

The French Fascination with a Scandinavian Model

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THE French fascination with Scandinavian social welfare models is a complicated matter. For one thing, it is not unqualified. The model in question here is not an alluring instance of the human form, but a social model, one of the different analytical categories used in the study of the Welfare State, or Welfare Capitalism, in the terminology of the Danish-born policy analyst Esping-Andersen (1990). Despite certain subsequent criticisms and modifications by other commentators, Esping-Andersen's typology of welfare regimes remains an essential point of reference for almost all scholarship in this sphere. Neither is this fascination longstanding. It refers to the emergence in France around the turn of the twenty-first century of an interest in Scandinavian welfare systems, especially the Danish form, which began to border on the obsessive (Clerc 2008). Of course, it was the European Union which was partly responsible for promoting discussion of the Danish experience. This was presented as an example to be emulated by other European countries in the context of the Lisbon strategy adopted in 2000, so that 'learning from Denmark' could form the basis for the convergence of European countries towards a common European Social Model (Boyer 2008). At the same time, the EU took up and popularised the term 'flexicurity'. Although this concocted word was initially invented in Holland, it has now become attached to the Danish system. It is, moreover, disseminated in the often peculiar version of English found in EU documents, in an attempt to illustrate the capacity of Denmark to reconcile pressures and objectives which proved to be antagonistic in other countries. Discussion of the concept of flexicurity duly took place in many parts of Europe. In France, however, it was to become something of a fixation among academics and politicians, as well as journalists, thereby spreading to a large section of the informed general public, and many in France began to examine seriously the extent to which its transposition into France might be possible (Lefebvre & Méda 2006).

This paper will address some of the issues arising from these developments, in an attempt to understand the reasons for this French love affair with Denmark and the forms which it has taken, as well as the impact which it has had on social policy in France. The scholarly importance of these considerations is situated at several levels, first because the French and Danish systems belong to different categories in the Esping-Andersen classification, raising questions as to the way in which the envisaged shift from one category to another can be understood conceptually. These considerations also illustrate many issues associated with the theme of Europeanisation, such as the conditions and processes involved in the convergence of national systems, or the extent to which emulation by one country of the example set by another can be empirically verified. Furthermore, distinct parallels can be established between the problems that arise in the comparative approach to policy analysis and the challenges encountered in the process of scholarly translation, in that both activities involve the need to address difficulties associated with the cultural embeddedness of language, a point to which we shall return below. First of all, however, the discussion will proceed with a brief presentation of what has become known as the 'Danish model', which has met with such widespread approval.

Squaring the circle in Denmark

The Danish system belongs to the category of Social Democratic regimes in the typology of Esping-Andersen. In his classification, Social Democratic regimes are characterised by universalism, and are funded out of taxation, not social welfare contributions from employers and employees. They also offer a high level of 'de-commodification', seeking to ensure that withdrawal from the labour market does not lead to a significant fall in living standards. At the heart of the current Danish model is a labour-market strategy which seeks to reconcile job flexibility with employment security (Kuttner 2008). The welfare state, especially in continental Europe, is often associated with rigid job protection, involving laws and union agreements which make it illegal or prohibitively expensive to lay off workers. In many parts of Europe, labour-market rigidities have been held responsible for high rates of unemployment and for creating a welfare state of 'insiders and outsiders', where those in secure employment fiercely protect their jobs to the detriment of those with little or nothing. The originality which analysts have seen in the Danish model lies in its attempt to move beyond traditional antagonism between the economic liberalism of largely unrestricted labour markets and the principles of social democracy, setting it apart from other countries in Esping-Andersen's Social Democratic category. Unlike Sweden, therefore,

despite heavy unionisation, regulations preventing the laying-off of workers are minimal in Denmark, requiring little more than the provision of advance notice. Indeed, a remarkable culture of collaboration has developed between businesses and their employees, facilitated by the existence of a Trade Union movement which is strong and unified, but is also managerially-oriented and, since the nineteenth century, committed to compromise, rather than political militancy (Madsen 2004).

