).

They argue that these features are institutionalized to various degrees in the European Union and that the UK and Ireland are definite outliers. The Netherlands, Denmark and Austria are put forward by these authors as good examples of how generous welfare policy can accommodate economic progress. Ebbinghaus (1999) identifies four groups of welfare state which together form what he calls the 'European social landscape'. He defines a model as a: 'specific combination of institutions and social practices that govern market–society relations in a particular nation-specific combination' (Ebbinghaus 1999: 3). This classification is based on the type of governance of market macro-economic policy, labour-market policy and social policy. Ebbinghaus argues that Europe is far from possessing any single best institutional design; rather, unity, in combination with diversity, is its hallmark.

### *The ESM as a European project*

The last way of understanding the ESM is found in the literature dealing with it as a European project, and there is a considerable degree of overlap with the two former strands. The authors all agree that the ESM is a dynamic and evolving model which is affected by both national and European forces and processes. However, rather than emphasizing the similarities between national systems, the focus here is on the development of a distinctive transnational model. Vaughan-Whitehead (2003) may be seen as a proponent of this trend, which is also endorsed by Wilding (1997), when he points out that for one single

country to conduct its own individual social policy can no longer be regarded as viable:

. . . there is no doubt that the construction of the European Union and the willingness of EU member states to develop coordination, cooperation, interdependence, and also common rules on social policies, have helped to maintain EU member states' commitment to social policy and have constrained 'free-riding' or 'social dumping' in the social area. (Vaughan-Whitehead, 2003: 5)

Hence, in the light of enlargement and the incorporation of the former state-socialist regimes into the process of European political and economic integration, the ESM takes on the role of assuring a certain degree of cohesion.

Black (2002) seeks to demonstrate that the core of the ESM lies in industrial relations and labour-market standards and policies. Its essence, in his view, is a multi-level system of regulation stemming from national as well as European systems of regulation/deregulation and taking as its basis the common European values and rights set out and formally agreed in the charter of Fundamental Social Rights. He argues that Europe has made a considerable impact on cross-national convergence within the ESM. Lönnroth (2002) also states that the charter of fundamental human rights codifies the key principles of the ESM and thereby establishes the challenges that are to be met by the ESM in the future. '... there are some values, which we Europeans share, and which make our life different from what you find elsewhere in the world. These values cover the quest for economic prosperity which should be linked with democracy and participation, search for consensus, solidarity with weakest members, equal opportunities for all, respect for human and labour rights, and the conviction that earning one's living through work is the basis upon which social welfare should be built.' Lönnroth (2002: 3)

In the Hellenic report (Ametsis et al., 2003) the ESM is described as a set of social values,

principles and methods which, in essence, may be reduced to three basic and universal principles: the recognition of social justice as a policy target; the acceptance of the productive role of social policy and its contribution to economic efficiency; and, finally, the development of a high level of bargaining between the social partners. The authors argue that the ESM has not attained a normative definition at the European level and that the definition of the future ESM will depend on reactions to the changes currently affecting the economic, social and demographic structures of the EU.

Most of the authors/policymakers who use the concept of ESM as a European project take the current situation to be a turning point between different models of advanced capitalism. The process of globalization produces a variety of common pressures which, in turn, expose the different parts of the world (including the USA and Europe) to the same imperatives of competitiveness and internal economic integration. In the face of technological, economic and social change, which are presented as inevitably and obviously 'given', the 'need' for social and institutional modernization (structural reform, more training for new technologies, etc.) is considered equally obvious:

Such modernisation *is becoming urgent* in the light of the European population, with consequences in terms of financing social protection systems and responding to the needs of an older population in terms of working conditions, health or quality of life. (European Commission, 2003b: 5).

This modernization appears, accordingly, as the 'natural' response to economic change and globalization. Many authors and policymakers at the European level use the term 'knowledge-based society' to illustrate the essence of these changes. Underlying this term are the notions that, due to a variety of causes, the conditions of the European production model have changed and that the ESM is geared to the framing of a response to the new economic/societal challenges. This 'naturalization' of the

process makes it appear as written into the order of things, beyond the sphere of human volition (Serrano Pascual and Crespo Suárez, 2002). The term 'knowledge society' comes to designate mainly the technical management of change, while also leaving room for political choices; and the expression 'social model' is intended to indicate the European approach to coping with the challenges deriving from the process of social change.

