

## Europe's Social Dimension

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**Jean-Claude Barbier presents us with a way of looking at the construction of Europe, concentrating on Europe's social regime, which he reminds us is not really on a par with its economic regime. His recent book on this subject, now available in English, is a methodological reflection on comparison and on the role of cultures.**

Reviewed: Jean-Claude Barbier, *La Longue Marche vers l'Europe sociale*, Paris, PUF, 2008, 279pp. Adapted by the author for the English edition, translated by Susan Gruenheck Taponier: *The Road to Social Europe: A Contemporary Approach to Political Cultures and Diversity in Europe*, Abingdon (UK) and New York, Routledge, 2013, 248pp.

It is impossible not to recognize Europe as a political entity. The institutions of the twenty-seven-member European Union already have a long history, alternatively one of progress towards a future of peace and solidarity, or one of vulnerability to anti-bureaucratic or anti-liberal critiques. But no one knows for sure what these institutions will look like in the future. To improve our knowledge about them, and to prepare the ground for what he sees as the way forwards, Jean-Claude Barbier offers some perspective on the construction of Europe, from the first steps just after the Second World War up to the present day. He focuses in particular on Europe's social regime, which, as he repeatedly and not very surprisingly notices, advances far more slowly than its economic regime.

### Social Protection and National Models

In this book, "social Europe" refers to the various measures that EU countries have devised in order to protect people in need, to battle against inequalities, to promote greater social justice, to develop education, and so on. When describing these measures, language difficulties immediately appear. Multiple meanings often lurk behind expressions that seem to be similar from one language to another. In other words, terms that politicians, social leaders and researchers naturally tend to put together can embrace meanings that vary considerably from one country to another. For example, William Beveridge's "social security" (security of income up to a minimum) is not simply a British version of French "sécurité sociale" to which Pierre Laroque assigned the mission of making sure that people have enough income to guarantee family subsistence in all circumstances. To avoid making false analogies, we need to reflect seriously on how to describe, and therefore how to study, Europe's social dimension. After showing that, with this in mind, labels such as "social security" and "the welfare state" do not help to make clear comparisons, Barbier opts for the expression "social protection system": "a complex structure of social relations" combining private insurance, fiscal redistribution, and family solidarity.

Barbier notes that social protection has been closely associated, historically, with a strong sense of belonging to a national political community; moreover, the resources and tools of social protection (such as language, administration, and law) are basically dependent on national infrastructures. But this obviously does not mean that social protection can never disregard borders. In an environment basically inspired by economic principles (the market and competition), more than fifty years after the Treaty of Rome, European social policy has succeeded in making some headway. True, the progress is not amazingly impressive. But there have been positive achievements, with the most important ones dating from the golden interlude of 1986-2003: reforming the EU Structural Funds, setting up a social dialogue on a European basis, adopting a charter of social rights, inventing the open method of coordination at the Lisbon Summit of 2000 (establishing common objectives, exchanging best practices, cross-evaluating), and so on.

At the end of his assessment, Barber reaches a quite unambiguous conclusion: compared to economic Europe, social Europe lags far behind. How should this backwardness be explained? The neo-classical economic theories influential among political elites, theories supported by claims to universal and normative knowledge, are not unrelated to this. But more fundamentally, Barbier explains, it is ignorance about cultural diversity that slows down the march towards more European social policy. The second part of his book is aimed at explaining how this diversity should be taken seriously as a sociological phenomenon. Above all, the objective is to do justice to cultural differences while avoiding a culturalism that, as happens in some research, ignores subnational heterogeneities, exaggerates conflicts between societies, and disregards the action of reciprocal influence and contamination between national cultures.

### **Going Beyond Universalism versus Culturalism**

With this project in mind, Barbier begins by reviewing several comparative works that have met with some success: the development approaches of the 1950s, works on the societal effect in the early 1980s, the now standard typologies of social protection (those of Richard Titmuss and then Gøsta Esping-Andersen), recent writings on the varieties of capitalism, and so on. The clear conclusion is that all these works have trouble giving culture its due. To overcome their problems, it is especially helpful to avoid the dead ends into which all the protagonists of the old quarrel between universalism and culturalism have strayed. Like orthodox economists, universalists see the world only through the prism of the market. In recent European history there are many examples of the limits of this way of looking at things. Consider especially the “best practice” policy (for example, in the OECD’s promotion of tax credits in the late 1990s), which, by setting standards supposedly valid for all, imposes reforms on very different systems of social protection, sometimes with improbable effects.