Denmark thus has Europe's highest rate of labour turnover, which is largely voluntary, rather than imposed by employers. A 2005 Eurobarometer poll (Kuttner 2008), found that over 70 percent of Danes considered it desirable to change jobs frequently, compared with less than 30 percent in neighbouring Germany. Danish respondents reported that they had changed employers an average of six times, the highest figure in the European Union, and one in three Danes changes jobs every year. Given the freedom enjoyed by employers to deploy workers as they wish, and the availability of generous social benefits on a universal basis, the need for a low-grade 'temp' labour market is obviated to a considerable extent. While precarious short-term contract employment has grown in most other countries, the number of Danes in temporary contracts has decreased since the mid-1980s. Moreover, since the Danish welfare state is financed primarily by income taxes and not payroll charges, overall labour costs to employers remain moderate. Where most other European nations have a significant concentration of middle-aged people trapped in long-term unemployment, the majority of the unemployed in Denmark are able to return to work within six months, due in part to the extensive availability of retraining programmes, and the number of long-term unemployed is small (Lefebvre & Méda 2006). The attractions of the Danish model can thus be summarised in five main features:

- 1) A commitment to full employment;
- 2) Strong unions with extensive, largely autonomous managerial responsibilities within the welfare system;
- 3) Fairly equal wages among different sectors, so that a shift from employment in manufacturing to service-sector work need not typically entail a reduction in pay;
- 4) A comprehensive minimum wage system, and;
- 5) A set of labour-market programmes that spend a very considerable 4.5 percent of Danish GDP on initiatives such as transitional unemployment assistance, wage subsidies, and retraining geared towards rapid re-entry into the labour market, known as activation. (Madsen 2002)

The Danish system is thus often presented as a form of compassionate capitalism, based on a 'golden triangle' made up of job flexibility, employment security and activation (Gautié 2006; Kuttner, 2008).

The vicious circle in France

This Danish model has been perceived by many commentators in France as some kind of miracle, possessing all the virtues which the French system has lacked, beginning with its internal coherence. The French fascination seems to have stemmed ultimately from a growing sense of insecurity about its own system, not only what it is, but also what it could or should be. All systems are hybrids to some extent, containing a mixture of elements taken from different sources, but hybridisation is a particularly pronounced and ongoing feature of the French welfare regime. The fascination here is thus not simply a variation on the 'grass is greener' syndrome, but is born out of a sense of frustration at struggling to understand what one has and this absence of a solid basis for comparison has led to misconceptions about possible, or indeed impossible alternatives. In the Esping-Andersen typology, the French system is classified as an instance of the conservative/corporatist, or Bismarckian model, considered to be a feature of much of continental Europe. Unlike the Danish system, the funding of the French Welfare State, or *État-Providence*, was focused traditionally on payroll contributions, rather than taxation, with protection closely linked to occupational activity and status, with different modes of affiliation, and benefits distributed on a proportional basis, according to previous salary and occupation. This worked well during the so-called *30 glorieuses*, the period of growth and increasing living standards that spanned the period from the end of the Second World War to the onset of the economic crisis of the 1970s (Damon 2008). This included a certain degree of social participation and the involvement of Trade Unions and employers' organisations in the management of the system of social insurance. However, along with the idea of social partnership between management and workers, a major feature of the French welfare regime has always been significant government intervention. One of the main reasons for this is that the climate of social trust that exists in Denmark is almost unimaginable in France, where employers have a long tradition of hostility towards Trade Unions (Maurin 2009). Furthermore, the position of the Trade Union movement is paradoxical, as it is numerically weak, with only 9 percent of the French work force unionised, as opposed to over 80 percent in Denmark, but it is also powerful and militant in key sectors of the economy. There is, moreover, little unity between the numerous major Trade Union confederations, which are frequently as hostile towards each other as they are towards employers, and the biggest ones

remained officially committed to socialist revolution into the 1980s. Thus, state intervention is a source of cohesion within the system and takes many forms, such as employment legislation seeking to protect those in permanent employment against dismissal. In addition, collective bargaining agreements reached between employers and workforce representatives in one particular sector of the economy have often been extended through state intervention to other workers, on the basis that this must only be allowed to improve working conditions or pay, not reduce the quality of what was already in place. The French State has therefore always retained major decision-making powers within the domain of social protection, particularly with regard to the levels of contribution required from workers and employers in order to fund the system, as well as the level of the benefits payable out of it. At the same time, the system has always included an element funded out of taxation for those unable to contribute out of their own income, a form of social solidarity, or social assistance, to which considerable stigma is attached. Thus, the French system has always been a mixture of Bismarckian corporatist, social insurance and the Beveridgian national welfare state approach. It is, however, important to distinguish between the minimalist, neo-liberal Beveridgian system which has evolved in the UK and the maximalist, much more generous Beveridgian-inspired system developed in Scandinavia. A very high level of protection has thus been traditionally afforded to those affiliated to the public sector especially who are in work or in retirement, but the system has proved much less successful with the onset of mass unemployment, especially with regard to young people, women and immigrants, leading to the emergence of a widely-shared critique of the so-called 'French social model', based on both long-standing problems and more recent changes (Damon 2008).

