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*Social Quality and Precarity:  
Approaching New Patterns of Societal (Dis-)Integration*

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The European Foundation on Social Quality was established during the Dutch Presidency of the European Union in June 1997. The aim is to develop networks of scientists to design and to apply the new theory on social quality, to prepare for comparative research of daily circumstances in Europe, Asia and other continents. This comparability presupposes a new conceptual framework, applicable at global level, as a condition to address the current fundamental international issues related to economic, socio-political and environmental aspects of global sustainability.

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**CONTENTS**

<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. A PROVOCATIVE REVIEW OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. SOCIAL QUALITY: A NEW METHODOLOGICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4. SOCIAL QUALITY AND THE EUROPEAN REALITIES</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5. THE CONCEPT OF PRECARITY</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>6. LABOUR MARKET, SOCIETY, AND PRECARITY</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>7. CURRENT POLITICAL CHALLENGES</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>8. OUTLOOK</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>5</b>

## 1. Introduction

The main aim of this article is to discuss the issue of 'precarity' in the context of the theory of social quality (see Beck et al, 2001), to further develop the theoretical foundation of precarity. Societal practice is the main challenge this concept tries to address. However, there is a danger in introducing a new term, while yet maintaining a discussion on traditional problems as poverty, marginalisation and exclusion. Our thesis is that these problems, far from being sufficiently tackled, are currently going along with and being adjunct to another challenge, namely precarity. Although the 'old problems' are not problems of individuals and expression of their 'personal failure', precarity – seen in the context of the theory of social quality – means a new stage of socialisation of the problems by further individualisation of the victims. In principle, we can say that this understanding of precarity is an expression of a further erosion of society, characterising especially periods of transformation of economic systems. In order to contribute to the discussion we will first present the European Single Market project as expression of establishing a specific European social model (*section 2*). Then we will remind the reader of some basic moments of the social quality approach (*section 3*). This is necessary in order to understand the assessment of the European social model, but as well to develop an understanding of social precarity. The following two steps will provide a brief sketch of the EC's social policy and problem interpretation in terms of the institutionalised Europe, first giving a wide overview (*section 4*), second discussing a landmark paper on precarity, titled *Social Precarity and Social Integration*. Though not being an official statement by the European Commission, it can be taken as a document that clearly expresses the perspective taken by the institutions (*section 5*). Following this, we will clarify that precarity goes much further than being a factor of increasing disintegration of individuals and groups. We suggest that disintegration with regard to labour market is not the actual problem. It is not even the disintegration of the labour market itself. At stake is the disintegration of an employment and perhaps even work-based model of society (*section 6*). Before wrapping up (*section 8*), some challenges for an integrated policy will be shown – here we offer as well some reflections on the meaning of a metatheoretical framework (*section 7*).

## 2. A Provocative Review of European Integration

### 2.1 The European Union as an economic project?

The notion of European social policy is as old as the idea of Europe – one can go back even to the ancient saga according to which Zeus stood at the 'cradle of Europe', building up *hierarchical social structures and ideologies based on dominance of man over woman, master over slave, city over the countryside, the King over his objects, a*

*transcendental, male Sky-God over all beings, particularly humans, of transcendence over immanence, of man over nature (Mies, 1999: 158)*

At the core of the first steps of European integration or better unification, when it came to the elaboration of the Treaty of Rome, we actually find two notions that are very much concerned with founding a European social model. In other words, we contest the established thesis that the so-called European integration is an economic project, having only a peripheral, ‘flanking’ socio-political meaning. Of course, this sharply contradicts the common understanding and thus needs explanation. The process of institutionalised European Integration started well before the Treaty of Rome, which came into force in 1957. Already in 1952 the ECSC had been established, this having been indeed a mere economic establishment, with only meagre socio-political meaning. At the core of the first treaties we find not much more than the intention of promoting internationally coordinated trade, limited to some sectors. When it comes to social policy, it only suggests offering some meagre mechanisms to cushion ‘negative social effects’ of industrial restructuring. A necessity that has not primarily been (if at all) a consequence of the policy of international integration but more linked to a secular change of accumulation regimes and global production and reproduction patterns.

## *2.2 Different global perspectives*

Established with the Treaty of Rome, the European Economic Community was backed by the reasoning that such an attempt of economic integration as given with the ECSC fell short due to its hybrid character. Being only concerned with economic integration in certain sectors and assuming an automatic tailing was obviously limited. We should not forget that the entire European project was built on far-reaching conditions in the international constellation as it emerged especially from the unique formation after World-War II. At that time we may recognise some different interpretations about existing global perspectives. First, we may find the interpretation of the split between the West and the East, the latter mainly being the formation of the then emerging socialist countries. Second, we find the West against the rest: USA and Europe on the one side, the socialist countries, the various Asian countries and the so-called developing world from the African and South-American world. Third, we find the European centre against the rest of the world, claiming that there is a core of Europeanisms that justifies to distinguish a core of European countries that is ready to defend this Europeanisms in the global conflict of systems – against the socialist countries but equally against the Northern American world (in this case and at that time the Asian world nor the countries of the African and Latin American World played a significant role in the political debates). Fourth, there was an inner-European split: the one side of it we may call a centripetal orientation, aiming at a unified European space, the other an – if not centrifugal – then at least isolationist European development. The inner-European development was not in the least dealing with the question of how to integrate Germany into a future historical

development that was not endangered by the awakening of the warmongers of the imperialist past – the Germans that had been main forces driving the world into two most horrible wars.

