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Review article

Between neoliberalism and nationalist populism: what role for the 'European social model' and social quality in post-Brexit Europe?

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*This article investigates the idea of 'the social' in Europe after the UK's EU Referendum vote, with reference to the 'European social model'. It is argued that the key drivers of the vote outcome did not feature in the referendum campaign but are features of longer running and deeper fractures in both British and wider European society. Especially, the lack of response to societal problems, the downplaying of individual participation, and a crisis in democracy created by an increasingly neoliberal direction within an EU concerned with austerity and social control, contrary to the values of the 'European social model' (Walker, 2005). In the absence of action for better 'social quality', this overall neoliberal direction has also weakened the progressive and integrative potential of social policy. The result is the regressive nationalist populist backlash against neoliberal technocracy. Instead, we argue that answers to contemporary European challenges must focus on improving social quality and democracy.*

## Introduction

This article considers the idea of the European social model, which originally intended to distinguish a dual concern with both economic development and social progress. It discusses how this rhetorical device, despite its potential, has been colonised by the neoliberal imperative to reduce all societal concerns to economic ones (even though

the EU has always been primarily an economic project). It is argued that the lack of a clear definition or theoretical depth to 'the social' in the European social model is partly to blame for the strong tendency towards neoliberalism. Social quality is then introduced, which theorises the social, and is a democratic concept. Following this, the Brexit Referendum is discussed: societal dislocation (brought about by neoliberal economic policy), and the resurgence of a regressive nationalist populism are cited as key drivers behind the vote. As set out in the introduction to this Themed Section, we understand populism to be the adoption of rhetoric by political actors, which characterises the 'establishment' or political, economic or cultural elites, as a threat to an envisioned 'heartland' (Taggart, 2004), though not all opposition to elites is populist (Müller, 2016). In right-wing versions of populism, there is anger with elite groups (especially those espousing 'social liberal' values), but this anger is also directed downwards at marginal groups in society, such as refugees, criminals, and unemployed people. Finally, we consider how adopting a social quality approach may realise the potential for a European social model and oppose both further technocratic neoliberalism or the descent into xenophobia and national protectionism.

## The 'European social model' and the neglect of the social

The 'European social model' is a 'contested ideal', which lacks a clear definition in EU policy (Whyman et al., 2012). It is largely an adjunct to the economic and trade-focused project of building the European single market (Whyman et al., 2012; Vanhercke et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the European social model idea is an important 'political intervention', attributed to Jacques Delors in the early 1980s, which was intended to 'strengthen the rather fragile European identity' and to promote Europe as an alternative to Anglo-Saxon liberal capitalisms, and the managerial capitalism of Japan (Hermann, 2017, p.59). It can be distinguished from the minimalist and individualist neoliberal approach to social policy in the United States (US) and increasingly, other Anglo-Saxon countries, and instead, denotes a more social democratic basis for policy and society (Gough, 1998; Whyman et al., 2012; Hermann and Hofbauer, 2007). The EU is similar to the US and other large trading blocs in its commitment to developing economic integration, but what sets the EU apart is the loosely defined social dimension (Walker, 2005). There is some debate about multiple European social models - especially in distinguishing between Western Europe, Northern and Southern Europe, and the post-2004 accession countries of Central and Eastern Europe, in a similar vein to comparative welfare regimes. One interpretation of a singular European social model includes attention to minimum rights and decent working conditions, a broadly universal and high degree of social protection, dialogue and compromise between societal actors (including businesses, trades unions, political actors, and citizens), inclusivity of labour markets, the provision of public services, and a focus on solidarity, guided by the concepts of social inclusion and social cohesion (Vaughan-Whitehead, 2015).

For its adherents, the European social model is seen as a brake on the remorseless global ideology of neoliberalism. It seeks to counter societal destruction created by financialization and global flows of capital, at least within Europe. This is in contradistinction to the impulses of liberal capitalist societies, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. The UK has long been considered a liberal welfare state, with an overarching governmental preference for market solutions to welfare issues, residual social protection, and minimal, often means-tested support, as in Esping-Andersen's (1999) tripartite typology of welfare states. Yet, the UK's 'social model' has also been termed 'liberal collectivism', due to its hybrid approach that has retained some important aspects of social democracy and the notion of the 'public realm', such as the expectation that the state has, at least, some public responsibilities (Clarke, 2004; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012). The failure to fully adopt the social democratic model during the Keynesian postwar period, rendered the UK's welfare state and social policy approach a 'mutation', situated somewhere between the extreme liberal model of the US and the more 'social' European models (Esping-Andersen, 1999, p.87). As a consequence of the absence of a clear commitment to the principles of the European social model, the UK has been particularly amenable to the influence of neoliberal ideology and policy over the past forty years.

