

# **Welfare for Aftermaths**

Mapping ideational common ground in the European Union

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## Abstract

The present work investigates ideational developments around the welfare state in the European Union against a political background of austerity and polarisation. Building on the debate of social policy paradigms, the research examines post-financial crisis changes in social policy and explores avenues for political convergence in order to understand the potential for retaining social welfare in the European reform agenda. It intends to reduce the academic gap in the assessment of values within contemporary social policy enterprises. The study theorises the politics and discourses of welfare reform and pinpoints the normative logic of social policy using an analytical framework formed by the ideas of social citizenship, social justice, social equality, decommodification and solidarity. The discursive analysis is based on extensive academic literature and primary documents of the European Commission, Europarties and organised opinions from civil society. The research suggests that social advocates could respond to neoliberal discourse distortions with a discursive strategy: rebranding traditional social expenditure under a social investment label can work as common ground to form political coalitions against polarisation and to advance a European social agenda.

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## Introduction

The impact of global crises on the welfare state has been historically coupled with social policy developments. The post-World War II period of Keynesianism and the neoliberal epoch associated with the 1970s Great Stagflation are emblematic representations of shifts in social policy paradigms. If historical catastrophes serve as paradigmatic landmarks, the study of contemporary events becomes a less assertive process as it lacks the analytical distance provided by history. For instance, the advancement of the social investment approach to social welfare in Europe is not seen as circumscribed to a specific event, it is rather observed as a “quiet revolution” resulting from the maturation of cumulative policy reforms over the years (Hemerijck, 2015). Although in many cases the borders between situational and structural factors can be blurred, the emergence of a crisis does represent a clear context-associated time frame that calls for tailored measures. The accumulation of policy responses to the circumstantial needs can then support the grasping of a bigger picture. In this sense, the present study discusses social welfare for aftermaths in the European Union (EU).

The wording of “welfare *for aftermaths*” is twofold. First, it aims to indicate the exploratory-descriptive nature of this research. The EU is dealing with Brexit, austerity has permeated national governments, migration flows have risen, political alignments are getting sharper, and societal transformations go beyond demographics reaching behavioural traits of the younger generations. These events allude to a period of adaptation and nurture a debate on what model is guiding the European welfare state reform. Social investment advocates argue that the “quiet revolution” has positioned social investment as a reality in terms of European social policy orientations (Hemerijck, 2015). Social investment is broadly understood here as “allocations to social programmes that produce returns and promote future social well-being. In addition to accruing to individuals, households and communities, these returns benefit society as a whole” (Midgley, 2017: 14). In the EU context, the social investment approach can be characterised by the policies

aiming at “preparing individuals and societies to respond to the new risks of a competitive knowledge economy, by investing in human capital and capabilities from early childhood through old age, rather than in policies that simply ‘repair’ damages after moments of economic or personal crisis” (Hemerijck, 2017a: 4).

However, imprecision regarding the social investment approach has also been cumulative. Vandenbroucke (2017: 323) posits the lack of consensus-building as one of the reasons preventing it to be understood as a “fully-fledged, well-identifiable and definite scientific paradigm”. This opens room for questioning what social welfare ideas are emerging, prevailing or fading, instead of taking social investment (or any other social policy orientation) as the cast-stone regime of the social realm. Therefore, this work intends to examine welfare evolutions in order to explore what they can tell about the social policy alignments currently unfolding in Europe.

The use of *for aftermaths* also illustrates this study’s aim to analyse the dynamics of social policy derivation from different policy and political enterprises. This does not equate to an under-positioning of social policy; it rather denotes the investigation of how diverse forces influence in the maintenance and development of social welfare. Moreover, a set of aftermath measures can represent the primary occurrence of another aftermath. For example, the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 was addressed through austerity, which subsequently became a source of concern on its own. This work studies the rationale behind retaining social welfare in the agenda during periods of economic growth restoration. Social welfare is understood here as the “state or condition of human well-being that exists when social problems are managed, when human needs are met, and when social opportunities are maximised” (Midgley, 1997: 5).

These objectives stem from scholarly concerns regarding a reduction of social space within European welfare state reform agenda. For instance, Kildal (2009: 38) remarks that within EU member states, “the welfare of the people seems to be secondary to the wellbeing of the economy”. Crouch and Keune (2012: 9) express that “if the earlier labour law was concerned with human rights, today’s law is concerned with human resources”.

Similarly, Vanherckel, Sabato and Bouget (2017) infer the EU's incapacity to rebalance its social and economic governance. Such scenario is layered with the rising political polarisation, which entails questions of whether the European Commission and centrist forces are capable “to transcend the austerity reflex and counter the populist tide, by opening a genuine policy space [to become] reliable guardians of a more ‘caring’ EU” (Hemerijck, 2017a: 33).

Discussing the emergence, maintenance or reformulation of a social policy paradigm requires attention to its connection with a set of ideas. *Ideas* denote the “means to understand a multifaceted social world by applying certain concepts that help to reduce complexity” (Ervik et al., 2009: 5). In its turn, a *paradigm* entails “a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing” (Hall, 1993: 279). Despite the logical connection between ideas and social policy orientations, the role of values has been either “glossed over or assumed to be self-evident” (Midgley et al., 2017b: 241) by scholarly production. The present work intends to contribute to filling this gap. This academic exercise gains additional relevance under the light of the intellectual quest to cope with alterations arising from modernity. As values are crucial elements for any normatively conceivable policy stream, this study investigates recent ideational developments around the welfare reform agenda against a political background of austerity and polarisation. Based on the intention to include the polity, political and constituency paths of European social policy-making, the work is guided by the interrogation of *what is the common ground on social welfare ideas among the European Commission, Europarties and organised opinions from civil society, and how it can support the retaining of social welfare in the post-financial crisis reform agenda in the EU?*

In order to address this question, the study conducts discursive analysis with extensive use of academic literature and primary political and policy documents. The work is divided into four chapters. Chapter I delineates the political architecture associated with European

welfare reform, serving as the starting point to draw answers since the analysis of political actors' positionings requires an understanding of the settings around them. As the discussion on reform measures over the past two decades coincides temporally with the emergence of the social investment debate, the chapter presents policy and conceptual questionings of the social investment perspective that are expressions of interests and concerns of past and current times. In other words, the chapter aims to comprehend what the polysemic social investment literature tells about contemporary Europe in terms of social policy challenges and opportunities.

Chapter II conceptualises the normative foundations of social welfare and offers a set of ideas that have been traditionally guiding social policy at national and European levels: social citizenship, social justice, social equality, decommodification and solidarity. The ideational scheme does not aim to delimit the edges of debate; it rather draws back to the constitutive ideas of the welfare state as reference points to situate both social policy orientations in the EU and academic challenges in theorising modernity. This research focuses on the class dimension of the welfare state; Daly (2011), Saraceno (2017) and Hernes (1987), for instance, build a debate on gender aspects and its intersectionality with class. Chapter III provides the methodological rationale adopted for case selection, data collection and analysis; it explains the selected analytical choices and their scientific value.

Chapter IV uses the conceptualisation of ideas as an analytical framework to investigate the convergence of ideas on social welfare in the EU. The analysis encompasses three sets of dimensions and actors: (i) *the institutional European level*, examining the European Commission once it predominantly initiates policy enterprises affecting the EU social acquis; (ii) *the political parties level*, investigating the two biggest Europarties, the European People's Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (PES), which depict centre-right and centre-left forces and together represent the majority of representatives at the three EU institutions; (iii) *the civil society dimension*, studying the trade unions movement via the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) bodies and the organised civil society through the European Economic Social Council (EESC). The

chapter further discusses the unfolding of historical state welfare features during times of adaptation. The study ends with a conclusion to appraise the informative potential of ideational convergence, remarking action paths and challenges for social welfare advocates.

## Politics and discourses of welfare reform in Europe

By the final years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, European states had experienced at least two welfare epochs since World War II came to an end. The post-war period was the first of them. At the time, public resources allocated for health care and education, including for reducing class barriers through the broadening of post-secondary education access, added up massive amounts from a historical standpoint. Welfare was in expansion under the Keynesian logic, greatly benefiting the generations of those born between the 1940s and 1960s (Myles, 2017). The second stage came in the aftermath of the 1970s oil crisis when Keynesianism was perceived to be short in resolving stagflation. Grounded on the 1980s election of right-wing governments in the United States, United Kingdom and other Western states, a neoliberal response encouraged privatisation, outsourcing and access restriction to social programmes (Midgley et al., 2017). The welfare state was in retraction, producing life setbacks for the existing and upcoming generations. Relative, in-work and child poverty, and income inequality increased in the 1980s and 1990s, including throughout strong welfare states in Scandinavia and continental Europe (Hemerijck, 2012).

The macroeconomic stabilisation and globalisation policies that had supported countries in fostering economic growth and controlling inflation were incapable of combating unemployment, social exclusion and income polarisation. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development (OECD, 1997: 3) feared that the diffusion of these problems could “undermine both the drive towards greater economic flexibility and the policies that encourage strong competition, globalisation and technological innovation” in developed states. This concern denoted the intention of reducing economic inequality effects to safeguard the very own economic growth. This was nothing new. Dahrendorf (1959) has long expressed that Europe was only capable of avoiding the class war predicted in Marx’s sociology of revolution because of the citizenship-derived expansion of life chances, despite the perpetuation of overall social inequality. Similarly, in the

volume *Regulating the Poor*, Piven and Cloward (1972) argue that a crucial function of relief-giving actions is to support political and economic order. The fear of underprivileged groups causing disruption to the ruling norms has been transported throughout the decades, making the welfare state an instrument for obedience, conformity and moral discipline (Ossewaarde, 2010).

Despite the concerns about wealth polarisation, the scenario in Europe did not get better. In the 1980s, the wealthiest 10% of Europeans used to have an average income seven times higher than the poorest 10%, in 2017 the proportion jumped to 9.5 times higher (OECD, 2017). The financial collapse of autumn 2008 deflagrated the structural limitations of reliance on market-determined relations and financial deregulation, amounting to the policy-makers' recognition that "neoliberalism had reached its social policy limits" (Jenson, 2012: 61). Welfare should then be reformed. The question was (and still is) how to reform conciliating economic and social and goals.