In short, critics have argued that France offers very good protection to those who are already protected, but much less to others. The system has been constructed over time, but especially in the post-Second World War period, on the basis of incremental compromises, within a perspective of full employment, seeking above all to protect those already in employment, leaving little room for 'creative destruction' to be brought about through the operation of market-driven dynamics, eliminating some forms of employment, in order to generate new ones.

As a result, during the 1990s, an increasing number of specialists began to suggest that the French welfare system, because of its particular characteristics, could actually be held responsible for a whole range of economic and social problems. The French system was thus no longer seen as a victim of economic crisis but one of its causes (Palier 2006). It was argued that since the social insurance system does not protect adequately those who cannot contribute,

i.e. those who need it most, as a system organised around employment, it reinforces the trend towards social exclusion. In addition, the financing of the system through contributions increases the financial burden on businesses, preventing them from being competitive and therefore from taking on workers, so the French system, far from protecting against unemployment actually contributes to the development of unemployment.

The consequent 'dualisation' is one of the principal causes of the profound malaise in France regarding social protection. This has resulted in a paradox whereby the sense of job insecurity among French workers is amongst the highest in Europe, while at the same time, France has one of the highest levels of employment protection of all European countries (Damon 2008). The problem is more complex than simply a question of insiders and outsiders. Even among those in work, there is a fundamental difference between permanent contracts protected by legislation, the so-called *Contrats à Durée Indéterminée* (CDIs), and the vast array of temporary contracts, the *Contrats à Durée Déterminée* (CDDs), which differ in the levels of job security they offer. For those not in work and ineligible for unemployment benefit because of insufficient levels of social insurance contributions, there are now as many as 9 different kinds of subsistence allowances – what the French call the *minima sociaux* – all offering different levels of support for different categories of the population (Barbier 2008). There is therefore considerable evidence to support the view that the system has become incomprehensibly complex, unworkably fragmented and profoundly inegalitarian, and the emergence of the theme of Danish flexicurity both fuelled and underpinned widespread calls for reform (Barbier 2009).

Misconceptions and distortions

As is well known, fascination and infatuation often result in a distorted perception, or at least presentation, not only of the object of desire, but also of the object of dissatisfaction. Many of the proposals for reform in France which claim to be inspired by the Danish model of flexicurity can be seen in this light. These proposals have varied considerably, of course, according to the protagonists concerned, but for employers, some economists, and many politicians, the main virtues appear to lie in the liberalisation of the labour market. Such virtues are seen, not only in easy hire and fire, but also in the reduction in financial pressure on employers with regard to funding the social protection system (the so-called *charges sociales*), which was at one time particularly onerous for businesses, with up to 70 percent of costs falling on the shoulders of employers, rather than employees.

However, promoters of the Danish model in terms of the flexibilisation of the labour market and the competitive business environment have apparently overlooked substantial evidence which suggests that in France changes consistent with what were seen as the advantages of the Danish model have already been taking place, on an incremental, cumulative basis for many years. These changes have altered the fundamental logic of the system by weakening its Bismarckian, continental European social insurance element and correspondingly strengthening its Beveridgian dimension by shifting the burden onto the taxpayer (Palier 2008). Already, for much of the 1990s, government had substantially subsidised employers' labour costs. But from the year 2000, particular tax levies on tobacco, alcohol and certain pharmaceutical products were devoted specifically to this purpose. With regard to labour market flexibility, many employers, viewing the obstacles to shedding workers in France as an excessive hindrance to flexible management, especially as far as large-scale redundancies for economic reasons are concerned, have for a number of years devised ways of circumventing the problem through recourse to a whole range of temporary contracts, the CDDs mentioned above. Thus, from 2003-2005, 2/3 of the number of people joining the labour market (300,000), was due to an upsurge in temporary contracts (Clerc 2008). Furthermore, the evidence to support the idea that flexible labour markets create new jobs is fragile, to say the least. In the early 1990s, for example, unemployment reached double figures in the UK, despite the existence of a largely unrestricted labour market, as far as the laying off of workers was concerned (Irès 2009). Moreover, even though its flexible labour market had already been in place for many years, Denmark's level of unemployment in 1993 was 9.6 percent, which was similar to that of other EU countries, but fell dramatically to 4.3 percent by 2001 (Madsen 2004), after it had re-vitalised the system of employment activation in the mid-1990s, with a further reduction to 2.9 percent by 2008, the lowest unemployment rate in the entire EU (Clerc 2008). The conclusion to be drawn from these considerations is suggested by Boyer (2008), in his observation that the use of models for normative purposes must be undertaken with considerable caution, since such models are frequently constructed by analysts with limited specialised knowledge of the country concerned, leading to the selection of fragmentary elements which are mistakenly viewed as constituting the fundamentals of the system as a whole, and presented as an example to be emulated by others, irrespective of time or place.