But what is behind this process of change? Why does the predominant social model appear to be challenged? A first set of reasons relates to the strengthening of the economic union, in conjunction with the process of EU enlargement (see Kittel, 2002 for a summary of the issues raised in this connection). In the wake of Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), a significant asymmetry between market efficiency (economic policies have been europeanized) and policies promoting social protection (these remain at national level) has come into being, the most telling example of this asymmetry being the manner in which the European employment strategy is intended as a counterweight to the European Economic and Monetary Union. Furthermore, economic integration has reduced the capacity of member states to use traditional national economic policy instruments (exchange rates, deficit spending, monetary policy, increasing labour costs) for the achievement of self-defined social-policy goals (Scharpf, 2002). The balance of power between fiscal and monetary authorities has shifted (Begg, 2002: 6). Last but not least, there is the risk of wage and social dumping (Jacobsson and Schmid, 2002; Kittel, 2002). The ability of firms to move production from one location to another might be expected to create downward pressure on the taxes, wages and social-security system. These are some of the reasons why authors argue that there is a risk of downward adjustment of social standards and of an attack on collective bargaining and labour-market regulation (Ferrera et al., 2000; Kittel, 2002), and hence a need for a further reinforcement of the social dimension of European integration.

A second type of reason is based more on demographic and societal changes, instances of which include the increasing participation of women in the labour market, the ageing of the population, changing patterns of consumption, and the transformation of institutions such as the family. The population ageing will have substantial effects, not only on pension spending but also on health and especially long-term care spending. Dependency ratios will rise in all developed countries, and this effect is compounded by the life expectancy gains at advanced ages. These demographic changes will have three main effects: first, there will be a larger population at a very advanced age who will probably require both substantial health care and long-term care; second, the current three-generational model (children, parents, grandparents) will become a four-generational model (children, parents, grandparents and great-grandparents); third, there will be a decline in the share of the population aged between 15 and 64, thereby raising questions as to the financing of the expenditures linked to the ageing population (OECD, 1999). The entry of women to the labour market and the change of family composition is challenging the traditional male-breadwinner model and creates complex interactions with the existing social-protection systems as well as new demands for some types of social support (e.g. child care, parental leave), and impacts on fertility rates and hence on the future workforce (Sarfati and Bonoli, 2002).

Finally, the third set of reasons (socio-economic) relate to the assumption that European economies are more internationally exposed and that, together with an increasing use of ICTs, this has changed the conditions of the European production model. In contrast to the principle of stability, on which industrialized societies were traditionally based, the basic characteristic of the currently emerging model is constant change and instability. In the past, in order to achieve the requisite stability, it was necessary to eliminate uncertainty by means of strict labour regulation, removal of risks and control of future events. Economic

and social stability was a key requirement for this model of production. In contrast with this past situation, it is currently considered impossible to regulate events before they happen and risk is seen as inevitable. This makes it 'necessary' to promote flexibility, so that people are able to accommodate uncertainty and adapt to rapid changes in production demands. Under this production model, the ability to cope with unforeseen and sudden changes is presented as a prerequisite for economic success; and this model of labour regulation is accompanied by the emergence of a model of social-welfare regulation which sees insecurity as inevitable. According to this ideal model, rather than protecting against risk, the Welfare State should concentrate on promoting the management of risk (in the form of workfare, i.e. providing the instruments – employability – required by the individual in order to facilitate his or her management of the situation and the capacity of the labour market to adapt), thereby consolidating the laws of the market. The market punishes anyone who fails to adapt to its absolute laws of technological development and competitiveness. The individual is seen as being responsible for managing the risks (e.g. job loss) that are represented as an inevitable fact of life. Against this background, citizenship is held to be, rather than a right, something which the individual is required to earn. As such, citizenship is described in fundamentally individualistic rather than social terms, as being determined by personal behaviour, i.e. by individual choices and attitudes.