The 1997-2010 'New Labour' governments attempted to 'graft' aspects of a more European-style level of social support and investment onto their individualist, pro-market, low-tax neoliberal approach, by deferring the costs of public expenditure through policies such as Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs) and outsourcing (Whitfield, 2001). This had negative consequences for solidarity, and to the claims to be social democratic by those governments (Hermann and Mahnkopf, 2010). The post-2010 Conservative-led governments have renewed the extreme neoliberal project to residualise social protection and furthered the use of the welfare state as social control for 'deviant' people (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; Harrison and Sanders, 2015). Under the guise of 'necessary' austerity, cuts and fiscal control Conservative governments have sought to move the UK closer to the US model (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011), and to strip away social protection, notably for unemployed people, disabled people, and families with more than two children, but not for older people and the richest 1%.

The European social model may have been more of a weak rhetorical device than a metatheory or specific policy approach. However, Whyman et al. (2012) argue that there have been benefits for workers in the UK and other low regulated countries that have adopted even a minimalist version of the European social model, for example, from the social chapter and the working time directive. While, on the one hand, EU law protects some social rights from neoliberal austerity cuts, EU competition law also hinders reversing the tendency towards opening-up public services to private contractors (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012). Contrary to the ideals of the European social model, the EU has also been susceptible to the corrosive influence of neoliberal thinking, politics and policy, while UK governments, especially Conservative ones, must take some of the blame as the 'enemy within' in terms of EU social policy. While the term emerged from European political elites, societal

development, as part of a common European identity, has been historically struggled for by working class movements, trade unions, and social democratic and socialist political parties (Hermann and Mahnkopf, 2010). Along with the gradual decline in the influence of these three factors in the ongoing process of European integration, political elites have increasingly favoured a more neoliberal direction, including the liberalisation of trade, weakening of social protection and welfare states, protection of multinational corporations, and the privatisation and marketisation of public services under the aegis of 'competitiveness' (Hermann and Mahnkopf, 2010). Rather than the compromise of a 'socially-embedded market project', 'social concerns' became subordinated to neoliberal economic imperatives and integrationist politics, particularly after 2008 (Jones and O'Donnell, 2017). This continues today, with the 'centrist' French President Macron seeking to weaken workers' rights and trade union power. While Daly (this issue) argues that member states retain a degree of domestic control over national social policies, this overall neoliberal direction has shaped the development of EU countries and limited the policy options open to governments.

For example, limits to deficit spending according to the Growth and Stability Pact have long prohibited member states from adopting a more interventionist Keynesian approach, and this has a knock-on effect in encouraging a reduction of public sector liabilities, such as privatised hospitals in Germany and PFI hospitals in the UK (Hermann and Mahnkopf, 2010). Instead of an adjunct to economic imperatives, the social dimension has become dependent upon economic integration and fiscal rules (Copeland and Daly, 2015). In the post-crisis period, the EU has moved further away from the notion of economic stimulation towards a technocratic model of financial consolidation, invoking both austerity and structural change, and focused on preventing and correcting the behaviours of states that do not adhere to its fiscal rules (Hermann, 2017). This has had particularly negative outcomes for southern European states, such as Greece, Portugal, and Spain.

As a result, it has been argued that in pursuing neoliberal economic reforms, the EU has deepened a longer-term process of 'Americanization' (Wincott, 2003), with the UK in particular strongly in favour of this process, and generally opposed to the aims of the European social model. Therein lies the rub; at this present juncture, the EU Referendum result marginally in favour of Brexit, appears to have been a result of disillusionment with the outcomes of neoliberalism over the past three decades, as much as of the EU itself. As discussed below, the dominant narrative of the Leave campaign marshalled a nationalist and protectionist populism - taking back control - against the technocratic and meddling 'undemocratic Eurocrats' in Brussels. This sleight of hand by the Leave campaign was despite the ultra-neoliberal leanings of some of the most prominent Brexiteers and reflects the trenchant opposition of Thatcherites to the 'social dimension' of the European Project (Wincott, 2003).

