

## BOOK REVIEW

Alber, Jens and Gilbert, Neil (eds): *United in Diversity: Comparing Social Models in Europe and America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 450 pp., \$55.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-537663-0

The debate of whether there is a distinct European Social Model (ESM) has pre-occupied the minds of social scientists and policy-makers alike. Supporters of a distinct European model of society often contrast it with an ‘American model’ for both analytical and normative purpose. In this reading, Europe has a social market economy and a comprehensive welfare state, whereas the United States is characterised by unbridled market capitalism and minimalist state welfare. To what extent are such claims still sustainable in the light of recent eastern enlargement? This edited volume sets out to systematically compare ‘social models in Europe and America’ to establish how much variation there is between the two but also within the enlarged EU. It is divided into two parts that altogether contain 16 chapters by scholars from both sides of the Atlantic on selected characteristics of the state and policy outcomes.

When comparing the quality of democracies in developed countries, Stein Ringen finds considerable variation not only between Northern America and Europe but also within the two. While the US performs rather poorly on Ringen’s democracy index, John Samples takes a more positive view on the American model by arguing that with its notions on individual and political liberty, it is better suited for the contemporary ‘global age’ than the European model with its emphasis on government intervention and collective endeavours. In relation to inequality of electoral participation, Jens Albert and Ulrich Kohler demonstrate that voter turnout is higher and less socially skewed in the ‘old’ EU-15 than in the US, with the EU’s new member states occupying an intermediate position. When examining patterns of public expenditure, Francis G. Castles identifies elements of an ESM, albeit only by excluding the UK and Ireland. In turn, Neil Gilbert finds greater similarities between the US and Europe by deploying a different methodology that not only focuses on gross public spending but also includes other measures such as tax exemptions and publicly mandated private expenditures. In the section on citizenship and welfare, Chiara Saraceno argues that income-support measures are less well-developed than more conventional

welfare rights in most European countries, while Rebecca M. Blank points out that in the US the primary means of providing social assistance has been work-conditioned support.

In the second part of the book on policy outcomes, Werner Eichhorst and Anton Hemerijck identify a greater emphasis on labour market activation policies across the EU which has led to increased employment rates in many countries. As regards the prospects of the US economy, Richard B. Freeman contends that it retains two competitive advantages in that it remains the world leader in research and development and has shown an unparalleled openness and capacity to adapt to change. When discussing inequality and mobility, Markus Gangl rejects the notion that welfare state institutions would stifle economic mobility. In turn, Richard V. Burkhauser and Kenneth A. Couch expect an evolving EU social policy to be more reminiscent of the US in being less redistributive in the light of greater heterogeneity and diversity. In the remaining chapters of the book, Jutta Allmendinger, Christian Ebner, and Rita Nikolai evaluate the educational performance of EU member states against the benchmarks of the 'Lisbon agenda', while Patricia Maloney and Karl Ulrich Mayer discuss whether the US educational system can be a model for Europe. In the last section on immigrant integration, Frank Kalter and Nadia Granato show that the labour market integration of the second generation mainly depends on educational attainments, while Charles Hirschman and Anthony Daniel Perez examine the immigration history of the US to illustrate the tension between national identity and international migration.

When evaluating the previous empirical chapters, the editors come up with three conclusions. First, the striking feature about Europe is its diversity which makes them sceptical of a common ESM which is 'less rooted in objective facts than in a perceived need to forge a common European identity' (415). Secondly, they note many similarities between Europe and the US which, if anything, have become more pronounced in recent years in the light of a greater emphasis on activation policies in Europe and state regulation in the US in the aftermath of the recent global financial crisis. Thirdly, there is a methodological issue regarding the 'unit of comparison' as some authors in the book have questioned the wisdom of comparing individual European countries to the much larger US. If instead the enlarged EU is the comparable unit, then levels of inequality are similar to, or may even surpass, those in the US.

This book represents the 'state of the art' research on social models in Europe and the US. It is particularly welcome that the editors have included the new member states in the debate on the ESM. It should be noted, however, that not all individual chapters have followed this example, as some have confined themselves to the 'old' EU in their

analysis. In that regard, the challenges remain to overcome old methodological and analytical paradigms when discussing 'European Societies'. Further, while the editors can point to growing similarities between the US and Europe in some areas such as active labour market policies, they perhaps underplay continuous differences in other areas such as welfare provision. For instance, the US system of work-conditioned social provisions may be well-suited for a country that has an abundance of low-wage jobs. However, in times of rising unemployment as currently experienced in the US, such a system may lead to increased hardship if the jobs that are supposed to be subsidised are no longer there. In contrast, as Chiara Saraceno points out, most European countries 'do keep a universal last resort safety net' (172) independently of whether someone is in employment or not.

With these caveats in mind, there is little doubt that this book is bound to become a standard reference in the field of comparative social scientific research in years to come. With its empirical depth and systematic analysis, it has set the bar for future research on social models quite high. As the book is written in an accessible manner, it should be of interest to policy-makers too, as the debate on the ESM is likely to continue inside and outside of academia.

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