

## Book Reviews

Kenneth Nelson, Rense Nieuwenhuis and Mara Yerkes (eds) (2022), *Social Policy in Changing European Societies: Research Agendas for the 21st Century*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, £99.00, pp. 328, hbk, Open Access.

doi:[10.1017/S0047279422001052](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279422001052)

This edited volume, which brings together a range of European scholars under the auspices of the European Social Policy Analysis Network (ESPAnet), is concerned to review the state of social policy research rather than developments in social policy. It sets itself three questions. What is the current state of the art of social policy research? How has social policy research developed? What directions should it take in the future? The comparative European literature that examines methods in the round is relatively small compared with the ever-growing volume of work focused on analysing, categorising and assessing concrete policy. This volume makes a substantial contribution to the discipline (or disciplines) that make up the social policy research community by exploring the field of research at the European level.

In answering the first question, the current state of the art, the authors make the following three points:

Research in this field is vibrant and dynamic. There is an active and engaged research community and the work is continually expanding and becoming ever more sophisticated. This results from engagement with new methods and with new substantive areas of interest (climate change, digitalisation, migration, crisis trend, and social investment). There is also (this reviewer would argue) a parallel fruitful interaction with a broader range of disciplines including demography, cultural studies, epidemiology, information science, management science, youth studies, social psychology, environmental science, ecology and political science.

Secondly, and partly as a result of the accumulation of knowledge and greater skill in a broader range of methods social policy has tended to become more analytic and more focused on gaining detailed knowledge in particular fields rather than producing Europe-wide categorisations and overviews. It has gained in accuracy and detail rather than in advancing overall theory.

Thirdly, the new approaches permit a much greater focus on the evaluation of outcomes within those areas and much greater knowledge on the likely implications of particular interventions.

This analysis leads to three suggestions. European social policy needs to inform its work through attention to overviews that seek to situate particular knowledge within a wider framework. This should be seen as enrichment rather than contradiction of the detailed topic-specific work. At the same time the broader approach needs to be directed by stronger theoretical frameworks adapted to include the wider range of areas and disciplines including in the subject. Research would also benefit from a stronger multi-disciplinarity. This is not an insistence that all scholars need to have a command of a full range of relevant disciplines, rather an awareness of the contribution of other disciplines and willingness to work in a way that seeks to include this.

The future, as always, contains many challenges for social policy. The volume identifies climate crisis, economic crisis, the threat of pandemics such as Covid, poverty and precariousness, the continuing progress of population ageing and all the problems of sustainability within economic and political systems that prioritise growth over human aims. However, the authors argue, social policy has developed in ways that equip it well to address these challenges.

The book embraces a substantial range of topics within its 328 pages and this makes substantial demands on the authors and editors. The topics are grouped into three sections covering key themes, cross-cutting issues and challenges with a series of essays by experts within each of them – seven in the first, six in the second and five in the third.

Key themes include social care, family policy, health (stressing the importance of public health), housing in all its complexity, pensions and other provision for older people (but no corresponding chapter specifically on young people to allow a full consideration of generational issues) and activation policies and their shortcomings and Matthew effects. Crosscutting these, the authors identify European social policies and the (potential) importance of the European Pillar of Social Rights; the evolution of social policy research at a regional level, in Central and Eastern Europe (but no corresponding chapters on other regions – notably, the south); gender and the increasing prominence of this topic and increasing theoretical and technical sophistication in the analysis of intersectionality and in establishing linkages with other fields; the labour market and precariousness; attitudes and attitude research (but no association with the politics of social policy in democracies); and comparative research, based on a close examination of articles published during the past thirty years in the *Journal of European Social Policy*.

The authors of these chapters themselves face considerable challenges as they grapple with the development of research in their own field, the current state of play and future possibilities. Some of them succeed better in focussing on research in social policy rather than the knowledge about social policy that is the outcome of that research and is a more common topic of comparative edited volumes. Notable is the chapter on Comparative Research Methods, which, because of the database of publications it has available in a key (perhaps the key) journal, succeeds in discussing changes in methods and topics with authority.