Both EU and British elites must both shoulder some of the blame for the outcome of the Referendum. Despite the politics of European integration, a major problem of the ideal of the European social model, rather like 'social policy' itself, is that the notion of 'the social' in these discourses is poorly defined and articulated

(Corbett and Walker, 2017). The remit of social policy historically has been viewed as public policies that aim for improvements in social welfare: social policy is defined as 'actions aimed at promoting social well-being' (Alcock et al., 1998, p.7). As Hill (2003) notes other definitions commonly use welfare as a synonym for well-being. This perspective emphasises the redistributional core of social policy, usually focusing on the institutional and organisational dimensions, but underplays the overarching concept of 'the social'. This has had implications for the UK, and Europe.

Indeed, the neoliberal direction of travel has prioritised a 'culture of individualism', which has downplayed the collectivisation of risk and culpability in the state, and emphasised individual responsibility and self-reliance. As argued by Jordan (2006) neoliberal governments preferred personal debt in the form of bank loans and credit, rather than using the tax-benefit system. 'Social' welfare then becomes a simple aggregate of individual welfares in a market context. The political project to rapidly enlarge the EU, which overlooked the underdevelopment in social policy terms of most of the candidate states, has exacerbated the tendency towards neoliberalism, as well as helping to provoke a crisis in EU solidarity over migration. One of the motivations behind strong Conservative support for enlargement was likely to have been a watering down of the social dimension.

While we have portrayed the social model in positive terms, as a counterweight to neoliberal economism and the basis for the EU's claim before enlargement to be a distinct form of capitalism, there is a negative side too. The EU's social model reinforced an introspective 'fortress Europe' perspective, which operated initially against enlargement towards the post-communist bloc Eastern and Central European countries because of their poor performance in social policy terms (Ferge, 1998). They were also in the grip of neoliberal inspired reforms, which were further undermining their social provision. With the neoliberal turn in EU policy making inadequate social provision was no longer a bar to membership. Now the fortress mentality is directed externally, as signalled by the migration crisis. Even in some of the most progressive expressions of the European social model ideal, such as by the Comite des Sages (1996), social citizenship is very definitely European rather than global.

## A 'social quality' approach to Europe: the importance of theorising 'the social'

The concept of social quality emerged from debates during the 1990s on the social dimension of Europe, fuelled by concerns that they were taking a neoliberal economistic direction (Beck et al., 1998). The intellectual stimulus was that, despite debate about the social dimension, the nature of 'the social' had never been explicitly defined, and as a consequence has been neglected in favour of 'the economic', which echoes a longstanding critique of economism from within the social policy tradition (Titmuss, 1963; Walker, 1984).

Unlike other concepts largely concerned with individual quality of life, such as social capital, happiness, capabilities, and subjective well-being, social quality is concerned with the quality of societies, in particular the societal conditions of socio-economic security, social inclusion, social cohesion, social empowerment, and social sustainability. While the individual and society are components of social quality (Phillips, 2011), although the conception of the social does not render them as opposed, in a duality, but rather, sees both as constitutive components of the social. The social is therefore not the mere aggregate of individuals but exists in a dialectical relationship between individual self-realisation and the formation of collective identities over time. Social quality includes a theoretical model of the social, which is the substance of society and includes within it communities, groups, networks and family relations, systems, institutions and organisations, rules and cultural norms, along with individual people, whose lives, their interactions and individual biographies, are in part shaped by – and help shape - broader societal processes (Van der Maesen and Walker, 2012). These aspects are in tension and out of their dialectical relations, society is produced, reproduced, and changed. Therefore, social quality has a comprehensive theoretical and sociological grounding that goes beyond approaches centred on individual well-being (Phillips, 2006).

