

The European Social Model: an exercise in deconstruction

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Abstract

One of the fastest growing European catchwords at the present time – the “European Social Model” – is used to describe the European experience of simultaneously promoting sustainable economic growth and social cohesion. The concept is characterised by a high degree of ambiguity and polysemy; it is a loosely defined normative concept and, as such, is used with differing meanings in accordance with rather half-baked definitions. A clear definition of what constitutes its essence seems to be lacking in most articles on the subject, while a review of some of the most important of these articles reveals that, insofar as definitions are to be found, they do not necessarily converge. This article aims to discuss the concept of the ESM. It analyses and deconstructs the concept in order to identify the main understandings and the various dimensions of the model. It classifies and discusses the ways in which the ESM is most frequently construed and proposes a new approach to its understanding. Finally, the implications of the ESM concept in the European debate are analysed and it is argued that it is a key factor in legitimising the European institutions.

Keywords: European Welfare States, Supranational regulation of Europe, Europeanisation of the social model, Social cohesion.

1. Introduction

One of the fastest growing European catchwords at the present time – the “European Social Model” – is used to describe the European experience of simultaneously promoting sustainable economic growth and social cohesion. This concept, current in both academic and political discourse, is used to advance thinking about a third way of achieving a society, as opposed to both the neo-liberal path taken by the USA, which leads to social disintegration, and the more recently discredited path of social-regulated markets, which entails economic inefficiency.

The concept is characterised by a high degree of ambiguity and polysemy. The European Social Model (ESM) is a loosely defined normative concept and, as such, is used with differing meanings in accordance with rather half-baked definitions. Many authors (academics, politicians, journalists) use the concept, without in any way defining it, in order to justify – or reject – a particular form of policy intervention. A clear definition of what constitutes its essence seems to be lacking in most articles on the subject, while a review of the most important of these articles reveals, furthermore, that, insofar as definitions are to be found, they do not necessarily converge. When discussing whether the ESM exists and whether its various manifestations are converging or diverging, the question therefore arises of precisely what it is that is being discussed and what type of causal relationships are being brought into play. The prerequisite for answering these questions, which are basically empirical in nature, is an analytical tool; this implies defining what we mean by the ESM and identifying its components.

In spite of the variable ways in which the concept is used and/or constructed, the definitions do share some common features. The first of these is the implicit reference to a dichotomy between the American and the European economy, on the one hand, and a distinction between two chronological phases of economic development on the other. One important feature is the concept's symbolic reliance on the American model, to which it implicitly or explicitly refers, while at the same time clearly assuming its own superiority. Implicitly, many authors and/or policy-makers take the United States as a (negative) reference – or “counterexample” – from which Europe is to be distinguished. This not fully transparent state of affairs is compounded by reminiscences of a past characterised by alternative and now obsolete prevailing social models. It is our belief that these implicit references and assumptions constitute a snare, in that they serve to inhibit further thinking on the subject.

A second common feature is that the economic and societal dimensions are assumed to be interlinked. Economic success and maintaining the social quality of Europe are presented as interrelated goals (see for instance Vobruba 2001). The key question in this discussion is what type of conditions, within the analytical framework of societal change, are conducive to both economic success and the social improvement of living conditions.

A third main characteristic of the discussion on the ESM is its predominantly normative character. It is, to a very large extent, based on a mass of assumptions none of which have been empirically established, and the discussion is built up without any serious

examination of the main tools used to construct it. What is more, the arguments and claims underlying this discussion are highly controversial: the extent to which Europe shares “common” foundational features; whether “knowledge” is more important in the Knowledge-Based-Society (KBS) than in any other society; the lack of empirical evidence supporting the assertion of a real increase in global trade (Petit 1999; Hay 2002); the problematic description of globalisation as a non-negotiable external economic reality (Hay 2002); the questioning of the much-touted correlation between the use of new ICTs and increased productivity (Petit and Kragen 1999); whether the “new” economy promoted by the KBS really is all that new (Evans 2000; Visco 2000; Wolf 1999); the extent to which these economic processes really involve an increase in work-related qualifications; the real impact of these processes on organisational changes (Brödner 2000); the need for a radical change in labour market institutions (Manning 1998); etc.