From here we can look at different stances, however all leading to the conclusion that Europe and the Europeans stood at the core of a world, now deciding on the way of the future. First, peace was a generally accepted goal, although the ideas of how to achieve it were divergent. Furthermore, the decision on capitalism versus socialism was on the agenda at a global level, primarily of course concerned with the two central worlds of understanding society, but as well concerned with searching for a new geo-political map of the entire world, thus defining the position of the peripheries, namely the Asian-Pacific region, the African continent and the Latin-Americas. Last but not least the question had to be answered how the West actually would interpret itself and its different understandings of capitalism (see for some aspects on the different worlds of capitalism Herrmann, 2007).

The founding of the European Economic Communities was at its very core dealing with the question of *What (kind of) society do we want?* as much as it was dealing from the outset with the idea of a single market. In other words, as much as the Treaty, founding the European Economic Community was lead by trade and even more fiscal matters, the ‘social question’ was by no means of lesser importance: *Who would belong* – if taken in the widest understanding – *in socio-cultural terms to Europe?* And *What kind of community, of integrity and cohesiveness did the actors have in mind?* In other words – and provocative when considering mainstream interpretations: The Treaty of Rome, the founding of the European Economic Community was not an economic project but a societal project, thus preparing for new societal relationships.

### **3. Social Quality: a new methodological and analytical Framework**

#### *3.1 Theorising ‘the social’*

The social quality approach offers, first and foremost, a complex methodological and analytical framework, making it possible to assess a social setting as a specific formation of relationships and processes that are expression and also condition of habitus. Of course, this formulation is in itself based on many assumptions and allows drawing links to approaches as Norbert Elias’ theory of civilisation, Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice and Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration. However, specifically distinct is the social quality approach in its relation to these approaches as it starts in principal from a proper understanding of ‘the social’ as the outcome of the interaction and dialectic between people (constituted as actors) and their constructed and natural environment (see Van der Maesen et al, 2005). With this in mind, its subject matter refers to people’s productive and reproductive relationships. In other words: the constitutive interdependency between processes of self-realisation and processes

of the formation of collective identities is a condition for ‘the social’, realised by the interactions of (i) actors, being – with their self-referential capacity – competent to act, and (ii) and their framing structure, which translates immediately into the context of human relationships. If this is agreeable, social quality is defined as:

*the extent to which people are able to participate in the social and economic life under conditions which enhance their well-being, capacity and individual potential*  
(Beck et al, 2008, Chapter-3)

This implies at its core that such enhancement is only then meaningful if it is about empowerment, namely the fact of making individuals action’s meaningful for societal development (and this means not least: change)

Against this background the critique of the *Aristotelian* truncation, as brought forward by one of the authors (Herrmann, 2008) opens a framework in which the social character of for instance the liberal and neo-liberal teaching can easily be understood. One can even go one step further, suggesting that *Aristotle* was providing the foundation for what later became known as classical economy. When for instance Friedrich Hayek states that the use of the adjective ‘social’ is without any meaning – and therefore, social democracy is no democracy, social justice is no justice, social market is no market, and subjectively the connection of this adjective with a subjective will result in nothing (see Hayek, 1997: passim) – we see what it actually means when today one frequently hears saying that the ‘European project is an economic project’. It follows the utilitarian propositions. To speak of a ‘dominance of the economic’ then means nothing else than to prolong the individualising commodification as it is typical for ‘market societies’ that are only steered by individual acts of exchange into all spheres of life – the blueprint of a European society that is solely concerned with the single market.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.2. *Two main tensions as point of departure*

It is against this background that the social quality approach suggests the definition as it had been presented before. And it is as well from here where we can see the meaning of the fundamental dialectical tensions as they are shown in the social quality quadrangle, reproduced in the following graph (see Beck et al, 2001):

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<sup>1</sup> An important remark of caution is necessary, however. We do not plead for the introduction of an understanding of the social as human face, masking harsh principals – such stance would be taken by advocates of the social market economy, asking for mechanisms of cushioning. The demand put forward here is to instrumentalise processes of economic production by defining them from the production of society rather than the other way round.