This important distinction draws attention to the promise of social quality in considering the role of societal structures, institutions, and processes, and the interdependency of human beings, without discarding the importance of individual freedom and autonomy, recognition and identity, capability and capacity. As Sayer (2011) points out, the value of freedom is only one part of human lives and is often characterised in masculinist and liberal individualist terms. Instead, we are understood as social beings, often dependent on others, we live through others, and rely on the care of others, and vice-versa, throughout our lives (Sayer, 2011). As a result, humans are conceptualised in social quality terms as social beings constituted by the social, for whom meaningful participation in society is fundamental. This concern is reflected in the definition of social quality: 'the extent to which people are able to participate in social relationships under conditions which enhance their well-being, capacities and potential' (Van der Maesen and Walker, 2012, p.68). While the definition includes individuals and their concern with their own well-being, it also recognises that this is impossible without societal relations (Walker, 2009, p.210).

Certain societal conditions must obtain for people to have meaningful opportunities to participate in society, and to do so on terms that develop their capacities and provide realistic chances for human flourishing. In other words, a socio-economically secure, cohesive, inclusive, empowering, and sustainable societal context in which people's lives take place is just as important as people's actual agency and abilities. This is in contrast to the direction of much neoliberal inspired 'social' policy and economic policy in recent years (Clarke, 2004; Deeming, 2016; Corbett and Walker, 2017), which for example, rewards the powerful and wealthy through favourable inheritance and tax regimes, while simultaneously micro-managing and controlling the weakest and poorest members of a society by using the welfare state to

'nudge' good behaviour, with harsh sanctions the penalty for failing to comply (Corbett and Walker, 2013; Crouch, 2016). In making sense of this, social quality theory has an overarching normative aim: to facilitate action in the form of the transformation of material conditions in ways that increase the possibilities for better realising the social and achieving greater meaningful participation in society.

Initially, then President of the European Commission Romano Prodi wrote in the Foreword to the second book on social quality that the democratic essence of the approach is based 'on partnership between the European institutions, the Member States, regional and local authorities and civil society. Quality conveys the sense of excellence that characterizes the European social model' (in Beck et al., 2001). In practice, however, there has been only minimal adoption of social quality thinking in European policy-making (for example the emphasis on the quality of employment). Instead, we have seen the dominance of neoliberal ideas, epitomised by the response to the 2008 financial crisis by many European states in adopting publicly-funded bailouts for banks and the deterioration of public services, stagnating wages and increasingly insecure work for many people. These are the societal pre-conditions which have proved fertile for the rise of nationalist populism and the mainstreaming of anti-EU sentiment that helped to produce Brexit. An alternative approach – focusing on the primacy of social quality and participation is discussed in the final section.


### The Brexit vote

Much of the political right in the UK, and some sections of the left, have held a long-running opposition to the EU, viewing it respectively as a 'communist' bureaucratic monolith or as a capitalist 'bosses' club'. The Maastrict Treaty's (1992) aim of developing political and economic convergence, however, invoked the trenchant opposition of particularly the right of the Conservative Party and the right-wing media. The failure of pro-EU politicians to counter the visceral hatred of the right, and that of the EU to actively promote its 'social dimension', has proliferated a generalised antipathy towards the EU. British (specifically, *English*) Euroscepticism towards European integration has a long legacy (Forster 2002). The establishment of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the 1990s was part of the clamour on the right for Brexit. This put anti-EU discourses firmly on the political agenda, assisted by regular media appearances of then UKIP leader, Nigel Farage.

Most European citizens have retained a commitment to national identity while also supporting economic integration within Europe (Eichenberg and Dalton, 2007). However, the UK has generally been characterised by ambivalent Euroscepticism connected to nostalgia for Britain's global role, the impact of World War II on national consciousness, and national economic decline (Gifford, 2008). Of all current 28 EU member states, the British public are the least likely to identify as 'European' (Dennison and Carl, 2016). Opposition to the European project, and European elites more generally, is not solely restricted to the UK, but also includes Euroscepticism in

other countries, as evidenced by the Danish rejection of Maastricht in 1992 (but with subsequent acceptance), and Ireland's initial referendum rejection of the Lisbon Treaty (Leconte, 2010). In addition, far right populist parties have doubled their vote over the past ten years across different countries (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Such parties often pledge to oppose European integration and the free movement of people in defence of national sovereignty, hard borders, and often xenophobia and racism, in Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark (Balorda, this issue), France (Lux, this issue), Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Poland. In the cases of Hungary and Poland in particular, this has taken the form of governments that are opposed to cosmopolitanism and the neoliberal economic model, in favour of populist nationalism and economic protectionism (Nölke, 2017).

