

# European social policy and the role of the university

## *Introduction*

Thank you for inviting me to participate in the opening of the new postgraduate programme in European Social Policy, here at the University of Ljubljana. The University has for the last two years been an active and valued partner in our international network of universities. Professor Svetlik and his colleagues deserve our congratulations, as they take this substantial step forward.

In establishing this programme, we assert the importance of European social policy as a field of study. Of course, governments often subordinate social policy to economic policy; and generous social services presuppose the resources which are provided by economic productivity. But this does not mean that social policy is less important than economic policy.

Indeed, in some important respects economic efficiency and economic policy themselves depend upon the type of social policy which is being pursued. The investment which we make in the education and health of our citizens helps to determine their economic productivity. The facilities which we provide for the care of children and of the elderly help to determine the availability for employment of the working age population. The fairness of the rewards which our society provides and the minimum standards of well-being which we establish help to determine the level of morale and motivation of the population; and hence their commitment to active involvement in the economic and political life of their society.

So social policy is important: perhaps as important as economic policy. But is *European* social policy important? What, indeed, do we mean by European social policy? And why do we choose to organise an international postgraduate programme in European social policy?

## *European Social Policy*

There are at least three answers which we can give to these questions.

### Comparing Welfare States

First, European social policy can refer to the different national social policy systems of Europe: and the study of their similarities and differences.

Various social scientists have tried to classify these welfare systems. In recent years, the Danish scholar Esping-Andersen has been particularly influential. He distinguishes different national welfare regimes according to the generosity of the welfare benefits which they provide, their coverage of different sections of the population and the extent to which these welfare benefits protect individual work-

\* Dr. Graham Room, University of Bath, Lecture given January 17th 1995 at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

ers from the insecurities of the labour market (Esping-Andersen, 1990). On this basis, he distinguishes three types of welfare regime: liberal regimes, where the market remains dominant; social democratic regimes, where the market has been humanised and where substantial social rights are guaranteed; and conservative regimes, where the market is limited not by the egalitarianism of social rights, but by social benefits which are designed to reinforce the traditional hierarchies of status.

It is important to study these similarities and differences between welfare systems because by so doing, we can appreciate the range of choices which are open to our own society, and the extent to which the institutional and cultural legacy of its past limits on the range of this choice. With the Slovene students who are participating in our postgraduate programme, we regularly ask whether Slovenia, in the new political circumstances of the 1990s, is approximating to one or other of Esping-Andersen's welfare regimes, or whether something quite different is emerging here. We want them to use the models, the analytical tools developed elsewhere in Europe in order to analyse the policy options which face their own society.

But of course, such analytical tools must be used with care. Esping-Andersen's scheme of classification is now so much taken for granted, that we are in danger of overlooking its weaknesses (Room, 1994). Esping-Andersen is, first and foremost, concerned with the contrast between liberal societies, where market values reign supreme, and social democratic societies, where social rights protect the individual from the insecurities of the market place. He is therefore centrally concerned with class interests and with the struggles between employers and trade unions, and parties of the right and left. His analytical tools are of reduced relevance to societies where class interests have not been so uniquely important for patterns of stratification, community formation and political order.

By giving a privileged position to class-based actors, his analysis tends to disregard other social and political actors, except as secondary influences. One example is provided by the churches. In many European countries the Churches and their associated welfare organisations have long been powerful; other social actors, including political parties and government, have been obliged to reach an accommodation with them. Social welfare services remain to a considerable extent under their control. Moreover, it would be wrong to see the Church, as some writers have done, as invariably a conservative force in the development of social welfare. The expansion of social rights should not be seen as being necessarily and uniquely the task of the trade unions and their social democratic allies: a wider range of political actors can be mobilised in this endeavour.

In short, it is not enough that our postgraduate should be aware of the analytical tools which are available within the literature on comparative social policy. What is also necessary is that they should be able to recognise the limitations of those tools and to develop analytical frameworks more appropriate to the new social institutions which are emerging, in particular within the countries of central and eastern Europe.

### Supra-National Social Policy

A second answer to the question, what is European social policy and why is it important, is that European social policy is the supra-national social policy of the

European Union. The doctrine of subsidiarity means that social policy remains largely the prerogative of national governments; nevertheless, the EU institutions have an important and growing role in establishing common standards of social provision and in promoting mutually consistent systems of welfare.

This has been a central concern of the European Commission during recent years. For example, during 1992, the Council of Ministers of the EU approved a recommendation on the convergence of national social welfare systems and the adoption of common standards (European Commission, 1991b). This convergence was said to be necessary for two reasons. First, in order to ensure that differences between national social welfare systems do not undermine the functioning of the Single Market: for example, Member States must not be allowed to use low standards of social provision as a means of gaining an unfair competitive advantage. Second, convergence in social policies is said to be important because the social problems which these welfare systems face are converging: for example, the problems of an ageing population and rising numbers of single parent families. Accordingly, the Council of Ministers set out certain common standards for national social welfare systems and called upon the European Commission to monitor progress towards these standards.