The reasoning of social policy as a productive factor behind the social investment approach illustrates an attempt of convening economic and social agendas. The term *social investment* brings together two notions that seem to have been used with some distance from each other over time. To circumscribe *investment* with a social prefix may generate thinking about what stream of thought is embracing the idea. It might even not be evident if *social* stands as the resource being invested or the result of an investment. These questionings go far beyond semantics; they reach the uses of social investment as an academic concept, a political discourse or a policy orientation. Adding up to the absence of consensus-building around the social investment approach, scholars have reported an economic inclination in the overall use of the social investment discourse. Barbier (2017: 51) suggests that supporters of "devising the social investment approach as a vehicle to destroy social protection" are more numerous than those advocates of social investment as a strategy associated with social protection. Likewise, in a compared study of Dutch and Finnish reconciliation policies, van Gerven and Nygard (2017: 143) infer that despite the "good intentions of social investment agenda to bring more *social* into economic-driven

policies, social investment promotion may further marginalise social policy goals". In the seminal volume *Towards a Social Investment State?*, Morel, Palier, and Palme (2012b) had already indicated that in Europe the liberal understandings of social investment are predominant over the social-democratic stream.

A liberal inclination has also been observed in social policy developments at the European level. Despite the traditional absence of formal EU social policy regulations, governments are no longer pursuing welfare state reforms in absolute domestic isolation (van Gerven & Beckers, 2009). European policy enterprises, such as the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), the regulatory advancement of the European Monetary Union (EMU) and the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) have impacted the status of national welfare systems. For instance, assessments of the OMC procedure have reported a neo-liberal bias (Ervik, 2009; Lundvall & Lorenz, 2012), while the EMU and the SGP are reported to have caused adverse effects on social protection once governments are likely to elect it as a domain to cut expenses when needed (Kvist & Saari, 2007). Even the Country-specific Recommendations (CSR) elaborated by the Commission that had been gradually acquiring a greater social orientation, ended up having its implementation restricted to fiscal consolidation content (Crespy & Schmidt, 2017).

In this context, the development of a reliable European social welfare strategy seems to get restricted. Looking at the social investment case, the institutional framework within its associated policies have been implemented was designed for public finances stability instead of social welfare. In effect, member states have been opting for less costly measures, generating an incomplete implementation of what should be a coherent "social investment package" (de la Porte & Jacobsson, 2012). Furthermore, the ambiguity in policy processes, such as the Lisbon Strategy, has allowed national policy-makers to conduct a selective use of ideas, generating a bias pro labour flexibility over social protection. To move away from the intention of resolving whether social investment is the new European social policy paradigm can generate analytical space to learn from the struggles such an approach has faced over the past two decades. How to deal with austerity

seems to be a central one. The following subsections discuss this question and emphasise its relationship with other policy aspects, such as public perception and political support.

## Coping with austerity

Consensus-building has proved to be no easy task. Yet (unsurprisingly) an austerity consensus flows over Europe. The post-financial crisis national debts were followed by refinancing troubles in the Eurozone periphery, leading to the agreement among elites that severe public spending constraints should be in place. Contrariwise, the simultaneous rise of unemployment and poverty levels emphasised the need for social spending to buffer the deflationary spiral effects and to safeguard living conditions. The primary obstacle for social welfare lies on the fact that even during surplus periods, “governments tend to use their improved fiscal position for tax cuts instead of new policy initiatives, and thereby further a general reduction in the size of the state” (Mertens, 2017: 80). As above-evidenced, the situation at the EU level is equally austerity-ridden.

Long before the financial crisis, an *age of permanent austerity* in affluent economies was projected by Pierson (1991, 2001: 410), observing that “contemporary politics of the welfare state take shape against a backdrop of both intense pressures for austerity and enduring popularity”. The argument emphasises that even passionate supporters of the welfare state would recognise that adjustments should be made, while welfare state critics would have to accept the politics of popular enthusiasm for social provision. This context surrounds social policy politics with renegotiation and reform (instead of eradication) of the post-war social contract. According to Pierson, the remaining critical issue refers to the states’ ability to facilitate the development of centrist reform efforts. The difficulties of convincingly presenting social investment as the ideal social-economic mix for Europe demonstrate that this issue is indeed crucial. After all, it takes “strong arguments to convince hard-nosed finance ministers” of allocating resources for social enterprises in times of controlled public spending (Begg, 2017: 174).

While finances ministries may be hard-nosed, the reasoning behind the austerity discourse might embody less pragmatic justifications. Crouch (2011, 2017: 369) articulates the fundamental neoliberal discursive distortion: “Once the financial crisis had provoked the Eurocrisis, a phenomenon that had been caused primarily by financial deregulation was redefined as having been caused by social policy spending. A major failure of neoliberal policies paradoxically became a justification for strengthening them”. Likewise, high welfare spending can derive from poor economic performance, rather than the opposite relation. Thus, economic outputs of social spending should be viewed as dependent on the specifics of social programmes instead of being addressed with basis on general aggregated spending variables. Ultimately, the assessment of social spending through its economic return capacity (instead of its social outcomes) is contestable since social spending is functionally designed to respond to social needs (Nolan, 2017). Whilst social policy undeniably embodies social components - it was named as such for a reason, the polity position it holds might be less stable. Hill (1997) affirms the dependence, or even derivation, of social policy upon economic policy, stressing the determining power of the understandings about how the economy runs or should operate. The politics of contemporary Europe should then be discussed.

## Aftermath politics

The year of 2008 was certainly not the first-time that policy-makers faced an economic crisis; however, it got restricted to austerity rather than prompting policy innovations as during the 1930s and 1970s. So, why did the global financial crisis lead to austerity policies but not to the modernisation of the welfare state? This question-wording was used by Armingeon (2003) to name his article that draws possible answers. The author builds on Kingdon’s (1984) notion that it takes different, competing and plausible policy ideas for reform opportunities to emerge. For example, the ideas around opening or closing national markets for global trade in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; the welfare activism and industrial relations conflicts in the 1930s; and the varieties of capitalism and democracies in the mid-

1970s post-Keynesianism. In contrast, by 2010, mature democracies portrayed not much distinction between left and right forces concerning macroeconomic and social policies. Armingeon indicates the absence of four specific elements as preventing substantial policy innovation during the crisis: no new coalitions; no new ideas; no threatening to the existing political order; and no feasible alternative for a new welfare state.

These settings expose the role played by political dynamics in welfare reform. The political interests have converged to austerity and its maintenance is then a process to be comprehended. The “normalisation of the right” (Berezin, 2013) within European governments indicates electorate adherence to the discursive distortion of presenting neoliberal measures as the solution for their very own financial crisis instead of its cause. How has such public support come to develop? Crouch (2017: 370) suggests the greater the instability in people’s lives generated by neoliberalism, “the more this can be blamed on ‘foreigners’ rather than on neoliberalism itself, creating popular support for the xenophobic part. Far from suffering from the social instability it creates, neoliberalism is indirectly rewarded for it”. In this context, social policies become under attack due to the image of ‘undeserving’ individuals as the main beneficiaries of social support whilst the progress of the ‘deserving’ native hard-workers gets restrained by taxes and social policy itself (Bonoli, 2005; Schierup & Castles, 2011). Similarly, the intensification of populist welfare chauvinism aims to safeguard social protection for native groups through the exclusion of migrants and other outsider populations (Hemerejick, 2017b).

The very EU has become a target of attacks in the populist wave. The Union is “an ideal scapegoat for wider anti-system sentiments” (Clfegg, 2017: 47) that are flowing in austerity times, grounded by long-term income inequality escalation. The comparison of these sentiments with people’s social aspirations further demonstrates the neoliberal discursive distortion. Most individuals desire decent jobs and education, quality child and elderly care, and adequate pensions. These aspirations are even more prominent among the younger population. Although millennials do express social and political discontent with the conjecture they live in, they have not opted for anti-system rhetoric – the majority of

voters in their age group did not vote for Donald Trump in the United States or Brexit in the United Kingdom (Hemerijck, 2017b). Parents became inferiorly remunerated, but their children have remained to demand the same (or much more) financial support.

The transformations go beyond a matter of wage. As the contemporary policy environment is much different from the 1960s, the belief in paying taxes has also been impacted. In the Keynesian heyday, policy elites believed taxation to not only finance public services but also to boost economic performance. Conjunctionally, in a scenario of vigorous economic growth, workers' salaries were increased despite high taxation (Myles, 2017). Since the 1980s, this has been in change due to less enthusiastic growth rates and a tax doctrine shift. "Anti-tax doctrine is a key part of the policy legacy we are leaving to the next generation and taps into other currents in public opinion: a general sense of risk averseness and a decline of trust in government that has been ongoing for decades, particularly among the young (Dalton, 2005 in Myles, 2017: 353). If taxpaying aversion is to be found among older generations, the question is whether the younger ones will reproduce or overcome the inherited distrust in the public machinery's return capacity. In the politics of prolonged aftermaths, social needs are accentuated against a discourse of public resources restraints. As Pierson (1991) predicted, centrist reform efforts have become a prominent path for solutions.

Political coalitions are then a decisive factor. Crouch (2017) observes two current interrelated elements that may challenge alliance formation: the strengthening of neoliberal parties and the weakening of social-democratic forces. The former derives from the increased popular acceptance of neoliberal justifications on blaming social spending for the national public debts. Thus, due to their paradoxical escalation in the crisis aftermath, neoliberals are less willing to commit to social democrats or organised labour. In contrast, social democracy has lost political weight once its chief source of support from trade unions has deteriorated. The author argues the social democratic labour movement has gradually passed to function for the protection of labour market insiders instead of the general working population, ending to become a weaker force than it was in the 1990s.

On the one hand, this entire context seems hardly favourable for the conservation and progress of social welfare, on the other, there are strong arguments and reasonings on the need of retaining social policy space in the welfare reform agenda. Recent events equally show that there is room for social developments. For instance, in November 2017, the European Council, Parliament and Commission jointly proclaimed the European Pillar of Social Rights. While it can be questioned the extent of social welfare the declared principles aim to ensure, the Pillar does mean that “a discussion on social Europe is ongoing” (Hendrickx, 2017: 191). Concerning the national responses to after-crisis finances, Portugal could cut its fiscal deficit while rising pensions and wages, yet concerns have been transferred to the public debts sphere (The Economist, 2017). Furthermore, the long-term problems from income polarisation recall that widespread poverty and inequality can be prejudicial even for the health of markets. Why does a social dimension of Europe matter? This question might be evident for many, but others could benefit from an explanation. The following section expands on the topic.