The third section dealing with future challenges faces major issues, since research in all of the topics selected is in its infancy, each merits substantial discussion; and developments in, and inter-linkages between, them are uncertain. This raises questions about method and about how one connects or integrates different topics. The chapter dealing with crises is of particular interest since this area, as opposed to particular crises – economic, pandemic, legitimisation – has received little attention in the literature as a substantive topic. The suggestion that social investment offers the best way to mitigate crisis trends is interesting and important, but needs to be expanded in terms of the research agenda that this implies.

Any reviewer will be bound to identify research areas which they feel might deserve to be included. From the viewpoint of disciplines that social policy research could profitably include, ten are mentioned in the third paragraph above and others could be included. Here may I mention two – cultural studies and social psychology – which both have much to contribute in relation to attitudes and social policy and thence to the politics of social policy. This is particularly notable in an age when culture wars stand alongside climate change, poverty, migration and the others as issues high on the policy agenda of government and when the study of groups and their relationships at various levels has much to say of relevance to policies concerned with inclusion and exclusion. In social policy, the politics of migration, generational work, labour market and poverty, ethnicity and other areas relies to a considerable extent on the interactions between those who identify themselves with a particular group and the extent to which politicians can promote such identification.

In relation to substantive themes, ethnicity and race (which attract increasing attention in European work) are notable by their absence. Young people face multiple and specific difficulties. A chapter on this group could usefully counterbalance that on older people.

This volume is an important contribution to the literature in relation to social policy research. It successfully addresses the challenges that the ambition of its subject sets it. Over to you, future scholars!

PETER TAYLOR-GOOPY  
University of Kent  
[P.F.Taylor-Gooby@kent.ac.uk](mailto:P.F.Taylor-Gooby@kent.ac.uk)

Richard Bellamy, Sandra Kröger and Marta Lorimer (2022), *Flexible Europe: Differentiated Integration, Fairness, and Democracy*, Bristol: Policy Press, £47.99, pp. 200, pbk.  
doi:[10.1017/S0047279422001064](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279422001064)

We live in fast times: reviewing in summer 2022 a book on the European Union published in January of the same year means reading a piece that did not have the chance to include a crisis in its reflections that is of fundamental relevance for – besides humanitarian issues and global geopolitical implications, of course – questions of European Integration: the Russian invasion in Ukraine. It is in the context of the war that normative questions ranging from democratic principles to issues of energy distribution become very crucial (again) at the European agenda. In light of this, it is even more welcome that the book “Flexible Europe. Differentiated Integration, Fairness and Democracy” by Richard Bellamy, Sandra Kröger and Marta Lorimer goes much beyond the technocratic perspectives on the EU that have dominated EU studies for some time, and engages in questions of normative foundations of and political divisions in Europe. Providing fundamental reflections on the normative and democratic foundations of the EU, the book is a very timely and inspiring companion for scholars of European Integration and EU citizens interested in the future of the Union alike.

The book is divided into two parts. In the introduction, which precedes these two parts, the authors first provide an overview on both parts and lay the foundations for their case for differential integration (DI). Bellamy, Kröger and Lorimer distinguish between different forms of DI. Drawing on Thomas Winzen (2016), they first differentiate between ‘capacity DI’ and ‘sovereignty DI’. Capacity DI refers to a differential integration process rooting in different capacities (e.g. administrative or financial) of member states – or in the assumption that some member states might have different capacities than others. This might result in a ‘multi-speed Europe’, with some member states integrating faster than others. Sovereignty DI, on the other hand, matters in the context of core state power transfer to the European level when ideological or pragmatic reasons keep member states from fully joining treaties or policy transfers (as the authors state, Euroscepticism can be a reason, but also stem cell research or abortion debates in a member state). This has been called ‘Europe à la carte’. Departing from the general idea of sovereignty DI, the authors add a further dimension of DI, which they discuss in greater detail further down the book: ‘value DI’. Value DI refers to a form of differential integration that does not only allow for member states voluntarily opting out from certain integration steps, but also for exclusion of member states in the case of democratic backsliding.

DI in general – be it sovereignty DI, capacity DI or value DI – is, in the eyes of the authors, not a failure of European integration or a pragmatic solution for a limited period