Despite generalised Euroscepticism, the 2016 EU Referendum emerged chiefly because of internal divisions within the governing Conservative Party, under electoral pressure from UKIP on the right. Prior to forming a Coalition after the 2010 election, David Cameron had attempted to move the Conservatives on from 'banging on about Europe' in opposition, with socially liberal rhetoric (Corbett and Walker, 2013). 'New Labour' governments had pursued further neoliberal-influenced economic integration, particularly the Lisbon Treaty in 2008, while remaining outside the Eurozone, and blocking further workplace legislation beyond the social chapter (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2017). Inward migration increased during this period as new member states joined the EU and Southern European member states experienced economic crises (Kilkey, 2017). However, once the Conservatives were in office in 2010, Cameron's repositioning coalesced as the flimsy 'big society' concept, which appealed only to self-help and community action, while adopting a very harsh version of 'austerity' in seeking to retrench the social role of the state (Corbett and Walker, 2013). With an increased intake of Eurosceptic MPs in 2010, and the rise of UKIP on the right, Cameron pledged to hold a simple in/out referendum on the UK's EU membership, should the Tories return a majority at the 2015 election. With this surprise majority achieved, Cameron set about providing a renegotiated 'in' relationship with the EU, loosely relating to restricting migrant benefits, preventing further political integration and safeguarding the City of London from a proposed financial transaction tax.

The weight of the British political and economic establishment was behind the Remain case, dubbed 'Project Fear' in its dire warning of the costs to the UK economy and individual household finances of leaving the EU. This campaign reflected a technocratic neoliberal understanding that a rational economic analysis of the EU would swing voters behind remain, without seeking to argue positively *for* the European project at all. Meanwhile, other influential political and media elites supported the eventually victorious Leave campaign. With the backing of the majority of the British news media (Reuters, 2016), Leave engaged in an emotive and 'positive' campaign that adopted nationalist populism in emphasising British sovereignty, with the empowering slogan 'Vote Leave, take control'. The campaign's defining image also referred to a form of cost/benefit argument and linked this to a fundamental social

institution, with the deliberate misrepresentation of the costs of EU membership advertised on the side of a red bus: 'we send the EU £350 million a week, let's fund our NHS [National Health Service] instead'.

Analysis of the vote points to a deeply divided society with several cleavages. Underpinning factors are argued to be simmering anger as a result of the problems of insecure, flexible labour markets, declining wages and increased competition for jobs (Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Clegg, 2017), or identities and cultural values (in particular, social liberalism versus social conservatism) (Kaufman, 2016), or in broader terms, a combination of divisions along the lines of inequality and cultural differences (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Winlow et al., 2017). Some of the analysis and debate focuses on the notion of the 'left behind', viewed in socio-economic terms as those who have not benefitted from the processes of neoliberal globalisation (Clarke et al., 2017). Goodwin and Heath's (2016) aggregate and individual analysis of voting patterns delineates a greater preference for a leave vote among poorer, older, less-educated voters in areas that have experienced post-industrial decline; the so-called 'left behind'.

The 'left behind' concept however, retains the neoliberal terms of 'modernisation' and economic globalisation as implicitly beneficial for people. This discourse is viewed as relying on 'stereotypes and prejudices that the poor white working class are "old fashioned", un-modern, have no mobility and long for the past', rather than a more systematic analysis of the structures of deindustrialisation, class inequality and class prejudice (Mckenzie, 2017, p.208). Instead, Mckenzie (2017) describes people as being 'left out' of society rather than 'behind', which has produced much of the anger and perception of societal unfairness in the eyes of many Leave voters in her ethnographic research in London and the Midlands. The Referendum vote reflected the decline of community solidarity in many ex-industrial towns and cities in the UK over the past 30 years, along with a blunt articulation of anger and frustration at having been 'left out' and ignored (or treated with contempt) by political, economic and media elites in the UK and elsewhere during this time (Mackenzie, 2017). This sense of disempowerment is an important point, which we return to below.