## Make Europe social again

Although this title could fit well on electoral campaign hats, its objective here is much less coloured – it alludes to this section’s aim to examine the reasoning behind the claims to reinforce social Europe. *Social Europe* denotes a metaphor “to connote the pursuit of limiting social inequalities that arise from market processes” (van Gerven & Ossewaarde, 2018: 3). The notion relates to the welfare state’s logical foundation of standing for the organisation of power in political and administrative forms to deliberately attempt modifying market dynamics in favour of individuals and families (Briggs, 1961). Building on Giddens (2014), van Gerven and Ossewaarde (2018) indicate that this figurative use of social Europe originated as a liberal/social democratic/Christian democratic response to the neoliberalism expansion in the 1970s. Accordingly, social Europe has its grounds in social protection and social rights, under the logic of redistributive justice and solidarity between rich and poor. Yet the authors remark this image of social Europe does not stand alone.

After the Lisbon Treaty and the OMC initiation, a neoliberal version arose, silencing the original intention to make the market work in favour of social aspirations. This later image of Europe dialogues with the neoliberal discursive distortion previously addressed. In the same pattern, informational biases have been surrounding the European integration project.

Historical forgetfulness is not limited to disregarding what Europe-staged conflicts say about oppression and exclusion; it also underestimates the aggregated advancement of life quality standards. Telò (2017) observes that despite the recent inequality climb, the past six decades have been followed by an increase in social and economic prosperity that Europe has never experienced before. Even in the post-financial crisis, in 2014, the gross domestic product of the EU28 was higher than of the US (World Bank, 2015). The development of a European social model has been capable of ensuring equilibrium between fairness and competitiveness in a way hardly found elsewhere (Habermas, 2004), demonstrating that market competitiveness can co-exist with adequate salaries and social welfare (Ferrera, 2009). In spite of this background, some national politicians “have either used the EU as a scapegoat for the current severe, multi-dimensional crisis, or have made it the subject of dreadful rhetoric [...] In Europe, in a context where weak and fearful national leaders blame everything on ‘Brussels’, the EU is seen, by an act of unprecedented manipulation, as the main culprit” (Telò, 2017: 16-17).

While the European social dimension has been a central strategy over the past decades, more recent years depict an alteration in the EU policy-making agenda towards monetary concerns and austerity (Sabato & Vanherckel, 2017). The European social model was not declared “dead” by the president of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi for no reason. On the one hand, the EU is misrepresented as a burden due to its social objectives, on the other, its social objectives are considered as cold as death. Aftermath politics appear to leave no side satisfied. The rationale of deeming the European social model too social can be viewed as derived from the distorted neoliberal discourse, therefore, in this line, policy responses should follow neoliberal recipes to achieve economic growth and financial stabilisation. These justifications seem to be clear, whether one agrees or not. So,

what are the clear components behind the reasoning of making Europe social again? The present study convenes three suggestions.

First, social Europe is about the very logic of a social contract. Individuals concede freedom and authority to the state so that they can be better-off than otherwise. If there is no intention of taming market dynamics to benefit individuals in democratic states, the idea of a social contract makes less sense. To let markets free can be as problematic as letting humans uncontrolled in the Rousseauian state of nature. The state as a form of democratic social organisation should secure its population interests against external threats. In this regard, Lundvall and Lorenz (2012) posit the need for a paradigmatic change concerning state intervention in market dynamics. They propose that both the fear of state interference and the confidence in free-market solutions should shift to a perspective that enables governments to ensure stable economic growth, including via the establishment of an increased financial regulation.

Secondly, social Europe matters for the EU enterprise. As the former Commission president Jacques Delors (2016: 7) expressed, “if European policy-making jeopardises cohesion and sacrifices social standards, there is no chance for the European project to gather support from European citizens”. The EU is under the same logic of democratic states functionality existing for the benefit of their population. Although causal relationships might be hard to pinpoint, the unprecedented European prosperity accumulated in the last decades suggests that the EU contributes to individuals’ wellbeing. Furthermore, changes are taking place in both the economy and societies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe. The transformations include population ageing, lower fertility levels, single parenthood (Meier et al., 2010; Lindh, 2012), increased deindustrialisation, flexibilization and female labour-force participation (Crouch & Keune, 2012). Such settings constitute a ‘knowledge-based economy/society’ (Morel et al., 2012a; Hemerijck, 2012, 2017a) or even a ‘globalising learning economy’ (Lundvall, 2012). Some of these societal features are often named “new social risks” (Taylor-Gooby, 2005; Bonoli, 2005).

A social Europe implies common standards for social cohesion in policy processes that address these transformations.

Thirdly, social Europe is strategic for avoiding social and fiscal competition among EU member states. Fernandes and Rinaldi (2016) observe that effects of single-market deepening, such as the freedom of services, capital, goods and people movement, could guide national governments into a “race to the bottom”, in which states with less social protection become the most cost-competitive. The authors argue that the Commission’s efforts to deepen the single market, especially in energy and digital segments, should be complemented with initiatives preventing market integration from working against national social models. Consequently, the situation demands a new compromise that reassembles the single market-offsetting logic of the 1980s cohesion funds and policies.

### In a nutshell...

The chapter explained the neoliberal enterprise of discursively distorting the financial crisis narrative, whereby the social instability created by overly unregulated markets was ascribed to social policy expenditure. This process has put forward the normalisation of political right streams, extremist, exclusion and anti-system (EU) feelings. The chapter theorised reasonings for advancing an image of social Europe in times of economic restoration, identifying its potential of strengthening both the economic and social dimensions of the EU project. The presented findings depict a challenging political scheme composed by austerity and electoral polarisation, in which the ability to facilitate centrist reform efforts remains crucial. Therefore, understanding the ideas that have been traditionally guiding European social welfare can be a pathway to explore the social policy orientation taking form in Europe. The next chapter develops this proposal, further explaining the gains from an ideational approach.

## Conceptualising welfare ideas for social policy analysis

Values and normative ideas have been historically employed in the justification of national welfare policies (Kildal, 2009). As articulated by Titmuss (1968), a central motivation for the adoption of the universalism principle in social services provision was to reduce humiliation, loss of dignity or self-respect by the users. The aim was to avoid a sense of inferiority or shame by service users, preventing public burden attributions. The Keynesian and the neoliberal policy models (and the social investment perspective) are grounded on a normative image of the social contract since their structures involve some claim around “equity and fairness, the work ethic, gender and family roles, intergenerational fairness, and collective and individual responsibilities” (Hemerijck, 2012: 35). Social values are equally relevant for the analysis of social policy beyond the nation-state. Even if most social protection decisions are upon national politics, the ideas disseminated at the European level are “immensely important” (Barbier, 2017: 58). They matter because often “what creates legitimacy is less the fact of having consented, but rather having consented to a certain normative reasoning, linking shared values and principles to practice type norms” (Steffek, 2003: 264). Thus, ideational reasoning can be perceived as a significant component in the formation of policy orientations by political groups.

The interplay between political coalitions and social ideas has been long-investigated by scholars (cf. Kingdon, 1984; Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1993; Hall, 1993; Risse, 1994). Ideas combined into policy frames can encompass both national and European levels, being especially relevant to analyse unpredictable periods of policy change (Dudley & Richardson, 1999). Béland and Cox (2016:429) articulate that ideas shape political power by acting as *coalition magnets*, which represent the ideational “capacity to appeal to a diversity of individuals and groups, and to be used strategically by policy entrepreneurs [...] to frame interests, mobilise supporters and build coalitions”. Similarly, belief systems

hold advocacy coalitions together (Sabatier, 1988). As argued in Chapter I, the formation of political centrist arrangements is a crucial element for the definition of welfare enterprises in Europe. Therefore, a framework formed by welfare notions can enable the examination of ideas that have the capacity of mobilising coalitions.

The social investment case has shown that vagueness regarding normative policy grounds hinders the acquisition of political support. Masking the normative foundations of decision-making on social choices is a risk once it appears to detach social policy from economic lenses (Nolan, 2017). This is problematic because policy “cannot escape the constraint of choice involving change, precisely because it is action-oriented and problem-oriented, no policy can escape from values, ideologies and images of what constitutes the ‘good society’” (Reisman, 2001:29). Consequently, to advance the debate on the welfare paradigm under construction in Europe, the normative basis of the policy agenda must be clarified. The following subsections aim to provide conceptual orientations for situating the EU social policy agenda normative underpinnings. As the prioritisation of welfare dimensions and normative foundations should always be open for democratic discussions and subject to democratic deliberations (Morel & Palme, 2017), the present work does not embody prescriptive purposes. It rather draws back to the constitutive ideas of the welfare state as reference points to situate the social policy orientations unfolding in the EU.

## **Social Citizenship & Social Justice**

The cornerstone notion of social citizenship entails the embedment of social rights within citizen rights, as coined by Marshal (1950). The entrenchment between social and civil rights means that welfare provision cannot be treated as public policy contingent to political variations; it is rather comparable with other citizenship rights such as voting or possessing private property. Welfare rights become an integral part of the citizenship logic; therefore, they cannot be revoked merely by governmental changes (King & Waldron, 1988). The idea illustrates the positioning of social policy as a core component of societal progress by enabling degrees of civilisation for the poor that would otherwise remain

restricted to the rich, mitigating social class and creating parallels for welfare division among citizenry (Morel & Palme, 2017). If social citizenship ideationally grounds the welfare state, what underpins the notion of social citizenship?

In Marshallian logic, the prerogatives for welfare as a right and the state duty to provide (or counter) welfare needs are based on dispute; there is no universal principle to legitimate them (Dwyer, 2000). Thus, the broad acceptance of social citizenship is expected to derive from reasonings that attenuate contestation. The idea of social justice provides arguments oriented to the common interest. Rawls (1971) allows the suggestion that individuals under the “veil of ignorance” would not contract an economic system absent of welfare provision because the risk of being poor or untalented would be too big without a safety net. The veil of ignorance metaphorically nulls awareness of individuals’ class position, social status, intelligence, strength and the like; thus, if they still decide to engage in a social system under such ignorance regarding the future, that system should be considered just (Rawls, 1971). As in reality people cannot choose whether to sign up for a social system, a state without welfare provision is automatically unjust. In effect, social citizenship is a crucial feature for genuine consent to social and political arrangements (King & Waldron, 1988).