Taken together, these reasons and circumstances justify, in the view of EU institutions, the need to transform the model upon which solidarity has been built in our society. It is seen to be important to strengthen the supranational dimension of solidarity. In this framework, which is also regarded as self-legitimizing, the European institutions, have been discussing what they call 'the European social model'.

### *The ESM as a political project*

In the light of the arguments discussed above, to the three clusters of definitions already identified we would like to add a fourth, namely, the ESM as a political project. This new approach involves regarding the ESM as a concept whereby, via the definition of a distinct policy, a common European solution may be provided to problems that are politically constructed as common to a varying degree. This definition builds on the third set of reasons for having a common European social dimension, namely the change in our production model. It promotes the idea of a productive social policy as a way forward for the social models in Europe and feeds into ideas such as flexicurity, activation, partnership, etc. as discussed above. Such a concept implies attuning social policy to the need to enhance the individual's capacity to survive in the economy, rather than using it as a means of seeking to correct market forces. Instead of being a 'market-correcting' factor, social policy becomes, in the European discourse, an instrument for optimizing the adjustment of social-protection systems to market forces. This positive-sounding catchword is thus used to promote, in some countries, a quite new departure in the design of social policy. This way of defining ESM overlaps with the third way, insofar as it is a European project. However, as we will argue below, far from being an exogenous factor, it is very much a political project aimed at building a European identity, not so much via common institutions and values as via – *precisely* – the common social-policy solutions themselves.

To sum up, the four clusters of definitions can be reduced to two main schools of thought within the discussion of an ESM. Under the first definition, the ESM is understood as a historical *acquis* (Kittel, 2002) – mainly characterized by specific institutions (redistributive social protection, coordinated interest organizations and resolution of social conflicts by consensual means), values (socialization of risk, social equity, etc.) and by their results (wider social-security coverage, more equal

wage and income distribution) – which is being challenged or threatened, and to some extent already eroded, by the changes mentioned earlier. In the second school of thought, by contrast, the ESM is regarded as a way to deal with these challenges. We believe the first approach to be rather debatable, particularly because it is questionable to what extent the ESM even exists, given the wide variety of welfare-state systems encountered in Europe (see for instance Esping-Andersen, 1990), and to what extent these different approaches are a question of degree (for instance ‘more or less’ egalitarian wage distribution) rather than a question of different principles (ideological and normative assumptions and core elements which explain the build-up of a specific social model). Only within the second school of thought is it possible to speak of genuinely different ‘models’. Nevertheless, the two approaches are frequently presented as complementary (the need for reform of the ESM – understood in the second sense – in order to preserve it – in the first sense).

### *Key ideas driven by the concept of ESM as a political project*

Rather than understanding the ESM as an entity or fact, it could be regarded as a political construction in the framework of a demand for legitimacy generated by the EU project per se. In this sense, we believe the concept is inseparable from the institutionalization of the EU as a supranational style of governance. What underlies this discussion is the aim of restoring the political legitimacy of the European institution after a period of crisis. To some extent, the proliferation of research dealing with the ESM in itself serves this process of constructing a European political project. In this framework, we believe that the concept is, rather than something external waiting to be discovered, a political project, and therefore, a social and political construct put in place by the academic and political discussion of how to deal with current socio-economic challenges. One illus-

tration of this is the way in which, the exercise of compressing the peculiarities of an economic and social region into a few features (Vobruba, 2001) can be seen – in view of the diversity characterizing the underlying conceptions of the ESM – as a means of furthering the goal of constructing a European identity.<sup>3</sup>

This discourse coincides with a process of constructing a European identity and, in particular, a process of searching for the values whereby such an identity can be given substance and shape. The European institutions put it as follows:

*The Union must shape* these changes in a manner consistent with its values and concepts of society and also with a view to the forthcoming enlargement. (European Council, 2000: 1, our emphasis)

Social policies are not simply an outcome of good economic performance and policies but are at the same time an input and a framework. In this context, the modernisation of the social model means developing and adapting it to take account of the rapidly changing economy and society, and to ensure the positive mutually supportive role of economic and social policies. (European Commission, 2001: 5)

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In the course of this search it is taken for granted that the European social and economic model is ill adapted to the new economic and social conditions. The rules of the industrial model appear inappropriate under the conditions of the new economy. This society thus requires, according to the argument, new standards, new competences (technical, methodological and moral) from the worker, and also new structures to regulate the institutions of

labour (procedural and flexible rather than substantive).