Thus, an excessively rosy picture has sometimes been painted in France of the object of desire, since it is not only the French system which has been changing, but the Danish one too. With a view to cost containment, certain

tough reforms have been implemented in Denmark since the end of the 1990s, and the Danish model appears somewhat less attractive when looked at from this angle. Social assistance to new immigrants, for example, has been cut by half, and the same measures have been applied to Danish nationals returning home to live, after lengthy periods spent abroad, as well as to Turkish immigrants (Barbier 2005). Changes of this kind have led scholars such as Kvist (2006), as well as others, to suggest that the previous Danish 'model' may be in the process of being transformed into a new, more restrictive form of Social Democratic welfare regime. What is clear is that such reforms have generated little outright opposition within the country itself and, attractive or not, these measures appear to confirm the remarkable level of Danish social cohesion and public confidence in their system. France, on the other hand, seems to have developed a kind of schizophrenic political culture, torn between the ruthless economic liberalism seen in what they insist on calling Anglo-Saxon countries (the UK, Ireland, and, of course, the USA), and the social democracy associated with Scandinavia (Clerc 2008).

It is therefore questionable whether the conditions exist in France to allow for the convergence towards a European Social Model, inspired by the Danish experience, as recommended by the EU. The evidence considered thus far would suggest that it is a mistake to imagine that certain policy instruments and mechanisms can be transposed from one country to another, in order to function in a similar way, since the civic and political cultures, which are the cornerstone of their institutional fabric and their social policy dynamics, remain so very different. In this regard, the concept of 'institutional complementarity', developed by analysts such as Amable (2003), has considerable explanatory value. It highlights the different compromises reached in particular countries over an extensive time period, resulting in distinctive forms of the interdependent relationship between the labour market, industrial relations and social policy, whereby cohesion is generated within the dynamics which drive the several European varieties of capitalism. When considered from this perspective, the implications of the envisaged shift in France towards the Danish model emerge in sharper focus. Firstly, combining weak employment protection with strong social protection as a 'solution' is predicated on the postulate of a positive correlation between unrestricted labour markets and job creation, which as we have already seen is highly questionable. Secondly, given the high level of unemployment payments upon which the system depends, along with the social insurance mechanisms upon which the institutional complementarity of the French welfare regime is founded, flexicurity would be viable only if unemployment levels remained low (Amable 2006). This requirement is not satisfied by the evolution of

French unemployment, which rose from 3 percent to over 10 percent between 1976 and 1986, and despite frequent subsequent fluctuations, has never fallen below 7 percent. Indeed, since 2008, the current financial crisis there has seen a significant increase to 10 percent (Maurin 2009). Attempts to move towards the Danish model in a context of lasting substantial unemployment would entail serious risks of unsustainability, both economically, because the unemployment benefit system would become unaffordable through payroll contributions, and politically, due to the inevitable conflict between those who finance the system through payroll contributions and beneficiaries who do not contribute. In such conditions, the system would evolve in the direction of decreasing generosity of social protection, becoming flexible only with regard to employment. Viewed in this light, rather than representing a healthy avenue of middle-way escape from schizophrenia, the implementation of flexicurity in France could become transformed into a stage within a shift towards a more neo-liberal model of capitalism (Amable 2006). A contrasting approach has nonetheless been adopted by Jacobsson (2004), who highlights the capacity of the EU, even in policy domains such as employment, where it has no legislative powers, to change the practices of member states and thereby contribute to the process of European integration, without recourse to coercion, within the so-called Open Method of Coordination (OMC). According to this perspective, a significant form of soft pressure in the direction of European convergence can be exerted by the EU through its use of Euro-discourse. This would involve the forging of a common language in the sphere of employment policy, through the dissemination in policy documents of shared concepts and terminology, along with strategic comparisons between different countries. The desired result would be a shaping of the conceptual framework within which policy-making takes place at national level, in the direction of increased flexibility, combined with employment security.