Three traditions should be named as being particularly important for developing this approach. First, it is in the tradition of enlightenment. Although this is strongly a European tradition, it is at the same time a global process as far as it is concerned with increasingly conscious, 'rational' motivation of action in terms of both secularisation and individualisation (see Herrmann, 2007). Second, it is the tradition of dialectical thinking that brings relations and processes together, by enabling the understanding of global development. Third, it is the tradition of understanding the production of daily life as the core of action, thus linking any philosophical and social thinking to its practical dimension. All this can well be brought together in the reinterpretation of Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu's separation of powers. As much as this separation of power is an institutional form of governing, the actual pattern is characterised by the challenge soci(et)al practice has to deal with: the balancing of accumulation regimes, modes of regulation, life regimes and modes of accumulation. It is important that this concerns the question of ways of establishing at least a temporary equilibrium. They concern communities, institutions, biographical and societal development (see the following graph, read from the inner circle as being concerned with (i) welfare policies, (ii) legislative systems, (iii) economic structuration and (iv) the public-private divide).



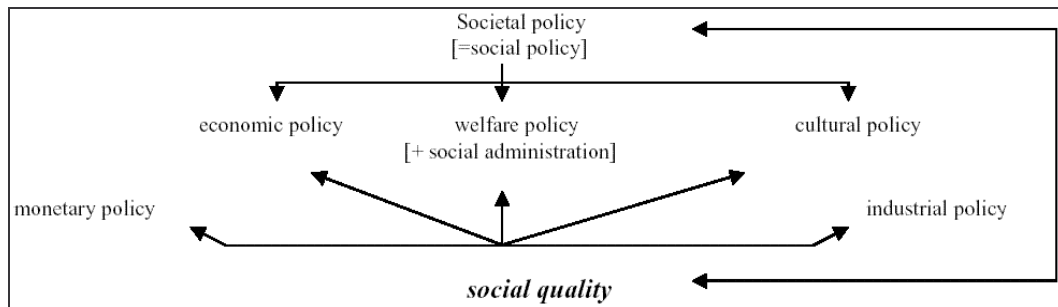
### 3.3 *The distinction between three types of factors*

This means nothing else than arriving at a comprehensive framework for a reflexive understanding of the social – already mentioned before: It is defined as the outcome of the interaction between people (constituted as actors) and their constructed and natural environment. With this in mind its subject matter refers to people's productive and reproductive relationships. In other words, the constitutive interdependency between processes of self-realisation and processes of the formation of collective identities is a condition for 'the social', realised by the interactions of (i) actors, – with their self-referential capacity – being competent to act and (ii) their framing structure, which translates immediately into the context of human relationships. For analysing societal processes the theory distinguishes between conditional factors, constitutional factors and normative factors. This is not based on arbitrary decisions. Rather, the advocates of this theory arrived at an analytical framework that allows the definition of these factors in their mutual dependency of a theory of practice. This topic will be extensively presented in the third main study about social quality (see W.A. Beck et al, 2009). The three sets of factors are as follows:

<b><i>CONDITIONAL FACTORS</i></b>	<b><i>CONSTITUTIONAL FACTORS</i></b>	<b><i>NORMATIVE FACTORS</i></b>
<i>socio-economic security</i>	<i>Personal (human) security</i>	<i>social justice (equity)</i>
<i>social cohesion</i>	<i>social recognition</i>	<i>solidarity</i>
<i>social inclusion</i>	<i>social responsiveness</i>	<i>Equal value</i>
<i>social empowerment</i>	<i>personal (human) capacity</i>	<i>human dignity</i>

Now, the definition of the normative factors can be derived from the interaction of conditional and normative factors, the conditional factors can be seen as function of interaction of the constitutional and the normative factors and the definition of the constitutional factors is derived from the interaction of the conditional and the normative factors. There is a danger of circularity, indeed, however it finds its solution in the fact that the social quality approach is a theory of practice (see Herrmann, 2007/b)

If we turn this approach against the – at least in the European Union – dominant view on a triangle of (i) economic policy, being concerned with economic growth, (ii) labour market policy as being concerned with creating employment and (iii) social policy, being concerned with social quality and cohesion (see European Commission, 2000; cf. van der Maesen, 2003) this has to be confronted with the social quality triangle, shown in the following graph.



This opens a new perspective on concerns of policy areas:

- \* economic policy, being concerned with allowing independence
- \* labour market policy as being concerned with opening ways for participation and
- \* social policy (or social administration) being concerned with securing dignity and fostering solidarity.

#### **4. Social Quality and the European Realities**

As complex as this approach is, it says nothing yet about the actual social quality, for instance in terms of European realities. In order to do so, we would like to suggest to heuristically introduce a second understanding of social quality, i.e. its 'descriptive perspective', looking at 'real' social quality of real societies or in other words: the good or high quality of every day's life – be it in rural and urban local communities, be it in regions and nation states or be it in supranational structures as the European Union. It is important to note that we are now dealing with people's real, daily life – happening in and depending on different levels and social spaces. In other words, (i) it is people's life in a local setting which may be of high social quality, although on a national level it may not be, and (ii) and it is certain areas of life (as with respect to public services) are of high social quality whereas others may not be.