Other analyses point to complexity in being 'left behind' or 'left out' and its expression in the referendum. As Ishkanian (this issue) states, the 'left behind' concept also misses the fluidity of insecurity and precariousness today, where many of those involved in social movements, such as Occupy; younger, urban, mobile, multicultural, often highly educated, have also borne the brunt of neoliberal austerity and the consequences of globalisation. However, overall this latter group is more likely to have voted remain in the Referendum, reflecting the contradictory nature of the neoliberal impulse and societal concerns within both the EU and the UK. Antonucci et al. (2017) suggest that, despite these divisions, key drivers for Leave voters were increased financial insecurity and a relative decline in economic position, which has affected both poorer working class *and* middle-income groups, older *and* younger people. Both of these conditions are linked to neoliberal austerity policies (though rarely recognised as such) (Dorling, 2016). For leave voters generally, '[p]ro-remain discourses simply

made no sense… as they were fundamentally dissociated from such reasoning on any economic, political or emotional level' (Mckenzie, 2017, p.201). Without any positive articulation of the societal benefits of membership of the EU (or rather, its potential), it was the case that, for all the Remain campaign's 'Project Fear' over what would happen to the British economy if the country left, this didn't matter a great deal to those who felt they already had little or nothing left to lose. This also suggests that, rather than being a 'left behind' residue of excluded people unable to adapt to modernity, the structures that create inequality and precarity (Dorling, 2016; Antonucci et al., 2017), and the decline of the social under neoliberal austerity, are key issues post-Brexit.

## Against technocratic neoliberalism and nationalist populism: social quality, participation and the deepening of democracy

Fraser (2017) has argued that the 2016 US Presidential Election represented a Hobson's choice between 'progessive neoliberalism' (Clinton) and 'reactionary populism' (Trump). Neither diagnosis can begin to address the societal problems of inequality, precarity, and declining solidarity that the US, like Europe, faces. There are similarities in the unfolding Brexit crisis with the government shifting between 'soft Brexit' and 'hard Brexit' positions. Part of the success of the Leave campaign was to extend the 'austerity-logic' of recent UK governments with the argument that 'we cannot afford the European Union', encapsulated by the infamous red bus NHS funding claim (Cooper and Whyte, 2017, p.1). 'Austerity' is an extension of the neoliberal logic to characterise any form of public spending as 'unproductive' (Mendoza, 2014). This is a continuation of the downplaying of traditional social policy values in the neoliberal period but it has also increased disillusionment with and distrust in democratic politics and institutions. This in turn provides fertile ground for the continuation of populist rhetoric and deepening divisions in society.

It is clear that both the EU and the UK cannot continue to adopt technocratic and anti-democratic neoliberal approaches if either are to learn from the experience of Brexit, even where some policy concessions for these problems are made, whether through developing a 'pillar of social rights' or tentative moves to better include migrants and refugees in European society. As Klein (2017, p.94) puts it '[f]ear of "the other" may be an animating force for many supporters of far right parties, but "inclusion" of the other within an inherently unjust system will not be powerful enough to defeat those forces'. The regressive march of nationalist right-wing populism as a response to distant elitism is opening up spaces for the far right to articulate a narrative of the post-financial crisis world: porous borders, migration, refugees, cultures of entitlement, social liberalism, and multiculturalism are to blame for poor jobs, and crumbling public services and welfare states. In the context of the rise of the far right, without systemic changes, these tensions cannot be addressed (Winlow et al., 2017).

In its response to Brexit, The European Trade Union Confederation has advocated an end to the primacy of market imperatives in the EU, over social and employment protection, even arguing for an end to further integration unless the 'social dimension' is prioritised: '*less* Europe *until* more social' (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2017, p.181). This represents a shift in tone towards a more confrontational approach with the existing structures of the EU, while seeking to emphasise cross-national co-operation rather than competition. More co-operative and democratic European institutions are desired, rather than the distant, top-down and technocratic approach of the EU (and national governments) in the neoliberal period, and this suggests increased attention to changes in the material conditions of European society to realise this shift. A deepening of democracy at all levels from local to national to supra-national is necessary to ensure genuine opportunities for participation and empowerment, and to counter disillusionment and the lure of nationalist populism. We argue that a social quality approach should be the impetus for this transformation.