Standard-setting of this sort is important. However, we must recognise that although this may appear to be a neutral, technical matter, it can in fact involve important political judgements. First, it is too easy for the European Commission to assume that the social problems which we face are becoming more and more similar (Room, 1994). It is just as important to notice the divergences in the social conditions which our social protection systems will be facing during the 1990s and beyond. European economic integration may even increase these divergences. To judge by the European Commission's own studies of the prospects for industrial performance in different member states, divergence in economic performance seems likely (European Commission, 1989, 1990, 1991a). And for social protection and employment policies also, therefore, the problems faced by different Member States may diverge: in particular in relation to unemployment, training and labour market re-insertion.

But even if the social problems faced by our social protection systems were to converge – something which cannot be taken for granted is it so obvious that the national social protection policies which deal with them should also converge? Surely the political task is to identify the range of alternative policy responses which will be possible for each member state, without having serious negative consequences for the working of the Single Market; and where there are negative consequences, to identify on whom they will fall?

I repeat: standard setting is important, but the definition of standards is as much a political as a technical task. Social problems and policies may be converging, but this can be overstated. If we forget this, we will tend to hide from ourselves the range of political choices which are open to us as societies. For the moment, however, the European Commission, with its considerable resources for steering research and political debate, is a major institutional sponsor of the convergence agenda. Of course, it is easy to understand why the Commission should adopt this position. By presenting its social policy proposals as being the technical requirements of the Single Market, it can deflect criticism from such governments as my own, who are too ready to assert that the Commission wants only expand its political power.

I hope that our postgraduate students will, in general, take a positive view of

European cooperation and that some of them will play a significant part in it as citizens and political actors during the coming years. However, I hope, no less, that in considering the European Commission's proposals for policy convergence and for common standards, they will maintain a healthy scepticism, and will seek to demystify the apparent technical consensus as to what those should be. This will be particularly important for potential new member states such as Slovenia, which will be faced with the impressive weight of existing EU legislation and may be expected to embrace uncritically the common standards and policy objectives which this legislation embodies, as a precondition of their entry.

## European Welfare Market

There is a third answer to the question, what is European social policy and why is it important.

I do not need to remind you that it is no longer appropriate to think of the State as being the only actor in social policy. Various scholars, in western Europe as well as in central and eastern Europe, have tried to shift our attention to the so-called "mixed economy of welfare". A variety of governmental and non-governmental actors cooperate and compete in the provision of welfare, and the State increasingly limits itself to the role of regulator and financier.

These actors now find themselves operating in a European, rather than just a national context. And, just as the Single European Market presents business enterprises with new opportunities and competitive pressures, the same goes for welfare providers. So the third answer to the question, what is European social policy and why is it important, is that a Single European Welfare Market is now developing and is shaping the provision of welfare in the various member states of the provision of welfare in the various member states of the European Union.

What patterns of growth and decline can be expected for welfare providers, to parallel the changing fortunes of industry? And what specific strategies of competition, cooperation and conflict are welfare providers adopting, in response to these opportunities and threats? We need to answer these questions, if we are to understand the ways in which the Single Market is re-shaping the welfare regimes of western Europe and the social rights which they provide.

Research on these questions has barely begun, at least within my own country. Researchers at the University of Kent, in the extreme south-east of England, have been exploring with the local authorities the opportunities for cross-border trade in welfare services between Kent and north-east France, the region around Calais (Swithinbank, 1991). Perri 6, one of my colleagues at Bath, has been building theoretical models of the incentives and disincentives to such cross-border trade. Jon Kvist, a Danish scholar who visited my university in 1994, has been researching the private pensions industry, its response to the new European market in financial services and the consequences for national pensions systems.

We need to continue this research. Market competition does not necessarily produce an optimum allocation of resources and services, nor is it always a recipe for efficiency. The development of the Single European Market may produce more intense competition between welfare providers as well as between businesses: but for the moment at least, it is unclear whether the result will be to strengthen or weaken social rights at a time of treater economic insecurity. To analyse this mixed

economy of European welfare must be one of the tasks in which we train our postgraduates.

### *The Role of the University*

So far, I have tried to answer the question: what do we mean by European social policy and what is its importance? It has become less and less possible to conceive of social policy in one country, or to study it without reference to the wider European experience.

I now want to consider what are the implications for our universities, which, to an increasing degree, find themselves obliged to define their strategies in European terms. These implications are three-fold, and they broadly parallel the three answers which I gave to the question, what is European social policy. I will illustrate what I say by referring to our own postgraduate programme.

### The University in the European Education Market

I have already referred welfare market that is coming into existence and the strategies of competition and cooperation which different welfare providers may adopt. Likewise, to an increasing extent universities find themselves competing within a European education market: Competing for research funds and for students. They can no longer define themselves as primarily national institutions. Nevertheless, the European dimension remains to some extent subordinate to their national preoccupations, at least my own country. Let me explain.