In policy context, social justice involves resources redistribution from those who have unjustly acquired them to those who justly deserve them (Feagin, 2001). Despite the redistributive nature, social justice has often been associated with the discourse of *equal opportunities*, whereby justice depends more on advancing inclusion than compensating for exclusion. Instead of equalising the rules of the game, the intention is to guarantee “self-realisation through the targeted investment in the development of individual capabilities” (Schraad-Tischler & Schiller, 2016: 77). The equal opportunities stream serves better economic elites, once it disregards changes in the status quo.

The idea of social citizenship has also been discursively subject to change. One the one hand, cuts to the welfare state are likely to be followed by resistance due to individuals’ beliefs on their embedded rights that should not be altered (King & Waldron,

1988). This may explain why the welfare state demonstrated little structural variation and the access to welfare rights remained a component perceived as central to effective citizenship even during the neoliberal prime (cf. Robinson, 1986; Harrison, 1995). On the other hand, the contemporary neoliberal encouragement of welfare reduction is advancing. Then, how does it relate to social citizenship? Crouch (2017: 369) suggests that the right-wing populist cleavage between ‘deserving’ national hard-workers and ‘undeserving’ groups has placed the latter as the main recipient of social support. Conjunctually, the sense of a welfare state has been disconnected from the idea of citizenship, “becoming instead the American idea of welfare as handouts to various non-deserving groups, almost a badge of non-citizenship”. The following subsection continues the debate by addressing the notion of social equality.

## Social Equality & Equal Opportunities

The policy uses of *equal opportunities* stemming from social justice have a somewhat contrasting sense from *social equality*. While equality of opportunity concerns *ex ante* expected payoffs, social equality might better relate to an outcome dimension, denoting *ex post* payoffs (Saito, 2013). Social equality refers to the “structural issue of the distribution of material rewards” (Jackman, 1974: 29). In welfare terms, equality of opportunities ensures that one person “must face an array of options that is equivalent to every other person’s in terms of the prospects for preference satisfaction it offers” (Arneson, 1988: 85). Therefore, equality of opportunities can still exist alongside the presence of great social inequality; the final distribution of material rewards may endure despite the granting of equal opportunities. Social equality represents a societal goal, an ideal. Equality of opportunities is a rather instrumental idea that can be used to foster social equality or not. As the offer of opportunities for social inclusion must be designed to include individuals somewhere, it often ends up nurturing the integration into a profoundly unequal labour market (Lister, 1998).

The adoption of these notions indicates the extent of social change expected to be achieved, which may be closely related to political orientations. For instance, Diamond and Roger (2012: 288) observe that “the economic realities experienced by the ‘squeezed middle’ appear to diminish public support for redistribution”. Economic hardness encourages the expansion of individuals’ access to the capabilities required to realise opportunities. In other words, economic inequality fosters political support to the promotion of opportunities, a short-term measure, instead of envisioning long-term equality of outcome. In this context, the promotion of social inclusion appears to have abandoned the goal of promoting greater equality (Lister, 1998). This scenario depicts a vicious cycle wherein the very aim of reducing economic inequality tends to reproduce inequality instead of reduce it.

Social equality also entails an immaterial dimension. Dworkin (1981: 189) remarks that “if we want genuinely to treat people as equals (or so it may seem) then we must contrive to make their lives equally desirable to them, or give them the means to do so, not simply to make the figures in their bank accounts the same”. Yet, this perception scheme is not detached from class. The sense of equality among individuals’ lives desirability is related to the understanding that the different groups in a society have a common fate, nurturing the responsibility to offer possibilities for those with scarcer resources. In this regard, Rothstein and Uslaner (2005) infer the causal relationship of social trust from both income and opportunity equality, noting that systems with elevated social trust are likely to have better democratic institutions, elevated economic growth, and reduced crime and corruption. Following such reasoning, social (in)equality encompasses and influences core dimensions of societal dynamics.

## Decommodification

Turning processes, aspects or persons into commodities is a capitalist method long rooted in human history. The very state entity can be seen as a structure to emanate and sustain a

utilitarian discourse of worldviews. In the volume *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, Scott (1998: 12-13) theorises in this regard by describing the historical transformations of individuals' interactions with the environment. As an example, the replacement of the term 'nature' by 'natural resources' promoted the appropriation of natural aspects that can serve human uses. From an anthropological perspective, the author remarks that the state performed certain poaching activities, such as imposing its statist claim over the wood revenue. Conversely, the state often disregarded "social uses of the forest [...] as well as the forest's significance for magic, worship, refuge, and so on", which were intricate social processes.

Although natural forces can impact the entire humanity in several manners, they do not vote. The commodification of citizens in democratic states is then an interesting phenomenon once those being transformed into commodities are the same ones who legitimise this condition through elections. Alongside the notion of commodified citizens being instruments of economic elites, decommodification efforts carry a normative logic: to be a commodity is neither good nor desirable. As Esping-Andersen (1990: 36) posits, capitalism can make diverse contributions to raise the quality of life, but ultimately "the market becomes to the worker a prison within which it is imperative to behave as a commodity in order to survive". Correspondingly, decommodification comes to life "when a service is rendered as a matter of right, and when a person can maintain a livelihood without a reliance on the market" (p.22), making workers stronger and diminishing the utter authority of employers.

Emancipation can be linked with the rationale of a welfare state, which is to enable wellbeing and to some extent should allow citizens to consider life worth-living. The notions of freedom and liberty enshrined in international law, especially among Western democracies, allow the broad assumption that one can hardly have a satisfactory life without such conditions. Turning 'worth-livingness' into a more academic matter, Pacek and Radcliff (2008) investigate whether the welfare state tends to raise individuals' satisfaction with their lives. The authors infer a positive relationship between citizens'

perception of life as rewarding and the generosity of the welfare state, arguing that social democratic welfare states do “indeed seem to make important contributions to the project of making ‘human life as satisfying as possible’” (p.273). Once eliminating the market systems’ structural conditions seems barely feasible, the social democratic model is presented as the most viable setting to supplement societies with countervailing institutions that restrict the conversion of human beings into commodities.

## Solidarity

Solidarity is a constitutive feature of the European integration. In the declaration that proposed creating the European Coal and Steel Community, Robert Schuman (1950) announced that the European project should gradually follow through concrete achievements that create a *de facto* solidarity. The rationale of electing solidarity as a guiding element of European policy processes draws back to the kind of solidarity that first cemented state and nation-building processes in the continent, including the rise of social, education and industrial policies (Lundvall & Edward, 2012). *Social solidarity* denotes “group members’ contributions towards the achievement of collective goals” (Widegren, 1997: 756; Hechter, 1987). Moreover, solidarity enables the shared feeling of responsibility among citizens. In this regard, Habermas (2001: 64) articulates the transformations from the civil bonds grounded on personal relationships into the current arrangement of solidarity: “While remaining strangers to one another, members of the same ‘nation’ feel responsible enough for one another that they are prepared to make ‘sacrifices’”, such as coping with tax redistribution.

The idea of solidarity equally upholds a core role in the politics of aftermaths. Despite continuous advancements towards a closer and wider Union over the past decades, the EU states are currently visualising pieces of disintegration (Vanherckel et al., 2017). In this context, a new notion of European citizenship is needed, being centred on mutual solidarity among citizens and member states instead of primarily relying on perceptions about shared

‘European’ features (Büchs, 2009, Offe & Preuss, 2006). Likewise, Castells (2002: 234) rejects common culture as an element to build a shared European identity and proposes instead a set of values composed by “shared feelings concerning the need for universal social protection of living conditions, social solidarity, stable employment, worker rights, universal human rights [...].” Castells brings the welfare state and social policy together, prompting the conditions for successful reform agendas. A reorientation towards solidarity is an important element to prevent policy enterprises such as the EU2020 from becoming “another example of European wishful thinking” (Lundvall & Edward, 2012: 349).

## In a nutshell...

The chapter pinpointed the normative logic of social policy and its derived ideational grounds. While ideas as social citizenship, decommodification and solidarity have embodied its primary sense, social equality and social justice have suffered discursive alterations (and perhaps somewhat merging) towards the idea of equal opportunities, embedded into the notion of social inclusion. The employment of these ideas has the potential to promote social welfare, yet their application in the policy-making realm can amount to different results that vary according to power relations and political goals. The chapter narrated the reasoning of values as critical elements for any conceivable policy realm with a normative background, such as social policy. Therefore, it theorised the logical argument for this study’s research question, emphasising the crucial role of ideas in connecting actors and shaping political arrangements. The uses of the ideational framework formulated in this chapter are explained in the following methodological section.

## CHAPTER III

# Methodological considerations

This study explores convergence on welfare ideas against a background of austerity, political polarisation and intellectual challenges derived from modernity. The purpose is not to longitudinally compare social policy transformations in EU since there is considerable research in such regard (cf. Arpe et al., 2015; Barbier, 2012). The focus is instead on the current employment of ideas to address welfare reform in the post-crisis context of economic restoration. Examining the discourses on social policy is a path for tracing the normative grounds of the social welfare orientation being put forward at the European level. Precisely, discursive analysis entails the interaction of language which enables possibilities for conjecturing European governance (Diez, 2001). Accordingly, the work conducts interpretative research to analyse social policy ideas prevailing in the EU.

The approach is relevant to the topic because different understandings of concepts have been shaping the development of a social Europe. For example, although the Lisbon Strategy had a declared focus upon social cohesion, policymakers often perceived “social cohesion as a burden for Europe rather than as the necessary foundation for the learning economy. Therefore, the implementation became increasingly lopsided and dominated by the traditional economic focus upon ‘structural reform’ and flexibilization” (Lundvall & Lorenz, 2012: 347). Accordingly, interpretative research can address the role of ideas and sense-making in the elaboration of policy projects, giving clarity to the research objective of investigating the social policy orientation unfolding in Europe and its associated symbolic meanings. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012:23) remark that this kind of practice seeks “to understand what a thing ‘is’ by learning what it does, how particular people use it, in particular contexts”. Thus, the aim is to comprehend how ideas exist in the context of European social policy reform, instead of broadly trying to define social norms.