This article aims to discuss the concept of a European Social Model as it is understood in, principally, the academic literature. It will analyse and deconstruct the concept in order to identify the main understandings and the various dimensions of the model. Section two summarises, classifies and discusses the ways in which the ESM is most frequently construed and proposes a new approach to its understanding. Section three examines the implications of the ESM concept in the European debate and argues that it is a key factor in legitimising the European institutions. The conclusions can be found in Section 4.

2. Main conceptions

Jacques Delors coined the term “European Social Model” in the mid-90s to designate an alternative to the American form of pure-market capitalism. The basic idea of the ESM is that economic and social progress must go hand in hand; economic growth, in other words, is to be combined with social cohesion. However, after nearly 10 years of discussion of the ESM in both academic and political circles, the term remains, in the face of analytical scrutiny, sorely imprecise.

One of the first definitions of the ESM appears in the “White paper on social policy” (European Commission 1994). There it is defined as a set of common values, namely the commitment to democracy, personal freedom, social dialogue, equal opportunities for all, adequate social security and solidarity towards the weaker individuals in society. This is a definition that fits into the broad strand of literature that deals with the ESM in a normative manner.

Without exploring in detail the various definitions of the ESM put forward by the European Commission, we wish to draw attention to the wording used in the presidency conclusion at the Lisbon Summit on 23-24 March 2000 (European Council 2000). The emphasis here was on modernising the ESM. The features stressed are the need for education and training, adaptation of skills and life-long learning, reform of the social security system and, finally, the promotion of social inclusion. The first features are concerned with human capital and are clearly focused on the supply side of the labour

market. With regard to social protection, the emphasis is on the fiscal sustainability of pensions, and on making work pay, as well as on social inclusion and promoting the capacity for participation. Hence, the focus is on enhancing individuals' capabilities to enable them to deal with, and survive in, the economy; a risk that was formerly social has instead become individual.

In the literature on the European Social Model more generally, the term is used in many different contexts and many different definitions can, accordingly, be identified. These definitions can be grouped into the four categories listed below (based on those developed in Hay, Watson and Wincot 1999). The categories are not mutually exclusive; hence a definition given under one heading may well also be applicable under another.

In the first cluster of definitions the ESM is considered as the model that incorporates certain common features (institutions, values, etc.) that are inherent in the status quo of the European Union member states and are perceived as enabling a distinctive mode of regulation as well as a distinctive competition regime.

The second cluster of definitions establishes the ESM as being enshrined in a variety of different national models, some of which are put forward as good examples; the ESM thus becomes an ideal model in the Weberian sense.

The third way of identifying the ESM is as a European project and a tool for modernisation/adaptation to changing economic conditions. Under this mode of apprehension, the ESM is an emerging trans-national phenomenon.

The fourth cluster of definitions uses the concept of ESM as an instrument for cohesiveness with a view to enlargement and predicts the emergence of various new ESMs.

The most commonly encountered definition is that which refers to the common features shared by the European Union member states. Under this heading, definitions range from quite vague to rather detailed and they tend, by and large, to suggest a normative approach. The ESM is often referred to as enshrining common views and principles applicable to different social issues (Vaughan-Whitehead 2003; Servais 2001). It is described as a specific common European aim geared to the achievement of full employment, adequate social protection, and equality. Another way of defining it is via the institutions of the welfare state and in terms of a capacity for political regulation of the market economy. Vaughan-Whitehead (2003) proposes a lengthy enumeration of components constituting the ESM. These factors encompass labour law on workers' rights, employment, equal opportunities, anti-discrimination, and so forth. He stresses that the ESM is not only a set of European Community and member-state regulations but also a range of practices aimed at promoting voluntaristic and comprehensive social policy in the European Union. Scharpf (2002), following a similar line of reasoning, sees the "identity marks" of the ESM as generous welfare state transfers and services together with a social regulation of the economy. These translate into the provision of social assistance to the needy, universal provision of education (primary and secondary) and health care, a complex nexus of social insurance and social services, as well as an elaborate system of industrial relations. In Hay, Watson, and Wincott (1999) the ESM is defined as a group of welfare regimes characterised by extensive social protection, fully