Therefore, the concept of ESM needs to be understood rather as a political project by means of which the European institutions are seeking to increase their legitimacy. As pointed out by Lord, this is particularly important in the wake of the crisis of legitimacy suffered by the EU in recent years. This author mentions the three components of legitimacy in democratic societies identified by Beetham (1991): the performance of institutions; conformity with democratic values; and political identity (Beetham cited by Lord, 2000: 3). The legitimacy of the EU institutions, which has been built up, in the main, on its performance in previous phases, needs to be taken further and to respond to yet another two dimensions of legitimacy, namely democracy and identity. The first aspect, democracy, lies beyond the scope of this article. We focus on the second aspect, namely identity, and argue that, in order to enhance legitimacy based on identity formation, the identification/attribution of key values plays a crucial role. We can construe the concept of ESM as a way to identify these core values through which a European identity might be constructed. The argument we would like to advance is that this constructed identity is based less on common values than on a sharing of problems and intervention solutions (policy paradigms). This explains that the nature of European integration lies in the production of common notions and concepts (Abélès, 2002), despite the different institutional settings and political values across Europe. In this political production the EU institutions play a crucial role. As some surveys show (Barbier, 2001; Palier, 2001; Serrano Pascual, 2003; Jacobsson, 2004), the EU institutions are playing a crucial role in providing cognitive frames and conceptual paradigms in the case of the European Employment Strategy. A certain vocabulary (employability, partnership, activation, gender mainstreaming, etc.) has spread into the national political discourses. This adaptation of the 'language' proposed by the EU institutions has had an

important impact on the construction of the terms of the problem of unemployment and/or poverty, influencing the main lines along which the debate has been conducted and the way in which the problem is described. European institutions play an important role in determining the direction of the debate (socializing role), intervening in the terminological constructions employed to designate the problem of exclusion from the labour market, and in proposing common frames of reference.

A relevant example here is the activation model. Despite the popularity of this model and the broad consensus to implement this intervention paradigm in different European countries, the values invoked to justify the model and the concrete policies inspired by it vary a great deal from country to country (Barbier, 2004; Serrano Pascual, 2004). Therefore, the same recipe will be translated into different modes of preparation which will enumerate different values among their ingredients. Another example of this process of creating a common identity is the production of European statistics (Eurostat) or promotion of comparative projects by the EU institutions, which seeks to reduce the complexity of European models into a small number of indicators, thereby creating 'common' problems. The European Council refer to some of these 'common' problems as follows:

The ageing society calls for clear strategies for ensuring the adequacy of pension systems as well as of health care systems, while at the same time maintaining sustainability of public finances and inter-generational solidarity. (European Council, 2001: 21)

The European Union *is confronted with a quantum shift* from globalisation and the challenges of a new knowledge-driven economy. These changes are affecting *every aspect of people's lives and require a radical transformation* of the European economy. (European Council, 2000: 21, our emphasis)

This might induce a feeling of belonging to the same community and might foster the construction of a common identity. Although this

European model might not be based on common values (because of the disparities between the national social models that underpin the European model), this process can encourage European countries to share common problems – by which they are ‘threatened’ – and to produce similar key recipes to fight against these (socially constructed) common problems. The binding tie in this situation is not so much values or cultures (as in the case of national models) but rather a common identity, which results in sharing the problems and the solutions (policy paradigms and cognitive filters through which the debate takes place). In this way, the ESM discussion and the tools associated with the concept of ESM are contributing to the construction of common challenges for Europe and to the building of a consensus as to how these are to be faced and tackled.