The end of the affair?

Elements of this 'soft regulation' approach have already been adopted by certain analysts in relation to the labour market modernisation reforms adopted in France after extensive negotiations between government and the Trade Unions in 2008, which were officially presented as directly inspired by the Danish experience of flexicurity. These reforms began as an agreement between government and several Trade Unions, but were subsequently enshrined at least partially in law. They have been seen as an adaptation at national level of the OMC adopted by the EU, representing a move towards greater openness in social dialogue, through the participation of Trade Unions in employment policy-making, within a cognitive framework

shaped by concepts such as flexicurity (Barbier *et al.* 2009). However, a closer examination of both the substance of these reforms and the means by which they were adopted suggests that empirical manifestations of the developments envisaged by Amable have begun to appear. Firstly, they contain little in the way of concrete measures to increase the resources devoted to vocational training or the availability of re-training for the unemployed. In addition to this, they offer only very limited improvements in entitlement to training acquired through service in one job to be transferred to another, on change of employment. On the other hand, the freedom for employers to lay off workers was substantially enhanced through the introduction of the legal right to terminate an employment contract through the industrial relations equivalent of divorce by mutual consent (*rupture conventionnelle*), taking little account of the reality of employer-employee power relations. In contrast with the postulated new, and relatively unconstrained framework for social dialogue, the two Trade Unions which endorsed the agreement did so 'with a gun to their heads'. According to their chief negotiators, they were aware from the outset that the measures would be applied by law with or without their agreement, and that an even less favourable outcome would be forthcoming should they decide to withdraw from participating in the process (Irès 2009: 201). In this context, one of the two most important Trade Union confederations, both in terms of its membership and its high profile in industrial relations, the *Confédération Générale du Travail*, adopted a quite different perspective and refused to endorse the agreement at all. In the light of this evidence, it is difficult to sustain the argument that new, less coercive or conflictual modes of social dialogue are developing in France, or that moves towards Danish-style flexicurity are genuinely under way in French employment policy. Rather than reflecting a change in national practices, the use of flexicurity-inspired discourse in French labour market reform has served as a way of re-formulating existing practices and reinforcing trends already in train, but with renewed credibility.

As suggested above, one of the fundamental problems here can be further elucidated through recourse to the linguistic dimension, touching on the difficulties involved in translation, with particular reference to the term 'social partners' which figures prominently in the English of EU discourse about flexicurity and labour-market reform. This term may look like English, it may even sound like English, but it connotes very little in English today, because the limited tradition of institutionalised social dialogue in the UK between management and labour, or what were once called 'the two sides of industry', has long since ceased to function. 'Social partners' is a direct translation from the French term *partenaires sociaux*, which refers to the role of

employers and Trade Unions in social dialogue, which, as suggested earlier, is a necessary but insufficient condition for the effective functioning of the system, thereby requiring the intervention of the state to provide policy substance and cohesion, even though such intervention may be unwelcome and coercive. These features are therefore elements in the connotations of the words used to designate the institutions and mechanisms in question. In contrast, the nearest equivalent in Danish to *partenaires sociaux*, which is *arbejdsmarkedets parter*, has completely different connotations, reflecting the long-standing recognition of the right of employers and employees to negotiate freely between themselves, without government intervention. In Denmark, the intervention of the state in social dialogue is neither sought nor expected and the connotations of the Danish term *arbejdsmarkedets parter* exclude such an eventuality (Clément 2009). Many policy concepts are thus understood differently by Europeans, according to their culture and their language, to the point where they may almost become different concepts. The function of the artificial international English often used in EU discourse appears to be to conceal these differences, resulting in obfuscation rather than integration, whereas mutual understanding of difference is required for meaningful convergence to take place. Scholarship and advanced teaching with a focus on developing an appreciation of the interplay between European languages and cultures have a vital role to play in this process.

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