comprehensive and legally sanctioned labour market institutions, as well as the resolution of social conflict by consensual and democratic means. Statistically speaking, there might seem to be a grouping of identical welfare states in Europe; this is, however, as demonstrated by Esping-Andersen (1990), no more than a statistical artefact, and this author argues that European welfare capitalism encompasses different worlds of welfare state. This is a position also followed by the supporters of path-dependency theory.

In the second strand of literature, specific national models are identified. The UK, Sweden and Germany are put forward as paradigm cases and certain countries are pinpointed as showing the way towards an ESM that successfully combines economic efficiency with social justice. Esping-Andersen (1999) endorses this approach. Ferrera, Hemerijck and Rhodes (2001) describe – and implicitly define – the key features of the model as being extensive basic social security protection for all citizens, a high degree of interest organisation and coordinated bargaining, and a more equal wage and income distribution than in most other parts of the world. They argue that these features are institutionalised to various degrees in the European Union and that the UK and Ireland are definite outliers. The Netherlands, Denmark, and Austria are put forward by these authors as good examples of how generous welfare policy can accommodate economic progress. Ebbinghaus (1999) identifies four groups of welfare state which together form what he calls the “European social landscape”. He defines a model as a “specific combination of institutions and social practices that govern market-society relations in a particular nation-specific combination”. The classification is based on the type of governance of market macro-economic policy, labour market policy and social policy.

Ebbinghaus argues that Europe is far from possessing any single best institutional design; rather, unity, in combination with diversity, is its hallmark.

The last two ways of understanding the ESM are found in the literature dealing with it as a European project, and there is a considerable degree of overlap with the two former strands. The authors all agree that the ESM is a dynamic and evolving model which is affected by both national and European forces and processes. However, rather than emphasising the similarities between national systems, the focus here is on the development of a distinctive trans-national model. Vaughan-Whitehead (2003) may be seen as a proponent of this trend, which is also endorsed by Wilding (1997) when he points out that for one single country to conduct its own individual social policy can no longer be regarded as viable. The evolution of the varying modes of European social and economic policy regulation has led to a steady increase in the number of subjects dealt with at a supra-national level.

Black (2000) seeks to demonstrate that the core of the ESM lies in industrial relations and labour market standards and policies. Its essence, in his view, is a multi-level system of regulation stemming from national as well European systems of regulation/deregulation and taking as its basis the common European values and rights set out and formally agreed in the charter of Fundamental Social Rights. He argues that Europe has made a considerable impact on cross-national convergence within the ESM. Lönnroth (2002) also states that the charter of fundamental human rights codifies the key principles of the ESM and thereby establishes the challenges that are to be met by the ESM in the future.

In the *Hellenic report* (Ametsis et al. 2003) the ESM is described as a set of social values, principles and methods which, in essence, may be reduced to three basic and universal principles: the recognition of social justice as a policy target; the acceptance of the productive role of social policy and its contribution to economic efficiency; and finally the development of a high level of bargaining between the social partners. The authors argue that the ESM has not attained a normative definition at the European level and that the definition of the future ESM will depend on reactions to the changes currently affecting the economic, social, and demographic structures of the EU.

