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“Social Policy in a Globalizing World, Developing a North-South Dialogue”

When research and politics mingle and converge to forget cultural diversity in welfare systems: lessons from the collapse of ‘social Europe’

The call refers to the “one-size fits all” social protection model promoted by international organisations in the 90s. It is certainly true that this ‘model’ has met with intense criticism and with the challenging of its appropriateness for all sorts of countries, whether Northern or Southern.

However, the role of international organisations is certainly here to stay, and these influential organisations (the OECD, the European Union, the ILO, World Bank, etc..) operate within inevitable and structural constraints. They are formatted to look for universal solutions. They are structured in order to mingle academic knowledge and politics, under the veil of an apparently technical, de-politicized discourse promoting some sort of ‘general public welfare’. At the same time, the experience drawn from comparative literature on social protection stresses that national diversity is crucial, whether for analysing problems or finding solutions to them.

In this respect, we contend that it is possible to draw important lessons – valid for both Northern and Southern countries - from the last 15 years that saw the attempt to build a significant layer of ‘Social Europe’, from the first initiatives taken by SAMAK in the Nordic countries and by certain political entrepreneurs, in the very early 1990s. The near collapse of this dynamics for a ‘Social Europe’ was triggered by the double rejection of the project for a constitutional treaty in the Netherlands and France. But it has much deeper cultural and political roots. In the absence of the ‘social’ dynamics, the substance of the discourse of coordination at EU level has quickly reversed back to good and solid mainstream ‘economicism’ while perfunctory service was paid to the necessity of “better communication”.

On the contrary, the knowledge accumulated in the welfare states comparative literature in social sciences has shown that economicism will hinder the understanding of the significant factors pertinent for the future of social protection across the world.

The example of the present failure of ‘Social Europe’ to actually materialize can lead to two conclusions for research, that reach much farther than the mere European ‘problems’: (1) the first one is that, because of the increasing role played by international organisations in

formatting information and discourse, a tendency has taken place too often among social scientists to let the frontiers blur between research and politics; (2) the second one is much broader: the fundamental conditions that brought the refusal from voters in France and the Netherlands are 'cultural'. For any further progress of 'Social Europe' to be achieved, Europeans have to understand that mutual understanding of diverse cultures in Europe is indispensable.

From a global research standpoint, this opens up a research programme where the status of a 'missing variable', *culture*, has to be considerably enhanced in comparative welfare state literature.

Author's recent references on the subject

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