## Case selection

In historical perspective, an ambitious enterprise for rebalancing the European economic and social dimensions is proposed about every 15 years: the first social programme was tabled in 1973 (Social Action Programme, COM[73]1600), in 1988/89 the adoption of the Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers was followed by an action plan, and in late 2000 the European Charter of Fundamental Rights was ratified (Pochet, 2017). It seems that the year of 2017 hosted the most recent social ambition: the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). This research builds on the reflections surrounding the social momentum generated by the Pillar. However, to investigate ideational patterns only focusing on the EU polity would be analytically short. Limiting an analysis of recent and current realities to the institutional dimension disregards pressing and more direct ideational inputs from society at an electoral stance, especially in times of aftermath politics, as previously theorised. From this angle, the study broadens the analysis to political parties at the European level and organised opinions from civil society. The intention is to include polity, political and constituency paths of European social policy-making. For instance, by examining political parties and constituents' aspirations, the study expects to grasp the political trajectory of social-democracy and neoliberal streams conjectured in Chapter I.

Therefore, the selected case encompasses the time frame associated with the Pillar social momentum but is not restricted to the Pillar document. Precisely, the investigation encompasses three sets of dimensions and actors: (i) *the institutional European level*, examining the Commission once it predominantly initiates policy enterprises affecting the EU social acquis; (ii) *the political parties level*, investigating the two biggest Europarties, the European People's Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (PES), which depict centre-right and centre-left forces and together represent the majority of representatives at the three EU institutions; (iii) *the civil society dimension*, studying the trade unions movement via the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) bodies and

the organised civil society through the European Economic and Social Council (EESC). Chapter IV elaborates on the role of such actors concerning policy-making at the EU level.

## Data collection

Data collection was conducted through documents officially issued by the three sets of actors. As documents are “social facts” elaborated, disseminated and used in socially structured forms (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997: 47), it is assumed to exist a connection between documents, practical action, and locus of action (Prior, 2008: 231). Documents are therefore capable of expressing and convening the ideational choices and derived discourse conformations. The analysed files consist of institutional papers, policy proposals, working papers, staff working documents, (EC); political manifestos, political resolutions, party agreements, policy opinions (Europaties, ETUC); reports, surveys and policy recommendations (EESC), besides speeches and interviews of affiliated representatives. For the EC examination, the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DGEMPL) was chiefly treated. In the case of the EPP and the PES, their associated official political foundations were also considered once political foundations complement political parties’ roles on “European public policy issues and European integration” (EC, 2007: 4). The documents were retrieved from the official websites under the sections assigned for social policy, political and programmatic public documents. The selection criteria was based on the documents’ content, considering those which main headings address welfare reform, post-crisis responses; social and labour policies or the future of the EU, including its social dimension.

Since the objective of this study concerns welfare for aftermaths, the time spectrum comprises the post-2008 financial crisis momentum until present days, with further consideration to most recent documents (2016 onwards) that can better reflect the social discussion taking place in the EU. A total of 51 documents were collected and skimmed; Appendix I offers a list of them. These documents were selected over others with basis on the most recent publication date, and directness reference to the selection criteria in the

titles. A higher number of files was retrieved at the EC level, which echoes its stronger organisational capacity in terms of human and financial resources for producing documents. In order to increase empirical reliance of the discursive analysis, the documental investigation was supported by inputs from scientific production on the topic.

## Data analysis

The examination of convergence on social welfare ideas and related discursive orientations was conducted through document analysis. This practice denotes that data is being examined and interpreted in order to “elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” (Bowen, 2009: 27; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Discourse refers to “a patterned system of texts, messages, talk, dialogue or conversation which can both be identified in these communications and located in social structures” (Lupton, 1992: 145). The analytical procedures executed involve retrieving, selecting, appraising and arranging data found in the documents, synthesising it into the narrative in the form of quotations, excerpts or text passages, and organising them in line with the social policy ideas being debated. As sets of language practices compose a discourse, such analytical procedures can amount to evidence to build an image of ideational convergence.

The underpinning reasoning of such analytical strategy applied to the present study lies on the notion that social values are primary settings for interaction in social systems, functioning as frameworks for assessing politics and defining both social problems and its associated solutions (Johnston & Klandermans, 1995; Arikan & Bloom, 2014). Precisely, the ideational investigation of welfare reform in this work is guided by the logic of symbolic interactionism, wherein process of collective definition determine how issues “will arise, whether they become legitimated, how they are shaped in discussion, how they come to be addressed in official policy, and how they are reconstituted in putting planned action into effect” (Blumer, 1971: 298). Following Goodman’s (1978) logic that framing is about *worldmaking*, social values are about *welfare-making*. Moreover, research has

demonstrated that welfare structures can shape social attitudes and citizens' worldviews (cf. Jakobsen, 2011).

The framework of social welfare ideas elaborated in Chapter II is used to orientate the document analysis. Table 1 outlines the policy applications of the considered ideas and keywords handled to appraise and synthesise data from the documents. Such use does not intend to restrict the consideration of ideas to social citizenship, social justice, social equality, equal opportunities, decommodification and solidarity. It rather serves as a conceptual basis for mapping what ideas are emerging, prevailing or fading in terms of welfare provision.

*Table 1: Translation of ideas into policy orientation*

Idea	Sample of associated social policy orientation	Guiding keywords
Social citizenship	Promotion of social rights primarily associated to the citizen status.	social rights; citizens' rights; European social acquis (promotion of)
Social justice	Development of life projects with distribution of outcomes.	compensation; buffer (policies); social justice
Social equality	Approximation of living standards; distributing material rewards.	income inequality (reduction of); social equality
Equal opportunities	Offer of a set of options that enable the achievement of particular aspirations.	social inclusion; equal opportunities; equality of opportunity(ies)
Decommodification	Strengthen of social protection schemes, promotion of social rights.	social protection; markets regulation; labour rights (promotion of)
Solidarity	Promotion of inter-groups, inter-generations and inter-regions benefits sharing.	solidarity; benefits sharing; mutual benefits

The expected results involve the delineation of ideational convergence within the three dimensions, primarily serving as an indication of common grounds for a possible broad

encompassing political arrangement, but also grasping the social policy orientation taking form at the EU.

### In a nutshell...

The chapter described the reasoning for adopting document analysis to investigate ideational convergence among discourses at different levels in Europe. This work places documents as social facts capable of portraying discourses on welfare reform, consequently enabling the appraisal of what ideas are being employed to address social policy in times of aftermath politics. Symbolic interactionism offers the theoretical basis for such analytical exercise since collective understandings arrange the framework to assess both social problems and related solutions (policies). Moreover, the chapter detailed the analytical procedures used for the exploration of ideational convergence to be conducted in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER IV

# Exploring social welfare common ground in the EU

Agents from both right and left political forces have acknowledged the need to restore growth through the implementation of economic and monetary governance despite conflicting perceptions on how such an economic scheme should look like. A pressing issue is then how to prevent the detachment between economic growth and the imperative of developing a social dimension at the EU level (Vanderbroucke, 2017). As theorised in the previous chapters, centrist coalitions can function as platforms to obstruct polarisation while advancing social goals. The present chapter operationalises this study's quest of assessing how political convergence on social welfare ideas can support the understanding of the social policy orientation taking form in the EU.

The chapter is organised into four sections: the European Commission is analysed first since it institutionally initiates actions that shape the European social *acquis*. The political dimension is following studied through the examination of Europarties, sampling centrist right and left streams. Workers and employers' aspirations are subsequently investigated, being followed by a discussion that facilitates sense-making on ideational convergence among the three levels and debates intellectual and societal challenges.

## The European Commission and a “new social dimension”

During the first EU social summit over the past twenty years - the Gothenburg Summit in 2017, the European Council, the Parliament and the Commission jointly proclaimed the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). According to the DGEMPL director-general Michel Servoz (2018:18), the Pillar entails “social values but also concrete issues such as health, housing [...The EPSR] is a very broad agenda which recognises” that employment issues cannot be separated from social ones (for contextualisation on the Pillar see Plomien, 2018; Sebastiano & Vanherckel, 2017). Re-emphasising the need of economic

and social balance echoes scholarly concerns on the effects from the post-crisis austerity policy architecture. The EC has often expressed that the recent improvements regarding economic growth and employment rates have not been proportionally followed by the reduction of poverty depth and persistence, hindering the reversion of the inequality levels amounted in the last years (cf. EC 2016a, 2017f, 2017c). Drawing on such scenario, the Commission seems to have been using the argument of intergenerational fairness to put forward the case of a ‘new social dimension’ driven by the EPSR, stressing the public concern that “for the first time since World War II, today’s young people and their children may end up worse off than their parents” (EC, 2018a: 9; cf. EC 2018c, 2017c). A Eurobarometer survey (EC, 2016b) has shown that most European citizens believe that the life of the youngest generations will be harder than their own.

In this context, the rhetoric of intergenerational fairness is handled to address the social contract which entails “a notion of sharing benefits (as in the case of economic growth) as well as burdens [...] associated with changing economic circumstances across cohorts” (EC, 2017c: 52). Whereas working documents of the EC label redistribution among generations under the idea of fairness (cf. EC, 2017b, 2018d, 2018c), the EPSR adopts the notion of intergenerational solidarity. The interplay between the ideas of solidarity and fairness is capable of tracing who is more likely to assume the burdens across cohorts: while the former entails the logic of inter-group dynamics, distancing the subject from the action, the latter ties the subject and action together. In other words, the employment of fairness appears to encourage a sense of duty concerning welfare adjustments that is less evident in the solidarity proposition.

The Commission’s recognition of challenges for welfare provisions associated with demographic and behavioural changes are manifested via its pension system. In such cases, the use of the intergenerational factor has been more connected with the extension of working lives rather than the reduction of benefits, transmitting the understanding that working lives are ‘the foundation of prosperity for all generations’ (EC, 2017c). Social justice notions are positioned as elements to enable the prolongation of work time spent by

individuals. However, the distributive dimension of social justice is limited by the equal opportunities logic, reflecting the existence of “a growing consensus across the EU that fostering equal opportunities is necessary to ensure that everyone can start well in life, overcomes difficulties and realise their own potential” (EC, 2018a: 58; cf. EC, 2017b: 23). When the idea of equality of opportunities is translated into policy proposals, the Commission predominantly emphasises education, lifelong learning and up-skilling of workers.