In this framework, there are two main issues shaping the discussion of what the role of public action or/and institutional remedies should be. First, there is the question of what tools can most appropriately be used. Second, there is the cluster of issues relating to the various alternative approaches to regulation. Regarding the first question, the main mechanisms seem to be flexibility and activation, which – translated into EU discourse – read, flexicurity (see Transfer, 2004) and employability. Both mechanisms stem from the conviction that, despite subordination to economic constraints, there is a need for an innovative and proactive adaptation to a new capitalist model. The main idea behind both concepts is that solidarity has been institutionalized in such a way that it diminishes people’s willingness to adapt their behaviour to economic requirements (Lindbeck, 2001). Accordingly, there is a need to shift from passive support towards activation, and to replace the old political frames for the socialization of people’s motives and morals with a view to persuading them to participate in the modernization process:

The system of financial incentives is one of the main determinants of participation in the

labour market ... The balance between income from work ... against income in unemployment or inactivity determines the decision to enter and to remain on the labour market. (European Commission, 2003a: 11)

The role of the institutions, in this context, should become to provide the instruments (employability, flexicurity) that will allow individuals to find ways of adapting to changing economic and social conditions:

... the modernisation of labour markets and labour mobility need to be encouraged to allow greater adaptability to change by breaking down existing barriers. (European Council, 2001: 16)

People are Europe’s main asset and should be the focal point of the Union’s policies. Investing in people and developing an active and dynamic WS will be crucial to Europe. (European Council, 2000: 7)

... making the right offer to the right person at the right time. Such an approach would rely upon an early identification of the needs of each jobseeker and the design, at an early stage, of a personalised action plan, with a view to a sustainable integration in the labour market. (European Commission, 2003a: 11)

As for the second question, many authors support the claim that substantive and standardized rules are ill suited to the new conditions of production. They argue, rather than for substantive rules, in favour of post-regulatory tools (i.e. those that are general, more accepting of diversity, incomplete and open-ended clauses; Sisson and Marginson, 2001), and new forms of enforcement based on voluntary and flexible participation of the actors concerned (e.g. persuasion) in order to deal with the variety and dynamic complexity of post-modern societies: ‘To replace politics with persuasion: social development is seen less as a question of institutionalized preconditions and political frames, but as a question of people’s motives, goodwill and morals’ (Vobruba, 2001: 263).

Although Vobruba is referring here to the American mode of promoting flexibility, we consider that this is the main characteristic of the regulatory model proposed by the EU institutions (for a detailed discussion, see Crespo Suárez and Serrano Pascual, 2005).

Examples of the new popularity of this type of approach are the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), which constitutes the regulatory model for the coordination of employment policies, social inclusion and pensions by the EU institutions, and the discussion on 'soft regulation' and flexible frameworks rather than 'compulsory rigid systems' as manifestations of the europeanization of industrial relations (Sisson and Marginson, 2001). This OMC is aimed at the harmonization of ideas, visions and norms of action, rather than of institutions and legislation, in order to define goals which can converge towards a common political vision (Palier, 2001). In this political vision, policy changes are legitimized by reference to uncontrollable processes of globalization and its discursive transformation into challenges (Fairclough, 2000; Crespo Suárez and Serrano Pascual, 2004). Muntigl et al. (2000) show how, in the face of the new economic constraints, the discourse about globalization rhetorically bypasses the national state and emphasizes the supranational nature of the challenges – presented in a deterministic mode – making the supranational level appear as the appropriate and 'normal' level for responding to these current threats.

In this framework, the different meanings identified in the second section (above) can be understood as belonging to different interpretative repertoires. In the light of this polysemy, the different meanings of the concept are made to appear equally valid, particular political philosophy perspectives being labelled in relation to differing needs. For instance, in order to show the evidence of common threats and to legitimize the need for common projects (fourth understanding of the concept), the EU institutions will appeal to the essentialist understanding of the concept ('the EU shares common values and common institutions' –

first and second understanding/interpretative repertoire of the concept). From this understanding of the concept, it is concluded that common results (equality, social fairness, etc.) are to be produced. Using this concept of ESM as a common denominator, EU discourse can thus move from a concept of ESM as a political project (sharing policy tools) towards arguing the need for common results. And yet the same policy tool may be used to quite different effect in different countries depending on institutional setting and specific cultural values (e.g. the example of activation: Serrano Pascual, 2004).

