

Nathalie Morel, Bruno Palier and Joakim Palme (eds.),
Towards a Social Investment Welfare State? Ideas, Policies and Challenges,
Bristol, Policy Press, 2012

In February 2013, the European Commission presented through its Communication 'Towards Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion' its long expected social investment package calling member states to prioritise social investment (SI) and to modernise their welfare states. The social investment package, comprising also a recommendation on child poverty and a series of staff working documents, is expected to provide guidance to member states on more efficient and effective social policies in response to the significant challenges they currently face.

The social investment package is the EU's latest attempt to consolidate the emergence of a new paradigm based on a new understanding of social policy as a productive factor and a different economy, the knowledge-based economy. While the origins of SI can be traced back to the ideas promoted by Alva and Gunnar Myrdal during the 1930s in Sweden (and despite more recent attempts in promoting the SI and analysing its logic) its content remains somewhat vague leading some scholars to attribute its adoption at EU level to its ambiguity and vagueness.

Against this background, 'Towards a Social Investment Welfare States?' provides a valuable contribution to the dialogue on SI and its adoption as a European-level approach. This becomes even more clear as the book is the outcome of a project launched in 2009 as part of the activities of the Institute of Future Studies in connection with the Swedish EU Presidency (during the second half of 2009) and the attempt to contribute to the discussion of the post-Lisbon strategy. More importantly, the strength of the book lies in the fact that it does not limit itself to an analysis of the content and coherence of ideas put forward in this new perspective, but seeks instead 'an empirically informed assessment' of SI policies' successes and failures, contradictions, tensions, synergies and factors facilitating or impeding the implementation of these policies.

The book is divided in four parts, besides the introductory and concluding chapters. Part One, comprising chapters 2 and 3 and entitled 'Towards a new social policy paradigm' presents the emergence of a new paradigm. Through the analysis of the distinct phases of welfare state configuration, the book presents the ideas behind the SI and its distinct characteristics in relation to the two other policy paradigms, i.e., those of Keynesianism and neoliberalism.

Part Two 'Mapping the development of social investment policies' (chapters 4 and 5) and Part Three 'Assessing the social investment policies' (chapters 6-9) constitute the core of the book. They provide an empirical analysis and assessment of the development of public policies underpinning SI (human capital improvement, the relation between the productive sphere of the economy and reproductive of the family and employment relations) and the variations between, but also within, welfare regimes in the pursuit of these policies. Through the presentation of different examples stemming from the implementation of SI policies, the book bridges the gap between theory and evidence, thus allowing the reader to have a better understanding of the impact of SI policies in Europe. In terms, for example, of SI as echoed in the European Employment Strategy, evidence points to an uneven implementation, with governments opting for the less costly recommodification instead of social investment. An equal uneven implementation seems to have taken place also in relation to work-family reconciliation policies considered as the lynchpin of the SI approach. On the other hand, evidence suggests that policies associated with SI have

led to the expansion of employment and employment in quality jobs in particular. Focusing on the geographical reach of SI policies, the authors of the various chapters show that only few countries have actually implemented SI policies. The Nordic countries display the strongest SI profile with the key to their success lying in the 'combination of strong protection with heavy social investment with the aim to promote social equality and gender equality'. Throughout this section the role of institutions is repeatedly highlighted as a key factor in facilitating or inhibiting the development and actual impact of SI policies.

The final fourth, Part 'Meeting the challenges ahead?' (chapters 10-14) discusses the ways in which the SI can contribute in meeting the current challenges of demographic change, economic crisis and climate change faced by European welfare states. Given that the ideas promoted by the SI approach have been developed in the period preceding the crisis, this section attracts the most attention as it reflects on the potential of SI and the place of social Europe in the European integration process. Authors rightly point out to the need to strengthening the role of Structural Funds and the redefinition of the Economic and Monetary Union through the adoption of a more radical reform that would recognise the 'social dimension'. The way forward seems to lie in the development 'of common policies at the European level that contribute to the kind of solidarity that was the historical foundation for the building of nation states and this includes social policy and education policy as well as industrial policy'; otherwise, Europe 2020 risks being limited to no more than wishful thinking. At the same time, it becomes obvious that countries that stand to gain most from a SI approach (like Greece) are those least likely to develop a fully-fledged SI strategy in the current context.

With Mario Draghi proclaiming the death of the European Social Model and the adoption of the new rules on EU's economic governance leaving little (if no) room for the development of social policy at both EU and national level, the true merit of the SI approach could well lie in that it brings to the forefront the importance of the social dimension as a basic legitimising component of the European integration process and the nature of the European project in the aftermath of the crisis.

Overall, the true merit of the book lies in the fact that it does not seek to present an embellished picture of the SI approach. By striving instead to highlight both its strengths and weaknesses and more importantly the challenges it will have to address if it aims to become a new paradigm for Europe, it offers a truly balanced approach to the debate. In that respect, 'Towards a social investment welfare state' is useful for both academics and policy practitioners.

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