

Book Review

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SOCIAL POLICY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Author: Karen M. Anderson

Social Policy in the European Union by Karen M Anderson provides a comprehensive examination, both analytically and empirically, of a set of policy areas, which make up what is known as the European Union's policy-making responsibilities. Generally, the sphere of social policy at the national level covers policy measures such as income maintenance programmes, which include pensions and employment insurance, as well as social services, such as health care and education. The book examines the evolution of the EU's role in addressing social policy issues – which were initially only the purview of national governments – by expanding both its legal mandate and developing soft law instruments to accompany this role. By analysing the EU's social policy process in light of European integration and welfare state literatures, the book chapters mainly draw on the analytical concepts of historical institutionalism – such as temporality, path dependence, unintended consequences – in the development of EU social policy. The analysis also departs from approaches to EU social policy examination found in the EU literature, namely the focus on the EU's regulatory role – understood as negative integration – whereby the EU establishes boundaries to national distributive policies, and second, the development of a catalogue of EU social rights which could be enforced judicially at the national level.

The central argument of the book is that the EU social policy has variable national effects within the context of multilevel governance. In other words, the book argues that the impact of EU social policy on national welfare systems varies across policy sectors and EU Member States due to the fact that European integration changes national opportunity structures, providing individual and collective actors with new ways to shape policy development (p. 3). There are two key questions that underpin the analysis: the first question focuses on the emergence of EU social policy despite a limited EU Treaty basis; while the second, stresses the differential impact of EU social policy at the national level.

The book's structure consists of seven empirical chapters, with the introductory chapter setting out the background to the topic and the key arguments developed, while the Conclusion chapter aims to draw broader conclusions and policy implications from the analysis. Chapter 2 ('Explaining Social Policy-making in Europe') provides a critical analysis of the key features that distinguish social policy from other policies at the national level (e.g. rules governing benefit access, the high salience of social policy at the domestic level etc.) and how these interact with EU governance structures to influence modes of social policy-making at the EU level as well as Member States' reactions to them. This chapter also covers the main relevant theoretical approaches to EU social policy analysis: the comparative social policy perspective and the impact of European integration, namely the 'Europeanisation' of social policy perspective. In Chapter 3 the social policy-making at the EU level is examined from a historical perspective, starting with the beginnings of the European project in the late 1950s. This chapter also outlines the roles played by various EU institutions, such as the European Court of Justice, in interpreting and developing EU social policies.

The next chapters of the book (Chapters 4-8) examine the EU's role in specific social policy sectors, such as pensions and social insurance, employment policy, vocational training and higher education, health policy and social inclusion. From the perspective of EU studies, these chapters shed a new light on the dynamics of negative and positive integration, as well as the key EU policy instruments that are prevalent for each policy sector under scrutiny. For instance, the EU's competition law has shaped policies such as health care services, while EU labour mobility has had an impact on pensions and social insurance by following the logic of negative integration. On the other hand, the positive integration dimension has been far more limited and less influential in the field of EU social policy. These empirical chapters also discuss the development and deployment of EU soft law instruments (such as the Open Method of Coordination –OMC) in sectors such as employment, social inclusion or pension reform. Chapter 4 focuses on the EU's impact on social security (statutory and collective) and pensions by highlighting the role played by the Court's rulings in these sectors. Chapter 5 scrutinises the emergence of EU law (hard and soft) intended to support high level of employment at the national level and reconciliation of work and family. For instance, the chapter examines the extent to which the European Employment Strategy (a soft law instrument) has been successful in delivering 'more and better jobs', as well as the influence of EU hard law, such as the Parental Leave Directive, aimed at reconciling work and family at the national level. Chapter 6 discusses the EU's role in relation to vocational training and higher education, by focusing on aspects such as the mutual recognition of education and vocational qualifications, the Bologna process as well as specific initiatives developed as part of the Lisbon Strategy and the EU law on free movement. Chapter 7 explores the implications of European integration, particularly the internal market, for the provision of health care at the national level. For instance, the chapter discusses policy aspects such as patient mobility, as well as EU-level actions in the area of occupational health and safety. Chapter 8, the final empirical chapter, examines the enhanced EU involvement in addressing issues such as poverty and social inclusion. The chapter traces the origins of EU role in dealing with poverty-related matters back to the 1970s, and its gradual development over time, and culminated with the inclusion of poverty and social exclusion in EU economic growth strategies, such as the Lisbon Strategy and Europe 2020.

Four key conclusions are reached by the analysis of EU social policy sectors (social security and pensions, employment, vocational training and higher education, health policy, poverty and social inclusion): the first, reinforces the national governments' support of the status quo, namely that EU Member States are the masters of their own welfare systems. Second, there is a wide social policy diversity across Europe, which is also linked to the fact that, third, social policy is different from other European policies due to its role in national politics. Finally, the expansion of EU social policy can primarily be attributed to the supranational activism exerted by the European Court of Justice and the European Commission. Both the Court and the Commission have advanced negative integration which required that national social policies facilitate labour mobility. Particularly the Court's interpretation of EU primary and secondary legislation, as well the effects of negative integration, have facilitated the opening up of national health care institutions to patient mobility or the promotion of equal pay for men and women in the labour market. Additionally, in policy sectors where the EU lacked explicit legal mandate, the EU developed soft law instruments, such as the Open Method of Coordination, for areas such as employment and social inclusion.

There are two aspects that the book could have addressed better. First, a more detailed discussion of how multilevel governance (MLG) is envisaged, how it is operationalised and particularly its connection to historical institutionalism would have been useful. Various meanings are attached to MLG in EU studies, and hence, in the context of EU social policy, it would have been helpful to tease out its specific relevance to the EU policy-making in various social policy matters. Second, a more thorough application of historical institutionalist concepts to explain policy change is unfortunately missing. The analysis mainly draws on historical institutionalist concepts that highlight policy stability

and path-dependence. Yet, these concepts fall short of explaining how and why policy changes. Indeed, by drawing on the policy entrepreneurship and agenda-setting literatures, the analysis could have captured better –both conceptually and empirically - those factors that not only determine policy stability (or status quo bias) but also those that can explain how and why the EU has expanded its role and scope in social policy more generally.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

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