But how can we avoid the opposite problem, the aporias of radical culturalism? Barbier’s answer is primarily epistemological. The social sciences are capable of objectifying. They can support solid results empirically and rigorously. So in spite of what is sometimes claimed, social science discourse is not equivalent to journalists’ conjectures or politicians’ talk. To flesh out his assertion, Barbier suggests two ethical principles essential to international comparison. First, to do good social science, respect the Other. Second, never fail to establish objective truths. It follows that researchers need to fend off the political influence often weighing on the definition of research programs financed at the European level. These are surely wise resolutions. But how do you get from general principles to effective comparative practice?

The third and last part of the book answers that question. For Barbier, the key is the political culture of each national community, and political culture means collective representations related to the principles and norms of systems of social protection. For example, as far as representations go, French culture has remarkably little in common with English culture. On one side of the Channel, professional solidarity, formal equality, and social security are the preferred values; on the other, priority is given to universalism of a minimum level of support, to the tolerance of great inequalities, and to the principle of self-help. When it comes to institutions, the differences in methods of managing solidarity, the multiplicity of rules for negotiating agreements, and the varying roles played by the state in each system of social protection, all indicate the importance of meanings that are specific to each society. Barbier adds that words are the primary repositories of Europe's very different political cultures. That is why it is so important that in their investigations, sociologists must pay substantial attention to them. Barbier again warns against being fooled into making hasty comparisons: " 'Fairness' is not the equivalent of *justice sociale* in French or *soziale Gerechtigkeit* in German" (English edition, p. 127). He also thinks we must be wary of the international vocabulary (workfare, flexicurity, etc.) that disregards cultural varieties, truncates national realities, and leads to the imposition of action plans that are often dubious.

### **Cultural Rapprochement as the First Step**

In his last chapter Barbier draws some lessons from these considerations about language, the heart of his reflections. To relaunch a social Europe, it is not enough to support – this has almost become a reflex – strengthening political communication efforts seen as inadequate, because citizens are too inattentive to the actions and messages of elites. The temptation of economic and legal standardization, disregarding the continuing diversity in politics and culture must also be resisted. For example, the "Bolkestein Directive" affair shows that European countries still differ greatly in their concepts of public services, and that these concepts cannot suddenly bend with every new regulatory breeze. So how can progress be made? Barbier finds the post-national idea advocated by Habermas unconvincing, and he is even more critical of the various partisans of a universal minimum income. Instead, he argues for a rapprochement of cultures. Although he is keenly aware that relaunching social Europe in this way would have to be a long-term project, this does not prevent him from pointing out possible courses of action that are consistent with his argument. In education, priority must from now on be given to languages, historical social sciences and humanities. For "if language lies at the foundation of all political activity, *there must also be an idiom underlying authentic European political activity* that is not limited to the strategic functioning of 'oligarchic' inter-statism led by administrative and political elites, which we have witnessed until now and even more since the beginnings of the current crisis." (English edition, p. 150, original emphasis). One can only agree here, although this demands patience. Indeed, even if we fully adopted such a strategy, cultural time not being the same as economic or legal time, we would have to reckon that the journey down the road to social Europe had only just begun.

Barbier's book obviously falls into several categories. The first is sociology. The argument here is clear and compelling: because systems of social protection are historically parts of historical national political communities, it is not surprising that social Europe advances in such small steps. This conclusion is based not just on consulting scholarly works and other documents in the grey literature. It is also based on twenty years of investigation, mostly interviewing actors with national and international responsibilities. Were these actors actually systematically targeted? That is how we are led to interpret the notes in which

Barbier refers to his interviews and observations. The fact is, he is not clear here about his data gathering methods. For information about that, you have to consult his previous publications, which this one often refers back to. My point here is not insubstantial; lurking within it is a fundamental question. To study social Europe, is it possible, as Barbier thus suggests, to target only the elites? Does a sociology of social Europe not also call for a study of the practical effects of social protection efforts, based more closely on studying the daily realities of citizens in general and of local and regional actors? Moreover, would such study not be a relevant means of understanding in a different way what cultural diversity can mean?

These questions lead directly to the book's second main category: the methodology of comparison. A striking and original feature that gives this book its flavour is Barbier's tireless warnings about the use and meaning of words. One good lesson to take away from reading this book is the need to take seriously the structuring role of language in every political community, and therefore the importance of deeply analysing shared meanings in the vocabulary that is used to describe the principles and tools of social protection. On this point, it would have been helpful to know more about Barbier's methods. In what language were his interviews conducted? How does he make use of them? Are there any methods that are particularly well-suited to content analysis when making international comparisons? What are the practical methodological implications of his call to respect the Other? Also on this point, showing the comparative method in action could have clinched the argument in favour of the principles proposed in the second part of the book.

The other main category of Barbier's book is politics. Favouring giving priority to learning one another's languages and cultures, he refrains from advocating ready-made quick fixes. Far from sinking into gloom and doom, he explores new avenues. His arguments really encourage the hope that Europe will one day be the finest place for "living well together". His book is a success because it sketches the framework of a tangible utopia.

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