Most of the authors/policy-makers that use the concept of ESM as a European project take the current situation to be a turning point between different models of advanced capitalism. The process of globalisation produces a variety of common pressures, which, in turn, expose the different parts of the world (including the USA and Europe) to the same imperatives of competitiveness and internal economic integration. In the face of technological, economic and social change, which are presented as inevitably and obviously “given”, the “need” for social and institutional modernisation (structural reform, more training for new technologies, etc.) is considered equally obvious. This modernisation appears, accordingly, as the “natural” response to economic change and globalisation. Many authors and policy-makers at the European level use the term “Knowledge-based society” to illustrate the essence of these changes. Underlying this term is the notion that, due to a variety of causes, the conditions of our production model have changed and that the ESM is geared to the framing of a response to the new economic /societal challenges. This “naturalisation” of the process makes it appear as

written into the order of things, beyond the sphere of human volition. The term “knowledge society” comes to designate mainly the technical management of change, while also leaving room for political choices; and the expression “social model” is intended to indicate the preferred approach to coping with the challenges deriving from the process of social change.

But what is behind this process of change? Why does the predominant social model appear to be challenged? A first set of reasons relates to the strengthening of the economic union, in conjunction with the process of EU enlargement¹. In the wake of Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), a significant asymmetry between market efficiency (economic policies have been europeanised) and policies promoting social protection (these remain at national level) has come into being, the most telling example of this asymmetry being the manner in which the European employment strategy is intended as a counterweight to the European Economic and Monetary Union. Furthermore, economic integration has reduced the capacity of Member States to use traditional national economic policy instruments (exchange rates, deficit spending, monetary policy, increasing labour costs) for the achievement of self-defined social policy goals (Scharpf 2002). The balance of power between fiscal and monetary authorities has shifted (Begg 2002: 6). Last but not least, there is the risk of wage and social dumping (Jacobsson and Schmid 2002; Kittel 2002). The ability of firms to move production from one location to another might be expected to create downward pressure on the taxes, wages and social security system. These are some of the reasons why authors argue that there is a risk of downward adjustment of social standards and of an attack on collective bargaining and labour market regulation (Ferrera, Hemerijck and

Rhodes 2000; Kittel 2002), and hence a need for a further reinforcement of the social dimension of European integration.

A second type of reason is based more on demographic and societal changes, instances of which include the increasing participation of women in the labour market, the ageing of the population, changing patterns of consumption, the transformation of institutions such as the family, etc.

Finally, the third set of reasons (socio-economic) relate to the assumption that our economies are more internationally exposed and that, together with an increasing use of ICTs, this has changed the conditions of our production model. In contrast to the principle of stability, on which industrialised societies were traditionally based, the basic characteristic of the currently emerging model is constant change and instability. In the past, in order to achieve the requisite stability, it was necessary to eliminate uncertainty by means of strict labour regulation, removal of risks and control of future events. Economic and social stability was a key requirement for this model of production. In contrast with this past situation, it is currently considered impossible to regulate events before they happen and risk is seen as inevitable. This makes it “necessary” to promote flexibility, so that people are able to accommodate uncertainty and adapt to rapid changes in production demands. Under this production model, the ability to cope with unforeseen and sudden changes is presented as a prerequisite for economic success; and this model of labour regulation is accompanied by the emergence of a model of social welfare regulation that sees insecurity as inevitable. According to this ideal model, rather than protecting against risk, the Welfare State

should concentrate on promoting the management of risk (in the form of workfare, i.e. providing the instruments – employability – required by the individual in order to facilitate his or her management of the situation and the capacity of the labour market to adapt), thereby consolidating the laws of the market. The market punishes anyone who fails to adapt to its absolute laws of technological development and competitiveness. This technological determinism and tendency to see change as inevitable prompt a number of Darwinist metaphors. Likewise, the abovementioned change in the role of the Welfare State seeks justification in the portrayal of unemployment as something for which the individual is responsible. The individual is seen as being responsible for managing the risks (for example job loss) that are represented as an inevitable fact of life.

Against this background, citizenship is held to be, rather than a right, something which the individual is required to earn. As such, citizenship is described in fundamentally individualistic rather than social terms, as being determined by personal behaviour, i.e. by individual choices and attitudes. The main features of this trend may be summarised in the following table.