Alongside the temporal aspect of working lives, the EC endorses the application of social protection schemes into contemporary working arrangements that had tended to conform better with the flexibility side of the flexicurity formula (cf. EC, 2018d). The Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, Marianne Thyssen, expresses the social ambition “to make sure that everybody who works is covered by social protection schemes, on the basis of their contributions. This is important to make sure our social protection systems are adequate, sustainable and in respect of intergenerational fairness” (EC, 2017e:1). Likewise, the EPSR declares that “regardless of the type and duration of their employment relationship, workers, and, under comparable conditions, the self-employed, have the right to adequate social protection”. This understanding reflects European public opinion, which in majority agree that a free-market economy should go with a high level of social protection (EC, 2016b). Interpreting the idea of decommodification as the strengthening of social protection schemes enables the suggestion that the EC does not manifest aspirations of decommodifying better, but of decommodifying more. This dynamic relates with the discursive alteration from social equality to social inclusion: the plan is to include those who have been left outside the system instead of transforming it.

The policy proposals under the momentum generated by the Pillar summon welfare ideas for advancing the European social acquis, which ultimately accentuates a sense of social citizenship associated with the EU. While the plans of ‘socialising’ European Semester cycles through a EPSR-based scoreboard represent a mechanism for evaluating

countries' social performances, it is perhaps the proposal of creating a European Labour Authority (cf. EC, 2018b, 2018c; Juncker, 2017) that says the most about transformative measures, challenging the traditional appliance of the subsidiarity principle for social policy matters. Although the Authority may end up being an instrument for unleashing market forces, its current rationale relates with the need of counter-balancing the internal market deepening, which depicts traces of a social Europe, particularly concerning the idea of approximating living standards among countries. The Commission has put forward other social initiatives, such as the creation of a European social security number (EC, 2017d), the proposal for a Council recommendation on social protection provision (EC, 2018d), and a set of legislative and non-legislative actions concerning EU law and policy frameworks to support better work-life a more equal use of leave and flexible work arrangements between men and women with caring responsibilities (EC, 2017a).

Hereof, it should be recalled that whereas chapter one offered a critical analysis of the social situation at the EU, this chapter intends to lay out the ideas upholding social welfare in different dimensions of actors. Therefore, the text should not be understood as a romantic interpretation of social policy developments but rather as a quest for convergence potential.

## Europartying at the middle

Transnational party federations at the European level, the Europarties, have been gradually adjusting organisational and financial capacities in order to increase influence capacity over European politics. They have a role recognised in EU law and have been financed by the general Union's budget since 2004, obtaining further opportunities to act with the strengthening of the European Parliament (Gagatek & van Hecke, 2014; Johansson & Raunio, 2005). According to the Maastricht Treaty (1992, art. 138a), Europarties "are important as a factor for integration within the Union. They contribute to forming a European awareness and to expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union" (for

contextualisation see Hix, 1996; Hix & Lord, 1997). Külahci (2010: 1287) gathers a set of scholarly arguments on Europarties' aspects that explain their potential to influence the EU agenda: the governmental incidence throughout countries encompassing negotiations at the highest level of involved parties (Ladrech, 2000); the possibility of unified action on core socio-economic topics (Hix, 1995); a shared vision on European integration (Johansson, 2002); and the capacity of jointly identifying latent consensual policies (Newman, 1996). This section focuses on such agenda-shaping ability and not on issues arising from members coordination or internal and external decision-making dynamics.

The functioning of parties at the European level is embedded in the politicisation of the European integration, which denotes “an increase in polarisation of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU” (de Wilde, 2011: 560). For instance, the creation of European political foundations in 2008 provided sources of policy expertise for the associated Europarties. In effect, these foundations have amplified the partisan capacity of generating more polarised debates (Gagatek & van Hecke, 2014). As enshrined in the EU treaties, Europarties are expected to contribute to the “democratic life” of the Union. Consequently, they can channel into the EU the polarisation and extremism that democracy enables to evolve in national systems. On the other hand, Europarties are equally capable of fostering coalition arrangements, especially because they filter a high degree of domestic heterogeneity, creating some extent of consensus among national parties to ‘speak with a single voice’ at the EU (Klüver & Rondon, 2012: 631).

In this context, the two biggest Europarties are analysed: the European People’s Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (PES). Their representatives jointly represent 79% of the current places at the Commission, 50% at the Parliament and 50% at the Council (EU28) (EU APPF, 2018). The 21<sup>st</sup> century has shown signs of direct electoral confrontation between them, composing the emergence of a government-opposition relation at the symbolic level around these major Europarties (Gagatek, 2009). The differing centre-right and centre-left orientations enable the search for convergence while

depicting an analytical opportunity to observe pro-EU forces with interests in countering extremist streams in a momentum preceding the May 2019 elections.

### *European People's Party (EPP)*

Originating from the pure Christian Democrat alliance formed in 1976, the EPP suffered an opening up to conservative and other similarly inclined parties during the 1980s with the strategic aim to increase its political weight, overtaking European Socialists. Building on the emergence of new democracies in the post-Cold War period, the EPP expanded to Central Europe's centre-right parties and later continued over the Eastern enlargement (for EPP's evolution, see Freudenstein, 2012). The party diagnoses populism and political radicalism as a threat to the European project (EPP, 2012). Concerning social welfare, the EPP recognises the need of tackling inequality and poverty, and safeguarding social Europe, which is regarded as a profound expression of the European integration. It defends that "economic competitiveness and social progress must be balanced in a highly competitive European Social Market Economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and at a high level of protection for, and improvement of, the quality of the environment" (EPP, 2017b: 1). The ideas of solidarity and equal opportunities appear to orientate the partisan discourse. For instance, the EPP has its own understanding of solidarity as a joint-responsibility wherein "the strong should help those in need, who in turn have to make an effort themselves to improve their situation according to their abilities", being translated into policy action "through the implementation of territorial, economic and social cohesion" (EPP, 2012: 2,5).

The idea of solidarity is largely used by the party, emphasising that solidarity "must be accompanied by fairness and responsibility. [The EPP is] committed to helping those in need, while also striving for the maximum participation of all working-age citizens" (EPP, 2017a: 5). The sense of duty underpinning the ideas of fairness and responsibility also encompasses the financial sphere, in which the party defends budgetary discipline

combined with sustainable growth (EPP, 2012). The ideational approach used by the EPP seems to be architected in a manner that generates a wide-ranging orientation of duties-based rights, as in opposition to the notion of social citizenship. For example, in policy action terms, the freedom of movement within the EU is coupled to job creation and prosperity; the provision of adequate social protection is attached to the pressing need of people working “harder and longer” (cf. EPP 2017b, EPP 2012). As a result, the idea of social policy as a tool for decommodifying workers may be overshadowed by the instrumentalisation of social policy to serve the market. Nevertheless, the EPP does acknowledge that the EU membership entails a set of rights, as well as obligations, for the citizens of member states (EPP, 2015), which relates with the construction of the European social *acquis* and somewhat with a sense of European citizenship.

The heterogenic nature of Europarties’ conformation and the EPP’s centre-right positioning support the comprehension of a mixed discourse in terms of social welfare. In this context, the idea of equal opportunities has the potential to discursively nurture social aspirations while avoiding a short-term structural alteration in economic elites’ paths. The party expresses that its ideals “originate from fighting for equality of opportunity and making sure that everyone has opportunities to benefit” (EPP, 2017a: 1). Correspondingly, the promotion of social protection walks together with market flexibility, yet the flexicurity formula is seldom mentioned. Perhaps the choice of addressing social protection outside the flexicurity discourse indicates an effort of gathering political support that would not be reached otherwise. For example, the EPP (2017b: 2) manifests the political quest for “jobs that pay, with decent income and working conditions, and access to effective social protection for everybody who works”, encouraging the strengthening of a Union social dimension through mechanisms such as the European Platform to Tackle Undeclared Work. Likewise, it maintains that “increasing flexibility, diversity and entrepreneurship in 21<sup>st</sup>-century labour markets are crucial drivers of long-term economic growth and job creation [...] and must be combined with security, ensuring all citizens have access to dignified work and adequate social rights”.

Whilst claiming the need to increase the coverage of social provision, the EPP emphasises an urgency of reforming social protection systems. The outcome of this equation leads to some combination of inclusion of those outside social rights coverage (as in the idea of social inclusion), and the expansion of the working force in order to increment tax resources. The policy orientation proposed by the EPP to achieve these goals builds on active labour market schemes, such as prioritising education and human capital policies (cf. 2017a).

### *Party of European Socialists (PES)*

Succeeding the Confederation of Socialist Parties in the European Community and assembling socialist, social democratic and labour parties in the EU, the PES was formally founded in 1992 (Lightfoot, 2005). Social democratic forces have faced a singular problem at the European level regarding a coherent understanding of what the EU project should be like: in the 1980s, after realising there was no exit from European economic integration, most of the social parties advocated for regulated capitalism, which enhanced the European integration scope and generated ideological controversies with large parts of their national constituency (Hooge & Marks, 2009; Külahci & Lightfoot, 2014). A similar phenomenon was manifested through the centre-left parties' response to the refugee influx, testing the leftist value of solidarity: the parties have been confronted with the question of whether they can distinguish between the needs of individuals with basis on nationalities, ultimately making use of a “flexible solidarity” in order to avoid electoral damage (Boros et al., 2017). On the one hand, the political challenge of advancing a socialist-like discourse within an enterprise that rests largely on its economic and financial aspects has demonstrated obstacles for the PES agenda-setter capacity. On the other, it offers an opportunity for appraising the ideational adaptation efforts undertaken by social democratic forces regarding welfare reform.

While the EPP has discursively addressed the increases on poverty and inequality during the neoliberal era while maintaining its market goals, the PES is expected to have put forward a social equality framework while approximating its discourse to the EU market realities. This conjecture depicts a scenario analytically productive for the present study's objective of delineating ideational convergence in the EU. The current 5-year party programme, approved in 2014, expresses its intention to ensure the EU functions as "a real Social Union as much as it is an Economic Union" (PES, 2014:4). Moreover, it has the goal of "bring[ing] back job creation, a productive economy, a sense of community and respect for people", prioritising "innovation, research, training and a smart reindustrialisation policy" (PES, 2014: 3).

