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Book review

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Cambridge: Polity, 2007, 265 pages

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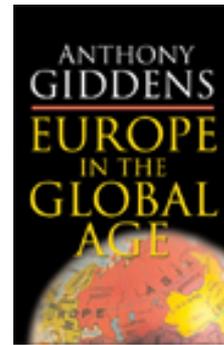
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This unidentified thing called a European Social Model

Can Europe afford its social model? So asks Anthony Giddens, eminent British sociologist and co-founder of Polity Press. His belief: Europe can't afford *not* to have its social model. But what social model might that be exactly? The welfare state no longer offers the stability and security it once did – a reason to worry because we live in 'the' global age, which is a state of affairs and set of social conditions bringing drastic changes to societal welfare. Globalization, by contrast, is a complex set of processes containing forces and influences responsible for such changes. External forces aside, the strains and endogenous structural changes within European economies and societies surround us: low birth rates; the 'transfer' of industry to the developing world; the impact of technology on labour; poverty and social exclusion; and the rise of the 'non-conventional' family. As Giddens asserts, Europe cannot merely seek to counter these changes, or create a version of globalisation with a more human face, because Europe is, not merely globalisation's instrument, but also its very expression.

In recent years the former director of the London School of Economics has gone beyond the old political left and right to find, not the middle of the road, but a Third Way. He laid the path for Tony Blair and New Labour, before documenting their apparent dead-end. Then, prompted by a speech to the European Parliament, in which the UK prime minister stressed personal commitment to the European 'social model', the renowned sociologist quickly set to work, coming up with what one might expect to be a Fourth Way for victory in the struggle for Europe. Blair made a big splash just prior to the UK presidency of the EU from 1 July 2005. But the same month, a bigger splash was caused by the Dutch

and French sinking of the Constitutional Treaty. As Giddens concedes, there was 'a confusion of ideas and feelings, probably'. It was in these choppy waters – struggling to keep Europe's head above water – that the book was written, to provide intellectual armbands for staying afloat, socially-speaking.

Europe in the Global Age is one of a trio of books that emerged, each attempting to reconcile 'the global' with 'the social'. It is pitched as a learning tool for rising world powers with apparently ineffective welfare systems, for example, China and India, in order to secure 'integrated and inclusive societies', learning from the achievements and mistakes of 'advanced states'. One presumes the author is referring to that collective of European states called the EU, global bastion of social inclusion, or social bastion of global exclusion, depending on which side of the fortress you cross your voting slip. Or don't.

Principally, the book's aim is to identify cutting-edge economic and social policy and learn lessons from it. But is this in order to make a new model or sell an existing one? Apparently there is already a European Social Model because Giddens found 55,800,000 items when he typed 'ESM' into Google. You may not find it. But if the existence of the ESM is a contested notion this may be because Europe is a contested notion also. For Giddens the ESM *would be*: a developed and interventionists state funded by high taxation; a 'robust' welfare system of effective social protection for all citizens; and the limitation or 'containment' of inequality. The 'social partners' are to play a key role in their attainment. Each trait would go hand in hand with overall economic prosperity and '(ideally) full employment', plus a general set of values for sharing societal risk cultivating solidarity, protecting the vulnerable, encouraging consultation, and providing a framework for citizenship rights.

The book is a quest for a unifying and *unifiable* social model, but also a boast about Europe's welfare system, even though one can only refer to a set of composite national systems. Giddens' task is to mix and match the best features of existing systems, to come up with a feasible, socially-just, post-industrial model suitable from Athens to Aberdeen. There is

much talk of change, innovation, positive welfare and lifestyle, but fundamental questions concerning tax harmonisation, pensions and social security for 500 million people are only treated lightly, one assumes because the author ultimately believes differences in political philosophies towards social welfare are insurmountable, never reducible to one workable model. A pan-European minimum wage is apparently unthinkable. Is Giddens merely pontificating upon an impossible, utopian ideal?