Insert Table 1 here

Taken together, these reasons and circumstances justify, in the view of a large number of authors, the need to transform the model upon which solidarity has been built in our society. First, it is seen to be important to strengthen the supranational dimension of solidarity. In this framework, which is also regarded as self-legitimizing, the European

institutions, as well as numerous researchers, have been discussing what they call “the European social model”.

To the four clusters of definitions identified above we would like to add a fifth understanding of the concept. This new approach involves regarding the ESM as a concept whereby, via the definition of a distinct policy, a common European solution may be provided to problems that are common to a varying degree. This definition builds on the third set of reasons for having a common European social dimension, namely the change in our production model. It promotes the idea of a productive social policy as a way forward for the social models in Europe and feeds into ideas such as flexicurity, activation, partnership, etc. as discussed above. Such a concept implies attuning social policy to the need to enhance the individual’s capacity to survive in the economy, rather than using it as a means of seeking to correct market forces. Instead of being a “market-correcting” factor, social policy becomes, in the European discourse, an instrument for optimising the adjustment of social protection systems to market forces. This “sympathetic catchword” is thus used to promote, in some countries, a quite new departure in the design of social policy. This fifth way of defining ESM overlaps with the third and fourth ways, insofar as it is a European project. However, as we will argue below, far from being an exogenous factor, it is very much a political project aimed at building a European identity, not so much via common institutions and values as via – precisely – the common social policy solutions themselves.

The five clusters of definitions described in Section two can be reduced to two main schools of thought within the discussion of an ESM. In the first, the ESM is understood

as a historical acquis (Kittel 2002) – mainly characterised by specific institutions (redistributive social protection, coordinated interest organisations and resolution of social conflicts by consensual means) and by their results (wider social security coverage, more equal wage and income distribution) – which is being challenged or threatened, and to some extent already eroded, by the changes mentioned earlier. In the second school of thought, by contrast, the ESM is regarded as a way to deal with these challenges. We believe the first approach to be rather debatable, particularly because it is questionable to what extent the ESM even exists, given the wide variety of welfare state systems encountered in Europe (see for instance Esping-Andersen 1990), and to what extent these different approaches are a question of degree (for instance “more or less” egalitarian wage distribution) rather than a question of different principles (ideological and normative assumptions and core elements which explain the build-up of a specific social model). In our opinion, only within the second school of thought is it possible to speak of genuinely different “models”.

Nevertheless, the two approaches are frequently presented as complementary (“the need for reform of the ESM – understood in the second sense – in order to preserve it - in the first sense“). In our own view, however, the concept should be understood as socially constructed in the framework of a demand for legitimacy generated by the EU project per se.

The main concept behind this second approach, and which underlies the relevant research and associated political discourse, is the idea of the complementary nature and

inevitable reciprocity of the economic and societal dimensions. Let us consider, for example, the way the European Commission understands the link between the two:

“Social policies are not simply an outcome of good economic performance and policies but are at the same time an input and a framework. In this context, the modernisation of the social model means developing and adapting it to take account of the rapidly changing economy and society, and to ensure the positive mutually supportive role of economic and social policies” (Commission of the European Communities. Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions., 20.6.2001, p.5).

This presumed mutual interaction between social protection and productivity growth (or economic efficiency and social equality) has been translated into the idea of “quality”. If the main feature of our production system is the quality of products, then this quality demands new qualities of work, in particular “reflexive action, constructed co-ordination and innovation-seeking” (Salais 2001). Accordingly, it requires the initiative and voluntary commitment of all workers who must be highly skilled and motivated, willing to work hard and able to adapt. With a view to the achievement of this high-quality workforce, the analytical discussion has been mainly focused on the regulatory model required to this end and the role of the Welfare State under these new conditions.