Since social democrats lost the 2009 elections, the PES, through its political foundation, has been working on a wide-encompassing programme named *The Next Left*. The plan offers a source of the core ideas orienting the party, particularly in the momentum that precedes the 2019 elections. In the words of the FEPS president Ernst Stetter (2017: 7), such adaptation efforts derive from the understanding that "it is simply impossible to continue thinking in traditional ways, to apply conventional solutions and to carry on hoping for the pendulum to simply shift by default, elevating the centre-left to the powerful positions again". In this context, the programme amounts to a set of prescriptive alterations regarding the future of both the PES and the welfare state (see FEPS, 2017). It recognises current predispositions about politics, particularly concerning leftist streams, and conceives the need of a new value-underpinned socioeconomic paradigm, re-politicising debates on the moral dimension of policy-making. The programme proposes a "new social deal" that upholds the notion of individuals both building and benefiting from it, with the aim of reconnecting the centre-left with the middle class. Moreover, it introduces the concept of "Welfare Societies" that "should discredit the claim that social policies are about overspending and insists on the idea that they are indispensable social investments" (FEPS, 2017: 27) wherein social provision should be accelerated.

In ideational terms, the PES' plan proposes to recalibrate traditional values guiding social democracy, predominantly social justice, equality and solidarity. Perhaps a social rebranding would be a better term to describe the planned objectives. The idea of equality is suggested to merge "in a coherent political agenda the principles of equality of opportunities with equality of outcomes and equality of autonomy" (FEPS, 2017: 24). The underpinning argument entails an emphasis on considering rights and responsibilities within the social justice discourse (cf. PES, 2014). Solidarity is similarly addressed in a manner aiming to disconnect the charity label and stress its transformative value. The narrative shift also encompasses the notion of competitiveness towards comparative advantages, apparently with the aim to strengthen the idea of solidary economy. Despite, the social rebranding exercise, the PES sustains a robust statist role in tackling inequalities and tangling global capitalism.

## Constituencies' aspirations

Accompanying the social momentum around the Pillar of Social Rights, the European Economic Social Council (EESC) has dedicated efforts to better comprehend the civil society expectations over a new social dimension for Europe. Moreover, it has discussed the evolution of the European social *acquis* against the current economic background. The EESC President Georges Dassis (2017:4) expresses that the Pillar can make the social *acquis* stronger and "bring it fully into the 21<sup>st</sup> century", fostering policies that "promote the consolidation of employment, social progress and productivity, as drivers of sustainable growth, and of national social protection systems and flexible labour markets that are ready to face the future". Such modernity discourse appears to entail the reasoning of social conforming to the labour market needs "of today". While Dassis sees the EPSR as supporting the European social *acquis*, the president of employers' group Jacek Krawczyk (2017: 5) rather emphasises the limitation of wage-setting processes to national competences, indicating that "employers' representatives generally oppose the idea of

further legislation in the field of social policies”. This observation is made upon an EESC study (2017) with 116 EESC members and about 1800 civil society representatives throughout EU28 countries. On the workers’ side, the president of the workers’ group Gabriele Bischoff (2017) manifests that the class’ expectations on the social future of Europe should surround fairness and opportunities, including in terms of member states convergence.

In this context, the idea of equal opportunities plays a preponderant role again. While employers are expectedly not willing to promote decommodification, workers are looking for an environment of opportunities. These two notions do not oppose each other, which may suggest that the idea of social inclusion runs over social equality. Amounting evidence in this regard, the EESC (2016: 3) asserts that “new policies are necessary to combine economic growth and budget deficit control with effective social inclusion policies. Poverty, insecure employment and unemployment have reached an unacceptable level. The lack of future prospects for young people represents a significant obstacle to a renewable future for Europe”. Intergenerational fairness underpins the rhetoric of policy reform, wherein the notion of social protection follows the pattern of increasing the coverage of social protection instead of necessarily strengthening social entitlements. Equally addressing the social future of Europe, for the ETUC, the “key priorities are to ensure a sustainable economic growth for the creation of quality jobs and better working conditions, a relaunch of the European social model based on stronger labour rights and social protection for all [...]” (Visentini et al., 2018: 5).

From the trade unions’ angle, the current phase of relative economic recovery should advance the implementation of a policy mix encompassing “a fully-fledged investment strategy for the future, with a genuine focus on research and development; a real pay rise; a halt in the deregulatory processes; allowing fiscal policy to come fully into its own; tackling the growing inequalities in the labour market; consolidating and enhancing social protection [...]” (Visentini et al., 2018: 5). The ETUC often uses social investment, not as an all-encompassing policy orientation, but as a policy strategy, or even as a more general

policy ideal, placing the disparity concerning life-long programmes across member states as a source of concern (cf. ETUC, 2016, 2017, 2018). Moreover, it stresses the need to tackle social inequality through other instruments such as combating tax evasion or establishing a European minimum wage (ETUC, 2017) which compose an agenda more closely operating under a social equality idea, since it involves some alteration in material redistribution.

## Discussion

A sense of trust surrounds what was proved efficient in the past. In terms of social welfare, Keynesianism demonstrated to offer a nurturing basis for human development in Europe. Perhaps because of the comfort in working with what is known, social welfare advocates have been struggling to create solutions capable of achieving the virtues of the past within current and upcoming settings. Yet, undoubtedly, the normalisation of the neoliberal discourse has not made the task easier. The efforts handled by the centre-left to design and promote the “next left” and a “new social deal” indicate the aspiration of recalibrating ideational and values schemes. Although this observation is more evident at the leftist side of the spectrum, since the increasing support to extreme right sentiments builds on rather old images opposing to cosmopolitanism, it does not mean that rethinking societal guiding principles is a quest confined to one socioeconomic ideology or another. The debate on crises of modernity expresses that the issue involves further socio-philosophical questions, such as the interplay between technology and human life or the incipient alternatives to financialization, wherein the elaboration of a new sociological imagination appears to be necessary for opening up these conceptual, political and policy challenges (Ossewaarde, 2017, 2014).

As an operational arm of welfare making, social policy may encompass several of the transformations concerning the future of European societies, or at least some symbolic illustration of them. The previous sections examined discourses on social policy and

welfare states reform, expressing that traditional social ideas are indeed going through a process of change. For instance, while social citizenship encompasses the EPSR outline, the “new social dimension” put forward by the EC assumes a different tone. Analyses of recent social enterprises must consider the aftermath politics context in which they have to be sold. Even if it was possible to know the absolute true intentions of a given actor, it appears to be complicated to untangle what would be the share of content used to convince market-led forces from direct manifestations of their interests. Moreover, it seems equally challenging to unravel what is a reflex of modernity and what stands for neoliberalism over-favouring a small share of individuals.

In the three dimensions of actors studied, the ideas of social justice, opportunities and solidarity assumed discursive preponderance. Social justice uses are far beyond (or behind) the Rawlsian reasoning of a just state as a system which enables individuals’ engagement even when they are ignorant about their future. Conceivably, the evidencing of class stratification and the intergenerational transmission of statuses had made individuals ultra-aware about their future. Social justice is rather associated with fairness, encouraging a sense of duty referent to welfare provision adjustments: the younger generations should benefit as much as those who benefited greatly in the past. Although younger cohorts have not manifested as much conservative right inclination as older ones, the fairness discourse offers a bright path for life improvements. Certainly, there is nothing wrong in aspiring fair and better lives. The problem arises in the utilitarian logic that measures morality according to the maximum possible welfare of a society, which allows the rights of some to be sacrificed in the name of a greater benefit of others. In such utilitarian theory of justice, the concerns with distribution are circumscribed to a convenient notion of utility across the community, which tend to reward too much the “wrong” individuals and too little to the “right” ones (Dworkin, 2000; Kildal, 2009). Ultimately, the morality of what is useful for the society conforms with economic elites’ interests.

The idea of equal opportunities seems to also echo an utilitarian theory of justice since little structural change, as in the redistribution of outcomes and material rewards, appears

to be envisioned. The adherence of the neoliberal image of a social Europe supports the explanation about the transition from social equality to social inclusion, which is best achieved through the promotion of equality of opportunities. The discursive analysis has shown that both the centre-left and labour unions endorse (not exclusively) the opportunities line. This phenomenon may allude to the social efforts to dismantle the stigma associated with welfare provision. The centre-right approach to the idea of solidarity is representative of transformations linked to modernity. The EPP has clearly demarcated its notion of solidarity as linked with fairness and responsibility. This form of fairness appears to forge a sense of duty from the individuals' side regarding welfare provision and adjustments, which is much weaker when purely handling solidarity as the practice of benefits sharing across groups, generations or regions.

The scenario depicts a trend towards transferring responsibilities from the state to individuals. In the context of European integration, individualisation might be capable of solidifying the EU project by forging cosmopolitanism among citizens since they become less connected to services and goods provided nationally (Beck & Grande, 2007). Through this process, social citizens are transformed into “risk takers and risk managers, who are self-responsible for their fate on the late modern labour market”, while the Union “takes a clear stand in promoting the individualization of social rights for purposes of cosmopolitan integration (van Gerven & Ossewaarde, 2012: 50-51). Although cosmopolitanism can counter extremist feelings arising from aftermath politics, the layering of duties combined with a reduction of rights does not seem to favour social welfare, as the increase in poverty and inequality levels over the past decades have evidenced. This debate offers another visualisation of an instrumentalist theory of justice, wherein individualisation would be enforced in the name of a greater European virtue. Additionally, an amplification of the EU social *acquis* does not seem to generate cosmopolitanisation, it rather builds a European identity upon a set of social rights, as suggested by Castles (2002).

The three groups of actors expressed the aim of including those who have been left outside protection systems, mainly as a response to new forms of work, which is perceived

as a desirable feature of the knowledge-based and globalised economy. Except by the trade unions, the overall sense regarding decommodification entails a quantitative expansion instead of a qualitative evolution. Just as social democrats lost shares of political support because of the trade unions deterioration over the past decades, the traditional meaning of work and the fight for social protection have also been crumbling (cf. Moen, 2017).