The contradiction of the EU is that, on the one hand, it celebrates unity over uniformity, and diversity over difference, but on the other, yearns for a single model for social welfare. This may mean choosing from the existing five – the three originally distinguished by Danish social scientist, Esping-Andersen (Nordic, conservative/corporatist and Anglo-Saxon), plus the Mediterranean and post-Communist transition ones. The ‘trilemma’ is to strike a balance between low tax, high jobs growth and low public borrowing. Yet, socially-just Scandinavia seems to have it all, with sound public finances, low inequality and high employment. According to traditional macro-economic criteria it has far out-performed the bad reformers - Germany, Italy and France. As such, for Giddens, a Europe to ‘take on the world’ would be a Nordic one, with French levels of health care, but Norwegian levels of education, Swedish levels of equality and Danish levels of employment. Surprising then that the author does not call more fervently for this model to be applied to low-skilled, low-pay, low-tax Britain, where Blair spent a decade trying to mop up the spillage of social exclusion and inequality partially generated by privatisation and the negation of society.

In terms of British political history *Europe in the Global Age* is a powerful testament to Giddens’s alliance with the New Labour machine and all its spin – a tale of two Tonys. The chatty, first-person narrative is anecdotal, brimming with statistics, and full of urging pleas for action, while hypothesising future scenarios for Europe in the world. Made a life peer in June 2004, Baron Giddens sits in the House of Lords for Labour. He is not alone in ‘reconciling’ politics and academia: globalisation scholar, Joseph Stiglitz, later worked for President Clinton and the World Bank; Jeremy Rifkin, personal adviser to Prodi when President of the

European Commission, published his European dream; and philosophers, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, have stood up on their soapboxes, writing open letters on the future of Europe, to which Giddens and sociologist, Ulrich Beck, reply in the Appendix to the book. Here lies a conundrum for the reader: what to make of language dressed up as rounded academic reflection, but which cannot conceal its square-jawed political opinion? In this respect, it is not a manifesto but neither is it really an academic resource for studying European social policy.

For linguists and discourse analysts it is essential reading. Readers will find a glossary of 22 compound adjectives used throughout the book, (new) political terms to (newly) understand the (new) challenges, including: *assertive multilateralism*, *blocked societies*, *ensuring state*, *politics of second chances*, *eurorealism*, *new egalitarianism*, *flexicurity* and *socio-geopolitical capabilities*. Many neologisms, such as *positive welfare* ('welfare oriented to positive life-goals') and *youthing society* ('where the life-habits of older people merge with those of the younger generations'), may be tools to frame economics-driven policies, instead of implementing ambitious citizen-inclusive schemes, such as in this case, contribution-based pension schemes for old age, that would really improve 'lifestyles' – not working an extra five years until the age of 70. Is that really social 'protection'? Watch your step with this minefield of lingo with the potential to coerce, disguise and confuse the debate, one which, for many users of such jargon, is ultimately about political, not social, nor even societal, welfare.

The EU indeed may risk losing massive geopolitical influence by keeping Turkey out, but the implications of its membership for a singular European social model, as well as on Europe's religious and cultural welfare, are not discussed. Instead, eight theses on the future of Europe are extended, addressing EU expansion, geopolitics and structural transformation. A drowned constitution is no loss for Giddens, though Angela Merkel would beg to differ. He advocates thinking more adventurously about social protection but seems to float off in all directions, not attempting the difficult strokes, and offering no discernible 'Way' for Gordon Brown who continues to tread water on Europe, as Tony Blair bids to splash about in the Brussels pool.

In short, Europe's welfare system today is supposedly the 'jewel in the crown' of European societies. Yet it is unclear what exactly Britain might have to offer India (once the cherished jewel in the crown of its own Empire), or Europe offer Angola and Sudan, in terms of a materially-obtainable 21st century welfare system, when, at its very core, Europe (i.e. the EU!) is *still* unable to agree which model to offer its collective self.