British universities are intensifying their efforts to secure European Commission funding: not only for their research, but also for programmes of student exchange and curriculum development. The funds themselves are of course welcome. But this is not the sole, or even the primary reason for initiating these programmes. A university's reputation at home depends, increasingly, on the extent to which it has a European image. Students expect that the university which they attend will have a European strategy; and universities are therefore using their cross-national links, for example through the ERASMUS and TEMPUS programmes of the European Commission, to advertise their European credentials to students. The presence of students from elsewhere in Europe demonstrates to potential domestic applicants the European credit-worthiness of the university in question. Similarly, industrial enterprises which come to us for research and consultancy services also expect us to match their own interest in Europe. Participation in European research networks, including those supported by the European Commission, validates a university's claim to be able to serve European industry.

To be more precise: I enjoy travel and I am pleased that Ljubljana University is participating in our programme. However, the reason why I devote a considerable proportion of my time to this postgraduate programme is that it enhances the credentials of my own institution. I hope that analogous benefits will accrue to the University here in Ljubljana, and to the Faculty of Social Sciences, because without this, there is insufficient incentive to long-term collaboration.

As universities compete and cooperate with each other in the European education market, it will be necessary for them to negotiate common standards. Otherwise, students and employers will be unable to make sense of the various qualifications and programmes of study which are available and collaboration between universities will be impossible. However, as I suggested earlier, the negotiation of common standards is by no means a merely technical matter – whether conducted under the auspices of the European Commission, or privately between individual universities.

When I speak of common standards I refer, first, to the titles which we give to the qualifications which we award. Titles may be similar in several countries, even where the level of attainment required of students differs. Secondly, I refer to the quality of the learning experience which we offer to students. The mere fact that students in different university systems may spend the same number of years on their studies does not necessarily mean that the learning experiences were of the same quality, nor therefore that the skills and understanding that students acquire are at the same level.

Within our own postgraduate programme, we have only to some extent dealt with these common standards. The title of the degree – Masters Degree in European Social Policy Analysis – is of course common. However, some of the participating universities are based in countries – Spain, Portugal and Greece – where the Masters Degree is an unfamiliar qualification; and some of them have until now failed to secure the authorization required from the relevant national authorities. The students from these universities have accordingly been receiving the Masters Degree from Bath, as a transitional arrangement.

What about common standards of teaching – of the learning experience which we offer to students? We have an agreed curriculum; we have common procedures for assessing students; we have common procedures for obtaining student feedback on the teaching we provide. Nevertheless, I suspect that as our programme develops, we will need to be more explicit as to the quality of teaching that each university provides and be less reticent about criticising each other.

I repeat, however, the definition of common standards is in part a political matter. I have already mentioned that the title of the degree which we award – the Master's degree – is unfamiliar in some of the countries involved. The methods of assessment which we use also draw more on some national traditions than others. It may well be that in different countries and universities, there will be differing views of what counts as a high quality learning experience. The danger is that the definitions used by the more intimidating academic cultures of northern Europe will unthinkingly prevail; and that indigenous forms of analysis and training within those subordinate countries will be disregarded, unless specific countervailing action is taking.

### Making Sense of Diversity

This brings me to the third and final set of implications for the universities of the Europeanisation of their environments. Our universities are rooted in different academic regimes which themselves are the products of political and cultural struggles over long periods. As we seek to modernise our universities we must not

neglect this diversity, but use it as a positive resource in the education which we provide to our students. But of course, this may seem a mere platitude, with which no one could possibly disagree. Let me therefore refer to some of the ways in which we seek to respect and use this diversity within our Master's programme.

Seven years ago, when my own university and three others began to plan this postgraduate programme, we were aware that none of us could offer a year-long programme by ourselves. We had neither the expertise nor the resources. Initially, therefore, three of us agreed to host one term each, with students moving from Ireland to the UK to the Netherlands, as the year progressed. Even though the programme has now expanded and matured, we retain this principle of mobility. It allows almost all the universities in our programme to host at least one term and students can thus choose between a wide variety of different academic regimes. Ten students have chosen to spend this term in Ljubljana, while fourteen are in Bath and seventeen are in Ireland. We try to ensure that at each host students make visits to social policy agencies, and do not just read about those agencies, imprisoned on the University campus.

In the future, I hope we can make further use of this diversity. For example, by putting together the diverse expertise of our different universities, we may be able to develop new teaching materials which can be disseminated throughout our network and beyond. We are already preparing multi-media computer-based teaching software, which will help our postgraduates in their studies of European Union institutions: and we expect to be using this with our students next Autumn. I hope that other innovations of this sort can be generated by our programme, which will thus serve as the laboratory, producing and testing new educational techniques in the field of European Social Policy studies.

### Conclusion

I have tried to justify European Social Policy as a subject of major importance for our universities: a subject which no university can afford to neglect, if it is to retain the esteem of universities elsewhere. I have indicated how our own Master's programme provides a training in this subject. I conclude by offering my best wishes to Professor Svetlik and his colleagues, the Faculty of Social Sciences and the University, as they develop their own work in this field.

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