3. Some key ideas driven by the concept ESM

Despite the diversity characterising the underlying conceptions of the ESM, the exercise of compressing the peculiarities of an economic and social region into a few features (Vobruba 2001) can be seen as aiming towards the goal of constructing a European identity². In our opinion, what underlies this discussion is the aim of restoring the political legitimacy of the European institution after a period of crisis. To some extent, the proliferation of research dealing with the ESM in itself serves this process of constructing a European project. In this framework, we believe that the concept is, rather than something external waiting to be discovered, a political project, and therefore, a social and political construct put in place by the academic and political discussion of how to deal with current socio-economic challenges.

This discourse coincides with a process of constructing a European identity and, in particular, a process of searching for the values whereby such an identity can be given substance and shape. In the course of this search it is taken for granted that the European social and economic model is ill adapted to the new economic and social conditions. The rules of the industrial model appear inappropriate under the conditions of the new economy. This society thus requires, according to the argument, new standards, new competences (technical, methodological and moral) from the worker, and also new structures to regulate the institutions of labour (procedural and flexible rather than substantive).

Therefore, the concept of ESM needs to be understood rather as a political project by means of which the European institutions are seeking to increase their legitimacy. As pointed out by Lord, this is particularly important in the wake of the crisis of legitimacy suffered by the EU in recent years. This author identifies three components of legitimacy in democratic societies: the performance of institutions; conformity with democratic values; and political identity (Lord 2000: 3). The legitimacy of the EU institutions, which has been built up, in the main, on its performance in previous phases, needs to be taken further and to respond to yet another two dimensions of legitimacy, namely democracy and identity. The first aspect, democracy, lies beyond the scope of this article (cf. the debate on governance), but we would like to focus on the second aspect, namely, identity and to argue that, in order to enhance legitimacy based on identity formation, the identification/attribution of key values plays a crucial role. We can construe the concept of ESM as a way to identify these core values whereby a European identity might be constructed. The argument we would like to advance is that this constructed identity is based less on common values than on a sharing of problems and intervention solutions (policy paradigms). A relevant example here is the activation model. Despite the popularity of this model and the broad consensus to implement this intervention paradigm in different European countries, the values invoked to justify the model and the concrete policies inspired by it vary a great deal from country to country. Therefore, the same recipe will be translated into different modes of preparation which will enumerate different values among their ingredients.

Another example of this process of creating a common identity is the production of European statistics (Eurostat) or promotion of comparative projects by the EU

institutions, which seeks to reduce the complexity of European models into a small number of indicators, thereby creating “common” problems. This might induce a feeling of belonging to the same community and might foster the construction of a common identity. Although this European model might not be based on common values (because of the disparities between the national social models that underpin the European model), this process can encourage European countries to share common problems – by which they are “threatened” – and to produce similar key recipes to fight against these (socially constructed) common problems. The binding tie in this situation is not so much values or cultures (as in the case of national models), but rather a common identity, which results in sharing the problems and the solutions (policy paradigms and cognitive filters through which the debate takes place). In this way, the ESM discussion and the tools associated with the concept of ESM are contributing to the construction of common challenges for Europe and to the building of a consensus as to how these are to be faced and tackled.

In this framework, there are two main issues shaping the discussion of what the role of public action or/and institutional remedies should be. Firstly, there is the question of what tools can most appropriately be used. Secondly, there is the cluster of issues relating to the various alternative approaches to regulation. Regarding the first question, the main mechanisms seem to be flexibility and activation, which – translated into EU discourse – read, flexicurity and employability. Both mechanisms stem from the conviction that, despite subordination to economic constraints, there is a need for an innovative and proactive adaptation to a new capitalist model. The main idea behind both concepts is that solidarity has been institutionalised in such a way that it

diminishes people's willingness to adapt their behaviour to economic requirements (Lindbeck 2003). Accordingly, there is a need to shift from passive support towards activation, and to replace the old political frames for the socialisation of people's motives and morals with a view to persuading them to participate in the modernisation process. The role of the institutions, in this context, should become to provide the instruments (employability, flexicurity) that will allow individuals to find ways of adapting to changing economic and social conditions.