As said in the beginning, from the beginning European integration or unification has very much been a question of establishing a specific social model, a framework for a society of the European Union and for European societies alike. Of course, this is not to say that such a model would prescribe concrete societies. Rather, diversity and subsidiarity have always been specific features of such a model. Nevertheless, there cannot be any doubt that the project of institutionalising European integration was about establishing a certain European society. One of the authors pointed on this aspect (see Herrmann, 1998) in reflecting on the debate on growth, competitiveness, and employment in the so-called Delors' White Paper (see Commission, 1993/a) and Green Paper on Social Policy (see Commission, 1993/b), the White Paper on Social Policy (see Commission, 1994). In addition to these general blueprints, there have been many attempts to assess the social situation in Europe – in particular around the debate on European programs to combat poverty from the middle of the 1970s until the

recent document on the *Social Reality of Europe* (see Liddle/Lerais, 2007), as well as the entire set of documents, concerned with the *Citizens' Agenda* (see [http://ec.europa.eu/citizens\\_agenda/social\\_reality\\_stocktaking/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/citizens_agenda/social_reality_stocktaking/index_en.htm); 3/1/08: 13:26). However, we are confronted with a paradox: there is a 'dominant economic orientation' going through a large part of the Treaties from the one of Rome in 1957 to the Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on the European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, signed at Lisbon, 13 December 2007. This 'dominant economic orientation' is also shaping major projects as the single market strategy, the introduction of the single currency and the Lisbon strategy from March 2000 and its mid-term review by the Kok-group. All this is very much concerned with the 'Europe we want'<sup>2</sup> as society. On the other hand, many of the explicitly 'social documents' had not been concerned with the social model as such. Rather, they accepted the fundamentals from the other side, thus (i) accepting a model according to which social policy could only have a flanking role in a society geared to commodification and one-sided individualisation, and (ii) thus dealing with an eclectic view on 'commonly accepted' issues usually dealt with under the heading of social policy.

## **5. The concept of precarity**

The European institutions are well aware of the fact that the increasing integration of Europe does not mean increasing integrity. It has surely been a landmark of policy development that we now find an employment chapter within the Treaties, the competence for the Commission to work against discrimination, exclusion and poverty, taking matters on board which have been – and actually still are – very much left as 'social policy issues' up to the member states for regulation. An important study has been published under the title *Social Precarity and Social Integration* (see Galie et al, 2002). It is explicitly dealing with precarity, but it is also meaningful that for the first time it has been a study that claimed within the new policy framework to provide an analysis going beyond a limited income and poverty study. Most notable at the outset is that the authors do not provide a definition of what precarity actually is. More or less interchangeably used or put forward in an unclear way are terms as poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation. We then read:

*The report focuses on two major dimensions of social precarity – precarity of living conditions and precarity of work conditions. In both cases, it adopts a broad rather a restricted concept of precarity: it is concerned not just with factors that constitute a threat of social exclusion in the short-term but with factors that are likely to erode people's resources and capacities in a way that raises their risks of marginalisation in the longer-term (ibid.: 1).*

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<sup>2</sup> Here it is not the place to discuss who the 'we' are.

The main problem with this – and subsequent – studies is that they are strictly positivist, starting with a conventional understanding of what social problems are about. This means as well, that precarity appears very much as issue of an eclectically assembled patchwork of what ‘a good society is about’.

With this in mind it is of course difficult to imagine that the authors arrive at – or even think about – a thorough understanding of what the social is about, and what its quality is – the definition has been mentioned before. Thus, the study presents empirical results that are important without any doubt; however, they barely go beyond a point of collecting data for different life situations and their meaning for the development of individuals. Even the prevailing understanding of ‘social capital’ is very much a matter of the assemblage of contacts rather than the integration of what has before been presented as a dialectic of social and biographical development. This finds a marked expression in the title of Chapter 6 of the report, reading ‘*Social Precarity and Personal Integration*’ (ibid.: 115). Especially problematic is not the confrontation of the social and the personal; however, we question the suggested complementarity of precarity and integration. To formulate it as explicit and clear critique: We do not read anything about empowerment, not even do we read anything about the personal, biographical development. Let alone that we read anything about development – considerations about the way forward. One can even say that we are facing a harsh recoil, even in relation to the Delors’ White paper which has been mentioned above.

## **6. Labour Market, Society, and Precarity**

### *6.1. Precarity and social quality*

In order to overcome subsequent problems of grasping the social situation and determining social problems, we would like to introduce – when dealing with social quality as standard for an assessment – a dimension that can function as pendent. In other words, rather than simply speaking of high social quality versus low social quality it is suggested to introduce social precarity as pole standing against ‘high social quality’. In other words, when it comes to the analytical concept of social quality, it is translated now into an axis spanning from:

- \* social quality as a high degree of people’s ability to participate in the social-economic, cultural, juridical and political life of their communities under conditions which enhance their well-being and individual potentials for contributing to societal development as well,
- \* social precarity as a lack of people’s ability to participate in the social-economic, cultural, juridical and political life of their communities under conditions which enhance their well-being and individual potentials for contributing to societal development as well.