The social quality approach provides a vehicle for the realisation of a more social Europe. As noted already it is, conceptually and practically, in contradiction to neoliberal individualism and can begin to engage with material inequalities and the sense of social dislocation that many feel. It is also a democratically orientated concept. Part of its original rationale was to respond to the so-called 'democratic deficit' by emphasising the essential role of social relationships and institutions (including EU ones) in the empowerment of citizens. This critical role has been neglected in traditional 'top-down' social policy and features nowhere in neoliberalism, beyond shallow market consumerism. Furthermore, it is envisaged that local communities might employ the instrument to engage in assessments of social quality and go on to compare the outcomes of those of other communities and countries. This process might generate community participation and democratic involvement as citizens begin to benchmark social progress, or lack of it. Moreover, social quality could help to provide the conditions for a new form of participatory social policy, by developing more participative democratic institutions through which citizens of EU member states can meaningfully articulate their needs and preferences, and shape the development of social policies (see Beresford, 2016; Beresford and Carr, 2018).

The social quality approach encourages a more sophisticated view of the zero-sum power relationship between the EU and its member states promoted by right wing populist rhetoric (Corbett, 2016). In fact, while European integration in the economic and monetary fields has meant diminished national sovereignty, this is matched by growing interdependence. In the social field national competencies remain formally intact, although there is also growing interdependence. The adoption of a social quality approach would help to balance the longstanding disparity between the economic and the social in EU policy. Finally, although developed in Europe, social quality has global relevance and might be a way of transcending the fortress mentality. By giving priority to societal concerns over economic growth (which has failed repeatedly to 'trickle down') as a measure of progress requires enhancing the conditions of socio-economic

security, social cohesion, social inclusion, social empowerment, and social sustainability. This also requires opportunities for meaningful participation beyond the fleeting feeling of power experienced by leave voters in the referendum, which might end the distrust and disillusionment with democracy, and revitalize a sense of genuine democratic empowerment. Various strategies for greater democratic participation and universalist politics are being espoused by the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DieM25), and there is a long legacy of citizen participation through participatory budgeting and participatory economic planning (Jones and O'Donnell, 2017). Serious engagement with these institutional innovations in democracy are required to enable a sense of meaningful participation in society that is socially empowering, and to avoid either elite technocracy or populist division.

## Conclusion

This paper has engaged with the failed promise contained in the idea of the 'European social model', which was supposed to distinguish a particular European concern with both economic development and societal progress. In the development of the EU, and especially since 2008, this concern has given way to a neoliberal impulse that prioritises economic imperatives and ignores societal concerns. This has reached its latest crisis with austerity and the Brexit vote. Much of the antagonism towards Europe on the part of Brexiteers and other national populists is not driven by personal experience of the impact of specifically EU policies (except in the case of Greece) or any in-depth knowledge of the EU itself, but by deeper social, economic and cultural divisions and legitimate grievances. Two decades ago the EU itself recognised the danger ahead as a result of the Danish Referendum. A Reflection Group established by the European Commission (1995, p.1) argued that 'men and women of Europe today, more than ever, feel the need for a common project. And yet, for a growing number of Europeans, the rational for Community integration is not self-evident. This paradox is a first challenge'. Then the authoritative Comité des Sages (1996, p.23) put it in blunt terms: 'Europe will be a Europe for everyone, for all its citizens, or it will be nothing'. Thus the failure of Europe itself to take action to bolster its social dimension and build more democratic forms of participation is a major factor in the recent rise of anti-European politics.

The stronghold gained by right-wing national populists poses an existential threat to European social values and social democracy, a threat that is demonstrated by Brexit. While it may be too late for the UK, which is being forced down the US road of social policy residualisation, this is not yet the case for the rest of Europe. As a matter of urgency the EU should adopt a principled social quality framework (as set out in the appendix) and, through it, give much greater emphasis at all levels in Europe to the daily lives of citizens and how their social quality is determined. Of paramount importance are policies to promote socio-economic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, social empowerment, and social sustainability through meaningful democratic participation and participatory social policy. EU and national policy

makers should also use this framework to join-up the presently fragmented policy domains, especially the economic and social, in order to make a concerted attack on the inequality, poverty, exclusion and precarity that both negate equal citizenship and create fertile ground for far right populist rhetoric and division. At the same time, the solidaristic and inclusive principles within the social quality idea should be the basis on which the EU confronts and deals with the appalling human tragedies created by wars and the complete absence of social quality in many African countries.

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