As for the second question, many authors support the claim that substantive and standardised rules are ill suited to the new conditions of production and they argue, rather than for substantive rules, in favour of post-regulatory tools, i.e. those that are general, more accepting of diversity, incomplete and open-ended clauses (Sisson and Marginson 2001), and new forms of enforcement based on voluntary and flexible participation of the actors concerned, for example, persuasion (Vobruba 2001), in order to deal with the variety and dynamic complexity of post-modern societies. Examples of the new popularity of this type of approach are the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), which constitutes the regulatory model for the coordination of employment policies, pensions and health by the EU institutions, and the discussion on "soft regulation" and flexible frameworks rather than "compulsory rigid systems" as manifestations of the europeanisation of industrial relations (Sisson and Marginson 2001).

4. Conclusion

The concept of ESM has been understood as a particular set of institutions (powerful welfare state, intervening social partners, etc.); as a particular set of values with reference to which these institutions are built up, for instance, temporary postponement of individual interests in order to achieve collective gains (Vobruba 2001) or a commitment to minimum guaranteed resources (Begg 2002); as a particular way to deal with common problems (policy paradigms and legitimately rhetoric); but also in terms of the outcomes of these institutions and values (levels of poverty and inequality, individual/collective empowerment, economic performance, decommodification of society) (Vobruba 2001).

We argue that ESM is a way of legitimising the notion of a European social policy and that it feeds into concepts such as activation and flexicurity. However, it is, as we demonstrate, far from being an exogenous factor, very much a political project aimed at fostering a European identity.

There are, in general terms, several rather debatable aspects of these different ways of understanding the concept of ESM. Firstly, it is by no means clear that different European countries do actually share common values and common institutions, or that the similarities between countries are more important than the differences with other regions in the world. What kind of entity is Europe? Is it unitary, marked by a fundamental character that unites the majority of its members? Is it plural, a creature of differences, diversity and even divisions? Is Europe a “myth” or an “ideal-ideology”?

Does some common framework hold Europe together? Secondly, the debate frequently moves from one semantic field to another, so that from a discussion of the ESM as the sharing of values, for instance, it can easily shift to a conception of the ESM as built on common outcomes. Each of these ways of understanding the ESM is to some extent autonomous, which means that the link between different ways of construing it cannot be taken for granted. Thirdly, most of this research is based on controversial assumptions concerning which the debate is taking place elsewhere.

These observations demonstrate the need to identify the main assumptions on which the debate is founded, in order to avoid deterministic explanations of currently changing paths of social policy making. Policy-makers and academics display a disconcerting tendency to draw freely and indiscriminately on the account of the European Social Model. Accordingly, to avoid a situation in which reference to the concept “European Social Model” can be used to help convey just about any policy proposition, be it economic or social, an agreed analytical definition is required in order to ensure that the concept is not ultimately abused to the point where it forfeits all credibility.

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Table 1: From socialisation of risk towards individualisation of risk

	Socialisation of risk	Individualisation of risk
Principles of productive and social model	Planning and pre-regulation	Rapid change and Instability
Social representation of unemployment	Social risk: societal duty to tackle risk (of unemployment, poverty)	Individual risk with the help of institutions: risk is unavoidable. Individual duty to tackle the situation
Target of the institutionalisation of solidarity	Wage earner condition implies dependence on employers	Dependency on Welfare State
Social model	Welfare: protection against risk. Provide resources which guarantee security and stability	Workfare: provide tools to individual to manage risks

¹ For a summary of the current state of research concerning the welfare implications of European Monetary Union and EU enlargement, see Kittel (2002).

² We do not wish to discuss here to what extent we are moving toward a process of convergence or divergence in the way different European countries are dealing with common pressures (for a good discussion of the theoretical and analytical positions behind these two opposed positions, see Hay 2002), but rather how this presumption that there is something in common is an inherent component of the political construction of the EU.