It is important to understand that the related proposed axis between social quality and social precarity is dealing with relations and processes standing at the core of society. With regard to standard definitions of social problems as poverty, exclusion etc., these are important challenges to overcome immediate emergency situations – areas in which current societies still fail to a large extent. However, the real problem is actually going much further. Precarity means that even the centre of integration is dissolving in tendency – the centre which metaphorically can be taken as point magnetically attracting integrity. In other words, precarity is a process of dissolution of society into self-sustaining individuals, being as such exposed to the ‘individualist socialised capital’.<sup>3</sup> In consequence, precarity is a ‘life pattern’, gaining validity as well for people at the centre of society, justifying in many respects to speak of a refeudalisation of society. As such, precarity is a pattern that is highly relevant for individuals but as well for (welfare) societies as such. Furthermore, it is a challenge, demanding the redefinition of the current European social model. What actually makes the problem one that moves into the centre of society is not firstly a matter of the increasing number of people concerned; nor is it a matter of the perspectives of living in ‘insecurity’ or in danger of being marginalized for a longer time. What is far more important is the fact that at their core, all these developments are affecting the capacity to act not only in terms of the lack of resources. At stake is the falling apart of time, space and organisation of daily life (see Herrmann, 2008/c)

It is in this sense that precarity is actually quite different when compared to poverty. Rather than being a broadened concept of poverty and marginalisation, precarity is about a fundamental change of participation strategies. Precarity means disintegration of society as far as it continues and carries the incomplete modernisation too far. Rather than allowing a merging of rationalities, it fosters a further divide of rationalities, actors, space and time. Importantly Zygmunt Bauman writes:

*‘Progress’ stands not for any quality of history, but for the self-confidence of the present. The deepest, perhaps the sole meaning of progress is made up of two closely interrelated beliefs – that ‘time is on our side’ and that we are the ones who ‘make things happen’. The two beliefs live together and die together – and they go on living as long as the power to make things happen finds its daily corroboration in the deeds of people who hold them (Bauman, 2000: 132).*

Taking it from here, precarity is not about a lack of resources alone; nor is it about a lack of decision making-power due to a lack of resources. Rather, it is about a lack of resources due to a lack of decision-making power in the course of an enforced falling apart of different spheres of life: alluding to *Bauman’s* wording: the loss of time and the loss of the feeling that

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<sup>3</sup> The latter means that we have capitals with a super power [for instance with larger budgets than nation states] but largely controlled by individuals and/or acting as capital in [quasi-]monopolist positions.

we can make things happen, not due to the lack of resources but due to the individuals' position in the structure of society. In other words, precarity is not a characteristic of an individual's life situation (be it as class individuals or not) nor is it a matter of structures of a society that has changed (be it national society or a society as part of a global system). Precarity is about the change of the 'joints' of the dialectical relationship between the poles of the social quality quadrangle.

## 6.2 *A link with original Marxian interpretation*

The following has to be left to further debate but should at least be mentioned here already. What is the actual difference to the perspective which has already been elaborated by Karl Marx a long time ago, pointing on the general problematique of alienation, for instance by commenting on James Mill by saying:

*My work would be a free manifestation of life, hence an enjoyment of life. Presupposing private property, my work is an alienation of life, for I work in order to live, in order to obtain for myself the means of life. My work is not my life.*  
(Marx, 1844/a: 228)

And in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* he states even clearer:

*The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. The devaluation of the world of men is in direct proportion to the increasing values in value of the world of things. Labour produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity – and this at the same rate at which it produces commodities in general. This fact expresses merely that the object which labour produces – labour's product – confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labour is labour which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labour. Labour's realisation is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realisation of labour appears as loss of realisation for the worker; objectification as loss of the object and bondage to it; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation.*

*So much does labour's realisation appear as loss of realisation that the worker loses realisation to the point of starving to death. So much does objectification appear as loss of the object that the worker is robbed of the objects most necessary not only for his life but for work. Indeed, labour itself becomes an object which he can obtain only with the greatest effort and with the most irregular interruption. So much does*

*the appropriation of the object appear as estrangement that the more objects the worker produces the less he can possess and the more he falls under the domination of his product, capital.*

*(Marx, 1844/b: 228)*

### 6.3 A link with recent interpretations

It is suggested to speak of precarity when three conditions are coinciding and we can speak of a manifest structural alienation as falling apart of: (i) 'material' reproduction (poverty), (ii) control over space and time (lack of political influence), and (iii) control over situations and practice (lack of control over the immediate life). From here some remarks can be made, discussing an interpretation of precarity brought forward by Rolf-Dieter Hepp under the title *Fragmentation and Isolation* (Hepp, 2006). An important point is made by establishing a strong link between employment and unemployment as, indeed:

*The modern European society is structured mainly by its members' proximity or distance to the processes of labour and qualification, thus determining their conditions of life and of participation (ibid.)*