Another example of this use of discourse is the way in which words are transformed to underline the 'made-in-Europe' approach to the treatment of issues. In order to emphasize that this European way of handling situations is a long way away from the US approach, concepts such as workfare are reprocessed and relabelled as activation, flexibility as flexicurity, globalization as the knowledge-based society, and corporate governance as social corporate responsibility. But the challenge stemming from this 'conceptual metamorphosis' is to ascertain to what extent changing concepts also transform the reality/philosophy behind the concept, particularly in countries where, in comparison with the market, social and political institutions are weak. In actual fact, the creation of such concepts establishes equivalences that serve to conceal the differences between countries.

The polysemy may also result from the EU's rather peculiar position, insofar as it needs to find ways of reconciling the differing political philosophies which hold sway in the different countries of Europe. The style of governance exercised by the EU institutions of necessity bears the hallmark of a form of 'regulation amid diversity', and this diversity is also reflected in the meanings underlying or attributed to the concepts. The vagueness of the concepts used by the EU institutions might accordingly be due, in some measure, to the regulatory needs and rather fragile position of these actors, whose need is to articulate their

goal of institutionalizing and creating a supra-national identity, while respecting, at the same time, the member states' claims to national sovereignty. This might go some way towards explaining the tendency of the EU institutions to offer political concepts with an excessively open meaning, thereby allowing national actors to infuse them with a specific meaning in accordance with national traditions.

## Conclusion

The concept of ESM has been understood as a particular set of institutions (powerful welfare state, intervening social partners, etc.); as a particular set of values with reference to which these institutions are built up, for instance, temporary postponement of individual interests in order to achieve collective gains (Vobruba, 2001) or a commitment to minimum guaranteed resources (Begg, 2002); as a particular way to deal with common problems (policy paradigms and legitimately rhetoric); but also in terms of the outcomes of these institutions and values (levels of poverty and inequality, individual/collective empowerment, economic performance, decommodification of society) (Vobruba, 2001).

We have discussed two interconnected features which characterize the use of the concept of ESM in academic and political debate: on the one hand, the usually taken-for-granted assumption behind the concept; on the other hand, the highly ambiguous and polysemic nature of this concept. In doing so, we have identified three main ways in which the concept is being used in the scientific and academic debate (ESM as an entity, as an ideal type, as a European project and instrument for cohesion). To these we have added a fourth way of understanding the ESM, namely as a means of legitimizing the European institutions.

We argue that the polysemic nature of the concept ESM results not only from the lack of discussion devoted to the concept but also from a political construction of a self-styled European social-policy identity by the EU insti-

tutions. In opposition to the idea of ESM as a fact, we set up the concept of ESM as a politically constructed project. We have emphasized how this concept could be understood as a way of legitimizing the notion of a European social policy and how it feeds into concepts such as activation and flexicurity. However, it is, as we demonstrate, far from being an exogenous factor but, on the contrary, very much a political project aimed at fostering a European identity. This constructed identity is based less on common values than on a sharing of problems and intervention solutions (policy paradigms).

These observations underline the need to identify and empirically verify the main assumptions on which the debate is founded, in order to avoid deterministic explanations of currently changing paths of social policy making. Accordingly, in order to avoid a situation in which reference to the concept 'European Social Model' can be used/instrumentalized to help convey just about any policy proposition, be it economic or social, and to present as 'natural' what are, in fact, political options, a critical analytical reflection is required.

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## Notes

- 1 By our use of the term 'normative' we wish to underline the gap between conventional wisdom and empirical evidence.
- 2 Wetherell and Potter define interpretative repertoires as 'the building blocks speakers use for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena' (1988: 172).
- 3 We do not wish to discuss here to what extent we are moving towards a process of convergence or divergence in the way different European countries are dealing with common pressures (for a good discussion of the theoretical and analytical positions behind these two opposed positions, see Hay, 2002), but rather how this presumption that there is something in common is an inherent component of the political construction of the EU.

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