Social policy at EU level: from the anti-poverty programmes to Europe 2020

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Warning: mind the perspective

• There is only “a” history of the Social OMC(s), or rather several ones

• Will – evidently – vary a great deal depending on:
  - The period (Lisbon I, II, III, Eur. 2020 etc.)
  - The specific OMC (or even strand)
  - The actors considered
  - The yardstick used (comparison with?)
  - …
Warning: mind the perspective

This is also - less evidently - true for academics:

• emergence and development of OMC was intertwined with development of (intense) academic production in this area

• Researchers (like me) also have a ‘stake’: any account will necessarily be selective
Warning: mind the perspective

“Blind M/W” defining an elephant
(Donald Puchala, 1972)
So let’s construct this history together:

Additions, questions, clarifications most welcome
When does the “history” of social policy coordination begin?

• Should we look at this elephant from its actual birth, or does preconception also matter?
I. Before conception

• History of social policy coordination starts with strong “constitutional asymmetry” between judicially imposed “negative integration” (4 freedoms) and legislative “positive integration” (Scharpf, 1999)

• High consensus requirements still hamper European legislation, even after Lisbon, and generally favour status-quo positions
Result

• Social policy: shared competence, where most policy tools remain firmly in the hands of the Member States

• But of course there are some key exceptions
  – social security coordination, health and safety legislation, non-discrimination etc.
II. Sowing the seeds of the OMC

• Adoption of a common definition of “poverty” (Council Decision 1975)
  - convergence of views among MS on nature of the phenomenon

• 1975 – 1993: several anti-poverty programs
  - focus mainly on advancing research in the field and on the exchange of good practice (national reports)
  - “European Observatory on Policies to Combat Social Exclusion”: prototype of an epistemic community (still out there)
II. Sowing the seeds of the OMC

• Council Recommendation (92/441/EEC) of 24 June 1992
  - On common criteria concerning sufficient resources and social assistance in social protection systems
  - Contains the OMC (avant la lettre) in its embryonic form: emphasis on exchange of good practice, learning and peer review
II. Sowing the seeds of the OMC

• Council Recommendation (92/442/EEC) of 27 July 1992 on the convergence of social protection objectives and policies
  • Fixing common objectives, organize regular consultation on social protection policy
  • Led to publication of three important Commission Communications that continued the debate
    - 1997: Modernising and Improving Social Protection
    - 1999: Concerted Strategy for Modernising Social Protection
II. Sowing the seeds of the OMC

• The European Community Household Panel (1994 to 2001)
  - replaced in 2005 by EU-SILC (Community Statistics on Income and Living Conditions)

• Austria, Finland and Sweden joined EU in 1995!

• The work within the “Administrative Committee” for the Coordination of Social Security Systems
  - trust-building between leading civil servants
II. Sowing the seeds of the OMC

• Amsterdam (1999) and Nice (2003) Treaties: basis for policy coordination in the field of employment and social policies
  - EES as a “template” for the Social OMC (and many others)
  - EES itself draws on pre-existing economic coordination (EU and OECD)
II. Sowing the seeds of the OMC

• Key: development of battery of (“Laeken”) social inclusion indicators
  - agreement on the Europe 2020 poverty reduction target would simply not have been possible without such comparable statistics
  - Imminently political in Social Protection & SI (compare to education: ‘technical’)
III. Launching a Social OMC in 1999/2000: why?

Multiple explanations leading to a “window of opportunity”
Emergence in 1999: why?

• “Learning” explanation is not sufficient: “double bind” in social policy (Hemerijck) and “common challenges” had been there for more than 10 years

• Then why “all of a sudden” an OMC, after a decade of futile efforts by EC (since 1992)?
Emergence OMC: why?

1. Political constellation in the Council (12/15 MS)
   - Spill-over of EMU (’99) + EES (’97):
     “Provocations” from EPC/ECOFIN/EFC (pensions and HC)
   - Doing nothing/legislation no options

2. European Commission as a strong “norm entrepreneur” (agenda-setting)
   - Odile Quingtin and others (Neo-Functionalist account)
Emergence OMC: why?

3. Interests of (big) MS
   - Political: keep legislation off agenda: “red herring”; Lisbon’s ‘neo-liberal agenda’?
   - Financial interestst (link with ESF)
   - Liberal Intergovernmentalist account
Emergence OMC: why?

4. Interests NGO’s (EAPN/FEANTSA etc.)
   - ’influence’ versus ‘power’ (e.g. Revision in 2005)

5. OMC as wider “New Mode of Governance”?
   - e.g. New Approach IM, State Aid; harmonisation fatigue?

6. Agency individual politicians
   - small MS (PT: introduction of minimum income; FR: local elections; B: ‘poverty norm’)

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Emergence OMC: Multiple explanations

7. Agency academic world (Anton Hemerijck & António Guterres)

8. Give “body” to European Social Model

9. Learning from good practice... not to be forgotten!
Getting on tracks

• OMC got going
  – kick-start for the SPC (& predecessor, HLGSP)
  – with a much stronger (and political) mandate than hoped for by some
  – Social Protection Committee anchored in Lisbon Treaty

• Inherited working methods from EMCO and EPC
  – deliberations of Committee go straight to Council, normally – with key exceptions - passing by Coreper

• Key weakness from start: involvement of (national and European) Parliament
CONSEQUENCE

MS let “1000 flowers bloom”
Inflation of OMC’s from 2000 on

- Organ transplantation (!), influenza, immigration, smoking, EU development policy, disability policy, Latin America (!)
- VERY different “tools” in the OMC boxes
OMC is certainly not a “fixed recipe” (let 1000 flowers bloom!)

Cookbook with ‘heavier’ and ‘lighter’ recipes (Frank Vandenbroucke)

Some more ‘teeth’ than others
• ‘effectiveness’ arguably varies
• and so does the “appraisal”
OMC elicits strong reactions

→ vary between enthusiasm and scorn
“Praise”: illustrations

• ‘revolutionary potential’
• provide tools for welfare state reform; B: economists propose it to coordinate regional employment policies and SS transfers
• ‘bridge between hard and soft law’
  • step-up to hard law; implement hard law
• ‘solution to EU’s democratic deficit’
• tool for (N & EU) Parliaments, NGO’s, Social Partners etc.
> “Scorn”: illustrations

• ‘weak and ineffective’, ‘paper tiger’, ‘rhetoric and cheap talk’
• delivery gap: not legally binding – not constitutionalised

• ’fashionable red herring’ (harmful!)
• distract (political) attention
• ‘closed method of coordination’
• Aggravates democratic deficit (experts)
IV. Mind the Soft law dilemma (Tholoniat, 2010)

• OMC has to sustain **policy activism** at the highest political level in order to supply the political agenda

**BUT**

• It also has to ensure sufficient institutional predictability
Defined through the “Toolbox” (instruments) of the OMC:

What needs to be in the toolbox (at the least) to prevent that OMC becomes a talkshop?

Thanks for your sustained effort!

Comments/criticism/questions very welcome, now or at:

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