Hepp correctly states the decreasing embeddedness of individuals into the labour market but also points at the necessity to contextualise the individual's experience with the economic cycle. So he points on unemployment, having been an exception, however being *now an ever increasing fragmentising segment within the societal reality. Consequently, unemployment is not a temporary cyclical problem, representing an episodically and temporary marginal note; rather it is gaining a central social role (ibid.).*

We see the need to qualify such an interpretation. Read this way, it looks as if precarity is not much else than the consolidation of unemployment as matter of normalising unemployment and insecurity on the labour market – the normalisation as well in terms of insecurity effecting previously secure positions. This suggests not much more than unemployment now also effecting people who previously were in more or less secure positions. This, however, is a limited interpretation insofar as it does not sufficiently reflect the fact that work itself has a different meaning – for individuals and within society. Still being crucial – and more or less sole – means to secure income and subsistence, the social meaning of work for the individual life plan is still high. However, its character and meaning changed in terms of availability, coherence and predictability. This means another side of the 'social meaning' of work for individual life changed: the social character of work itself. Now it is not only the fact that work is a means of production of commodities which is relevant; moreover, the work itself and social relationships are also commodified. Consequently we propose to speak of

desocialisation rather than isolation. The difference is clearly that in case of isolation the actual entity – the society – is seen as structurally intact, needing some repair and still offering the possibility that – after repair – individuals can be reintegrated – social inclusion policies of the European Union speak volumes about ambitions – and failures. Looking at desocialisation suggests that the process of dissolution actually affects social integrity itself. This makes clearer that it is not the individual that loses the frames of reference; instead: the frames themselves do not exist anymore.

This brings us back to the quote from Zygmunt Bauman. Precarity is about the fact that capability to act is taken from individuals, rather than the resources to act. Thus, the question of resources gains a further dimension as well as that resources are now not about means for securing subsistence. In the perspective which is developed here:

*resourcefulness means the freedom to pick and choose, but also – and perhaps most importantly – the freedom from bearing the consequences of wrong choices, and so freedom from the least appetizing attributes of the life of choosing (Baumann, 2000: 89).*

A crucial point is that against this background the discussion on precarity has to be more focused and at the same time it has to be widened. It has to be focused insofar personal security, social recognition, social responsiveness, personal capacity (the constitutional factors of social quality) are about regaining formal positions rather than reinterpretations; they are in need of structural reinforcement. It is in this sense that Pierre Bourdieu's 'concept de capital' (Bourdieu, 2000) and its culmination in the 'esprit de calcul' (ibid.: 17) are in danger of leaving individuals alone on the bowling alley (of course, alluding to Robert D. Putnam). The proposal is demanding for widening the perspective as it asks for a wider understanding of what 'work' – in terms of socially valued activity – actually is about. The limitations of a commodity-oriented understanding of work have to be overcome.

## **7. Current Political Challenges**

### *7.1 The necessity to redefine social policy*

The conclusion mentioned above also means that social policy has to be seen in a different perspective. It is not about 'much has been achieved and more has to be done'; rather, we can see a challenge to redefine social policy in several regards.

First, it is about refocusing policies. In the proposed light we are challenged to overcome the separation of social policy from other areas. Considering the architecture of the social quality approach, this means to apply a twofold move. Overall, we are concerned with a move from



developing a meta-theoretical foundation for soci(et)al practice. This provides a common ground for different disciplines and as well their interdisciplinary connection – actually one can say that it is itself the chain link of the connection. Both disciplinary and interdisciplinary work have to merge with public policy areas (as for instance public health, education, water/energy). Furthermore, these policy areas, but the different individual disciplines should as well intrinsically relate to categories and social groups (as for instance elderly, lower income groups, migrants). It is from here – and in any case minding the dialectical feedback loops – that policies can be developed in practice. This means that we have a fundamentally different understanding, starting from ‘public policies’ rather than ‘social policies’. Of course, this does not deny the importance of social policy and respective measures in the traditional sense. However, it means that both, public policy in the sense as it is suggested here and social policy, are dealing with the fundamental question of socialisation, i.e. the way of society-building as matter of increasing the individual’s power. It is important to note that power, as understood here, is a matter of shaping spaces for action rather than about developing – and counteracting – hierarchies. In other words – and linking to the deliberations on empowerment in a social quality perspective (see Herrmann, 2008/d) – it is the perspective on empowerment as win-win-game rather than a zero-sum-game.<sup>4</sup>

Second, public policy has to be developed as policy of socialisation rather than as policy for the excluded. Of course this does not aim on abandoning the view on very specific and unbearable social circumstances as poverty, unemployment, etc. However, as much as we need specific measures, in the end only a policy on general integration will succeed in overcoming societal and social disintegration. This is not about the raising tide frequently suggested as mechanism lifting all boats. It is about a policy that puts processes of socialisation, of conscious society-building at its core. Policies starting from being policies to combat exclusion, and to achieve inclusion, start from the wrong assumption that today’s ‘normality’ is based on individual development alone. If this was ever the case, it should now be questioned. It is without doubt a fact that this is not the case anymore today. The clearest examples of this can be seen in the Nordic countries, but as well in all Western countries where schooling and health issues are a matter of a general and public responsibility – and remain to be so in one way or the other, even where we find massive policies of privatisation.