The deindustrialisation and the growing amount of jobs in discretionary learning environments serve as points to discuss the historical relationship between social and economic policy in industry-based economies. Discretionary learning jobs denote the work settings involving a high level of responsibility allocation to the employee, who is expected to perform tasks in a personal way. Positions in business services may be taken as typical examples of it, in opposition to jobs offered in conditions of lean production (more narrow definitions of problem-solving methods and further constraints in the working pace), Taylorism (restricted access to both learning and autonomy) and traditional organisations (tasks with the lowest level of complexity). As Europe stages a movement towards an economy where the speed of adaptation and innovation is taken as a decisive element for companies' development, the promotion of discretionary learning jobs are perceived as a path to cope with such transformations (Lundvall, 2012). These ideas are reflected in the Lisbon Strategy's intention to make the EU the most "dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world".

While discretionary learning jobs are seen as quality jobs, they represent a working relation different from the industrialised society wherein the collective bargaining has its roots; by advancing the individualisation of duties, they put forward the individualisation of community feelings. Moreover, the widespread logic of entrepreneurship and leadership across business does not appear to promote a rationale of collective bargain and solidarity across workers. Aligned with the perceived need of upscaling the workforce to fulfil such jobs, the three dimensions of analysed actors manifest as a policy priority the allocation of resources for some mix between education, research, training and lifelong learning, which materialises the firm adherence to the idea of equal opportunities.

The ideational convergence across the samples of centre-right and centre-left forces, workers and employers and the EC surrounds the discourse of equal opportunities, fairness and inclusion of those who have been left outside social protection coverage, symbolising a shift from social equality to social inclusion and individualisation of social citizenship rights. The remaining question is what this scheme of ideas tells in terms of potential for improving social welfare? An attempt to answer this interrogation should consider the current scenario entrenched with a neoliberal discourse and guided by aftermath politics. Therefore, the long-known conviction in thinking social welfare as a fruit of Keynesianism should be opened up, enabling social advocates to dialogue and put a social agenda forward within a stage of stronger market interests. As social democrats have realised, it is needed to cope with “a different culture of political participation, enabling more debates and disagreements” (PES, 2017: 42).

The social investment perspective certainly encompasses the ideas of equal opportunities and social inclusion, and, perhaps, it might be a clear reflection of the ideational puzzle being formed at the EU. In social welfare terms, what is equally certain is the general uncleanness on whether policies with a buffering function are taken as an integral part of the social investment scheme, or as a traditional form of welfare state intervention that offers a crucial prerequisite for an effective social investment plan (De Deken, 2017). Yet, part of social investment advocates has acknowledged the past rare reference to “social rights, redistribution or the promotion of social solidarity, which are *the key, historic features of state welfare*” (Midgely et al., 2017: 4, emphasis added). For instance, Morel and Palme (2017: 151) posited the importance of re-embedding the social investment approach “in the broader debate about social citizenship and social progress”. The reinforcement of the social protection side can equally be visualised in scholarly efforts to resonate the cruciality of institutional complementarities (Dräbing & Nelson, 2017) of buffers, stocks and flows policies (Hemerijck, 2015, 2017a).

The problem is whether the key, historical features of state welfare are still convincing if handled with the same language they have traditionally been. As the most preponderant

enterprise for strengthening the European social *acquis* of the past decades, the EPSR hints that the promotion of the social rights agenda demands a different approach nowadays; its scope has been associated with the social investment logic (EC, 2018a). This scenario portrays the challenges of resolving which transformations are products of modernity and which are representations of economic elites' interests, and how the interplay between these two dimensions is structured. Although this questioning extrapolates the scope of the present study, it can indicate that while a new sociological imagination is yet to evolve, the pursuit of welfare for aftermaths may benefit from a strategy that is capable of convening buffer, stock and flow policies, despite the critiques that arise from the instrumentalisation of people to serve the market. Ultimately, it seems a continuation of the debate on the uses of social policy: while it does contribute to social control and order, it also sets the grounds for well-being within the current global economic system.

# Conclusion

The aftermaths of economic crises in the 20<sup>th</sup> century generated social policy innovations due to threats to the political order and the interaction of competing ideas. In its turn, the period succeeding the financial collapse in 2008 portrayed a continuation of the status quo that has amounted to little policy novelty. The normalisation of the neoliberal discourse blaming social programmes for economic problems appears to have contributed to the lack of different and plausible ideas on welfare reform as alternatives to the neoliberal formula.

One the one hand, the increase in global and European economic inequality has evidenced that economic elites' power remains steady years on. On the other, the pro-exclusion and anti-system feelings nurtured by the neoliberal discourse have bestowed political support from the centre to radical streams in Europe. This change in the political order has opened room for questioning whether it will work as a call for action to the political centre to develop new coalitions and new social policy orientations. The present research coined this puzzling conjuncture as *aftermath politics*, inquiring how a social welfare regime can cope with it.

The analysis of welfare reform and social policy documents of the European Commission, EPP, PES, EESC and ETUC revealed that traditional social ideas are going through changes that are rather interpretative than innovative. The ideas of social justice, equal opportunities and solidarity have acquired discursive predominance in a way that allows them being communicated alongside the neoliberal discourse. While this study examined the normative foundations of the welfare state reform debate, it has not resolved the academic gap in the normative uses of social policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century nor in the pathway for a sociological thought capable of filtering what belongs to modernity and what reflects a neoliberal project. The objective was much more modest: to investigate what political convergence on social welfare ideas can tell about the social policy orientation taking form in the EU. The answer is twofold.

First, the social policy limitations of neoliberalism have been increasingly stressed without the political implication of breaking with the neoliberal paradigm. The loss of electoral support to social-democrats seems to have constrained the left-inclined actors to rebrand traditionally left ideals to cope with the post financial crisis politics. This appears to validate scholarly explanations on the deep-rooted neoliberal enterprise, not only in the present but also in times that are yet to come. For instance, Ossewaarde (2017) articulates the colonisation of the future with the neoliberal discourse. Secondly, the emergence of a new social momentum in Europe indicates that social advocates' efforts to rebalancing economic and social dimensions have enacted a space for action against the increase in economic inequality, including intergenerational inequality, whereby younger generations can play important tax-paying and electoral roles. What the social image of Europe lacks to move forward is political support. This is the case with the European Pillar of Social Rights, which could enable the socialisation of the European semester and promote transnational protection of workers.

The identified social space builds largely on the idea of opportunities and social inclusion, wherein, in policy action terms, the three studied sets of actors endorse resource allocation for some mix of education, research, training and lifelong learning policies. This ideational-policy combination is more convenient for economic elites since it overlooks the distribution of outcomes and envisions little structural alteration. Nevertheless, it seems hard to conceive of a viable (non-revolutionary) social welfare regime that does not play along with existing power relations. Even in the Keynesian heyday, social policy was backed by the policy elites' confidence in taxation being capable to not only finance public services but also to boost economic performance. In this context, the social investment approach has been treated as a quiet revolution. Just as the European Pillar of Social Rights, the social investment case demands political support to function for social welfare. The present study theorised that social advocates could respond to the neoliberal discourse distortion with a discursive strategy.

Although it might be far from ideal to couple social policy with expectations of economic return, social policy can only work if resources are allocated to it; therefore, it must be convincing. Part of the social investment advocates tries to do that. Some scholars (Sabel et al., 2017; Midgley, 2017; Hemerijck, 2012) even call it the “new social investment” because many of its proposals, such as the focus on education and care, are much similar to the post-war Keynesianism period. Certainly, a “new Keynesianism” would not be much appealing in austerity times; thus, an approach labelled with investment should do better. The economic argument of social investment reads as: “The fiscal resources for welfare provision are ultimately generated by productive workers. A larger, more productive, and less socially scarred workforce is the main funding base of the welfare state’s costly but potentially productive social spending” (Hemerijck, 2017a: 9). The prevalent neoliberal rhetoric of social spending as a causal factor of the financial crisis poses challenges to social welfare political support, after all, social spending is *undoubtedly costly* but only *potentially productive*. Thus, a social policy rebranding may increase its political support.

The remaining social challenge is to build a unified and stronger case concerning the institutional complementarities of buffer, stock and flow policies instead of selectively picking some of them. This movement is required to alter the notion that the social investment approach amends neoliberal excesses but does not modify the primary reliance on individualism and self-responsibility, and to compensate for the damages of utilitarian uses of social welfare ideas, which tend to reward more the better-off and less the worst-off. While the social investment approach to social welfare may not portray the purest social policy-intended reform plan, it is compatible with the ideational convergence retrieved in this study; thus, it can serve as common ground for forming political coalitions against polarisation and developing a European social agenda. Perhaps this might sound somewhat conformist, but it does represent an avenue to advance social welfare during periods of aftermath politics.

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# Appendix

## List of analysed documents

	Actor	Document title / Source
1	EC	Reflection Paper on the Social Dimension of Europe, COM(2017) 206 final. < <a href="https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2017:206:FIN">https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2017:206:FIN</a> >
2	EC	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions- An Initiative to Support Work-Life Balance for Working Parents and Carers, COM/2017/0252 final. < <a href="https://eurlex.europa.eu/legalcontent/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2017%3A252%3AFIN">https://eurlex.europa.eu/legalcontent/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2017%3A252%3AFIN</a> >
3	EC	Social Protection Committee Annual Report 2016 Review of the social protection performance monitor and developments in social protection policies. <Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, DOI 10.2767/901489>
4	EC	Employment and Social Developments in Europe Annual Review 2017. <Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, DOI 10.2767/144714>
5	EC	A European Social Security Number and Insurance Status Verifier < <a href="https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=PI_COM:Ares(2017)5862503">https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=PI_COM:Ares(2017)5862503</a> >
6	EC	Moving forward on the European Pillar of Social Rights < <a href="http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-4709_en.htm">http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-4709_en.htm</a> >
7	EC	Social Protection Committee Annual Report 2017- Review of the social protection performance monitor and developments in social protection policies. <Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, DOI 10.2767/022621>
8	EC	Social Agenda, 50(1) < <a href="https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2b33f61e-00bb-11e8-b8f5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en">https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2b33f61e-00bb-11e8-b8f5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en</a> >
9	EC	Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a European Labour Authority COM(2018) 131 final < <a href="https://eurlex.europa.eu/legalcontent/EN/TXT/?qid=1526897248159&amp;uri=CELEX:52018PC0131">https://eurlex.europa.eu/legalcontent/EN/TXT/?qid=1526897248159&amp;uri=CELEX:52018PC0131</a> >

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