Third, elaborating social policy is consequently very much a matter of applying interdisciplinary approaches. Important is, however, that they are developed on the basis of a common meta-theory that follows the architecture as it is suggested by the Social Quality Approach. While such an approach is as well guided by normative considerations and although subjective factors are considered as being important, they are nevertheless grounded in a theoretically sound approach of reflexive and historical reasoning.

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<sup>4</sup> Without any doubt, achieving such kind of empowerment requires very much action as well in terms of combating hierarchies, i.e. as matter of a zero-sum-game.

Fourth, from here we can arrive as well at processes of adroitness that go beyond mechanisms of coordination or harmonisation. Whereas the latter start from an ex-post perspective, aiming on bringing together different strands of pragmatically developed and linked policy areas and developing a closer ‘interaction’, it is about starting from a common focus, namely the aim of a ‘functioning society’.

## 7.2. *Practical examples*

We can see part of the problematique for example in the fact that the remits of ministries are rarely defined from the perspective of soci(et)al needs. Rather, professional interests and rationalities, power considerations and pragmatically defined constellations play a role.<sup>5</sup> While labelling ministries it can of course be disputed if education is part of social policy in the widest sense, if employment in the cases mentioned is merely seen as a *fait économique* and so on, but also the other way around, if there can be any justification for leaving the *Utrikesdepartementet* (Ministry for Foreign Affairs) out – it is the Swedish Ministry that is responsible for Migration (the section headed by the *Migrationsminister*). Furthermore, to a different degree social affairs are usually in a particular – and peculiar – way a cross sectional task, catered for by the entire cabinet and being especially observed by the respective prime minister of the countries. What is interesting in addition to the list of different formations of responsibility is the fact that many of these different constellations frequently change – particularly according to the interests of newly elected governments.

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<sup>5</sup> As much as they are historically given and shaped by national traditions and formations, they are nevertheless rather arbitrary. The following illustrative view looks at relevant ministries/government departments in France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Sweden: France: *Ministère de l’Emploi et de la Solidarité* (Ministry of employment and solidarity), *Ministère de l’Éducation, de la Recherche et de la Technologie* (Ministry of education, research and technology), *Ministère de la Jeunesse et des Sports* (Ministry of youth and sport), but as well the *Conseil Économique et Social* (Economic and social council); Germany: *Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales* (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs), *Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend* (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth) *Bundesministerium für Gesundheit* (Federal Ministry for Health), *Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung* (Federal Ministry for Education and Research); Ireland: *An Roinn Gnóthaí Sóisialacha agus Teaghlaigh* (Department of Social and Family Affairs), *An Roinn Sláinte agus Leanaí* (Department of Health and Children), *An Roinn Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta* (Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs); Italy: *Diritti e Pari Opportunità* (Equal Opportunities), *Politiche per la Famiglia* (Family, including Childcare and Kindergardens), *Politiche Giovanili e Attività Sportive* (Youth and Sports), *Istruzione* (Education), *Lavoro e della Previdenza Sociale* (Employment, Social Security and Pensions), *Solidarietà Sociale* (Social Solidarity, a new ministry with competences for the definition of social policies, including migration), *Salute* (Health); Sweden: *Socialdepartementet* (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs), *Näringsdepartementet* (Ministry of Industry, Employment and Communications), *Utbildnings- och kulturdepartementet* (Ministry of Education, Research and Culture), *Justitiedepartementet* (Minister of Justice – here: *Demokrati-, storstads-, integrations-, och jämställdhetsminister* – Democracy, Cities, Integration and Equal Opportunities), *Miljö- och samhällsbyggnadsdepartementet* (Ministry for Environment and Building); here it is of some interest that we find three ministers alone within the Ministry of Social Affairs, namely: the *Socialminister* (Minister for Social Affairs), the *Folkhälso- och socialtjänstminister* (Minister for Public Health and Social Services), the *Vård- och äldreomsorgsminister* (Minister for Health and Elderly Care).

Pragmatically and with respect to policies of European integration in the interest of a Europe of social quality two steps are of immediate relevance. First, a need to focus on policymaking. Whereas the current European social model, to a large extent, is based on a liberal model of individualism and utilitarianism, the foregoing points at the need of grounding policies on an alternative understanding of the social (see Ferge, 2004). From there, then, the various needs of policies can be elaborated. Second, there is a need of a synchronisation of policies. This is relevant in three regards.

- Currently we find for instance disparate competencies with respect to the European and the national levels. And even within some of the member states, federalist structures undermine developing coherent interventions and a development of coherent spaces of action. This can be read as demanding a centralisation of policies. However, this would be a misinterpretation. Instead, at stake is a correspondence between different levels of intervention.
- Mentioning intervention, this should not be misunderstood. Any political action has to be considered as matter of 'intervention' and 'civic action'. It is here where actually public spaces are established. – This has immediate consequences for instance for dealing with political topics as labour-market activation policies, flexicurity-measures and also governance approaches as for instance the open method of coordination and finally the role of different so-called stakeholders, in particular the role of non-governmental organisations. In all these cases it is not necessarily a question of their usefulness as such but more a matter of the way of the policy-design.
- Coherence and synchronisation is also needed with the view on political areas and as it has been shown above by suggesting a twofold approach.

With these points in mind it seems to be of utmost importance to bring social quality to the centre of social policy, not only in analytical terms but to confront it with precarity – the two being concerned with both a holistic perspective on life situations and a coherence-oriented approach on social situations.

## **8. Outlook**

Social policy today is not fundamentally different from social policy in earlier times. Still, two aspects are noteworthy. The one is that the process of socialisation is much more advanced than in the early years of an emerging acceptance of public responsibility; and the other is that with this more subtle issues are a concern for policies as well. Together, this means that public social policy shifted more and more from the margins of society to its centre. In other

words, from its emergence as means dealing with individuals at the periphery of societies, it established itself as matter of dealing with the centre of soci(et)al development. In other words, we see that it is part of a centripetal process of society building. At the same time, however, current societal development is characterised by centrifugal processes to a large extent– globalisation being one major moment, the disembedding of and split between policies another aspect and the enforced and artificial isolating individualisation being a third facet. Taking this as background, combating social precarity is a major challenge. The task is to reintroduce the social as matter not only of supply policies but as matter of a public sphere of (inter-)action, recognising the need and possibility of coherence or synchronisation of the three-by-four factors as suggested by the social quality approach (see above) as the core of the architecture for achieving social quality and combating its counter-appearance of social precarity.

More pragmatically we also need to look at the following three issues. First, it has to be acknowledged that the EU already defines society and the question is not one of having a European Social Model or not having one. Instead we have to ask which vision we want to develop for Europe and how to operationalise and implement this vision. Accepting that economic relations are also means to confront the vision of the EU as

*most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion (European Council, 2000)*

with a vision as presented in the Amsterdam Declaration on Social Quality:

*a Europe in which social quality is paramount. Its citizens would be able and required to participate in the social and economic life of their communities and to do so under conditions which enhance their well-being, their individual potential and the welfare of their communities. To be able to participate, citizens must have access to an acceptable level of economic security and of social inclusion, live in cohesive communities, and be empowered to develop their full potential. In other words, social quality depends on the extent to which economic, social and political citizenship is enjoyed by all residents of Europe (European Foundation, 1997).*

Such a vision, this is important, has to be based on the understanding of fundamental human rights rather than a voluntarist understanding of the social. In this context, it is also of utmost importance to define a clear role within the process of globalisation. In the Commission's Communication we read:

*Responding to Europe's new social realities. The ongoing stocktaking of Europe's social realities is looking at the big changes under way in employment patterns,*

*family structures, lifestyles and in traditional support structures, reflecting increasing pressures from demography in an ageing society. This will require a new approach to the social agenda with implications for both national and European level: we will need more effective means of ensuring citizens' existing rights of access to employment, education, social services, health care and other forms of social protection across Europe. Globalisation is central to these new realities: in areas where the EU has a direct role, it must better adapt its existing instruments and policies, but also build on new policy responses such as the Globalisation Adjustment Fund and continue to respond to the legitimate concerns of people adversely affected by changes in trade patterns and by economic and social change. It must also be alive to the need to respond to new forms of poverty in our Member States. (European Commission, 2007: 4).*

In the mentioned document, many important issues are raised, not in the least the role of the EU to shape the process of globalisation rather than seeing it as something that 'happens', that is like an 'external event' and the need of securing socially beneficial outcomes rather than seeing the process solely as matter of economic growth in its own right. However, looking at the quote – and as well at the document in general – we can see fundamental shortcomings, the first being a lack of explanatory power: causes and effects are confused, factors are segmented and disjointed etc. The second has to be seen in the fact already expressed in the title: *Succeeding in the Age of Globalisation*. Again, it sees globalisation still as a fundamentally external factor. Moreover, the task again seems to be to compete in the world, to be the successor rather than accepting the vision of a 'one-world-strategy'.

The second issue concerns the question, in order to overcome precarity as defined before, that we should develop an activation strategy concerned with citizens rather than with employees or consumers. This may sound abstract, however it is very concrete when it comes to matters of policy-making. Are benefits linked to employment and especially to standard-employment? Is taking up voluntary work a barrier when it comes to claiming benefits? Is participation in the labour market highly standardised, flexible in regard of employers or with respect to employees? – These and other questions are of immediate importance when concrete measures are at stake.

The third issue implies that all this can only be implemented in a way of overcoming asymmetries. Decisions have to be taken where they are relevant and in any case they should be taken as decisions of living spaces. This entails a consideration of practice; and equally it means to have informed decisions. However, informed means dealing with the challenge of completely involving citizens as such. A difficulty to deal with this challenge is to re-translate rights into truly social rights rather than accepting their perversion into social rights of individuals.

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