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Book Review

Jens Alber and Neil Gilbert eds., *United in Diversity? Comparing Social Models in Europe and America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 450 Hardcover ISBN 978-0-19-537663-0.
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There is more here than meets the eye. That could well be the motto for this striking effort to evaluate the European social model in comparison to its American counterpart. Jens Alber and Neil Gilbert have brought together a stellar cast of analysts who tackle eight major issues areas in couplets that often pair a chapter by Europeans with a corresponding one by American scholars. A number of fascinating observations emerge.

Some observations can be read as correctives to the negative stereotypes many Europeans have of the United States. Adjusted for purchasing power parity, per capita, net social expenditure in the US is higher than in Europe. On reasonable calculations, the proportion of the population at risk of poverty in the member states of the European Union is roughly the same as it is across the Atlantic. The differences in literacy scores for children drawn from the top and bottom quartiles of society are smaller in the US than in some major European countries, including Germany and Britain. One in five American jobs is held by people who are immigrants or the children of immigrants, dwarfing the employment performance of immigrants in Europe.

Other observations confirm conventional views but cast them in a useful new light. The American government devotes a much larger share of its resources to public order and defense than do European states, although the proportion of spending on internal and external defense is generally larger in southern than in northern Europe. Although income inequality has grown dramatically in the US over recent decades, when shifts at the top of the income spectrum are ignored, most of the relevant increases in inequality occurred during the 1980s rather than the 1990s. Given the fears excited by 'globalization', social spending has remained relatively robust in recent years across the developed democracies.

Rather than impose a common conceptual framework or set of metrics, the editors have given the contributors relatively free rein to define a problem as they see it and to cite the data each considers most apposite; the volume displays the virtues and vices that follow from this approach. Some chapters take up the trans-Atlantic comparison, while others focus more on the US or Europe. In some cases, the definitions of the problem adopted by the authors seem idiosyncratic, most notably in the chapters on the quality of democracy by Stein Ringen and John Samples. However, the advantage is that the chapters open up new perspectives on old problems, and none is a slapdash effort. Most contributions bring systematic empirical data to bear on the issues at hand, often in inventive ways. The attempts of Francis Castles and Neil Gilbert to apply to cross-national comparisons of social policy new data based on net social expenditure that take into account the taxation of benefits and mandated private

spending are notable examples. Like most chapters in this book, these can be read with profit by experts as well as those with a general interest in the subject.

The wealth of information here about multiple problems approached from divergent angles leaves the editors with no small task when it comes to summing up the volume's findings. They emphasize general observations about the diversity of social models in Europe and the presence of some similarities with America. Their concluding chapter about the 'epistemology of comparative analysis' emphasizes how dependent comparisons across countries must be on the measures chosen to reflect the dimensions of interest and on the interpretations given to chosen measures. This is a point of profound significance, ignored with surprising frequency by social scientists determined to make one argument or another, and it is well illustrated by this book, because the contributors are careful empiricists and have been given the scope to consider how best to assess a wide range of important but intractable social phenomena. Anyone inclined to think the differences between the social models of Europe and the United States are simple or obvious should read this book.

What are we to make, then, of the European social model? The authors conclude that references to this model are "less rooted in objective facts than in a perceived need to forge a common European identity" (p. 415). In some respects, they are surely right. The concept of a European social model was adopted by the European Commission under Jacques Delors to justify and add a humanizing dimension to its ambitious plans for restructuring Europe in the context of a single continental market. Its distinctive features were said to be a concern for promoting social justice and bonds of solidarity among the citizens of the EU. As such, the European social model has always been more of an aspiration than an objectively identifiable fact, and recent efforts to promote participation in the workforce, associated with the Lisbon strategy of the EU, have undercut the generosity of unconditional social protection, once seen, at least informally, as distinguishing the European from the American social model. To observe, as many contributors to this book do, how diverse the arrangements for social protection are across the members states of the EU seems to belie the existence of a European model. At a minimum, one must talk of multiple variants of that model, as the Sapir report did, and the absence here of any attempt to identify those types is curious.

Eppur si muove. When all is said and done, however, the commitment to some tangible form of social justice and a willingness to use the resources of the state to secure it, more evident in Europe than in the US, does seem to distinguish European from American approaches to welfare and the economy and to constitute a fact no less real for being as much 'political' as 'economic'. In some respects, that is obscured as much as it is clarified by the waves of information available in this book. Where Europe clearly falls down is in the treatment generally accorded to immigrants. It is arguable that, for all the controversy immigration issues raise in the US, it still succeeds in integrating immigrants more effectively into the workforce and fabric of social life than most European states currently do. It remains unclear whether the bonds of solidarity many Europeans want to promote extend to immigrant communities as well.

This book stops short of resolving the debates aroused by the concept of a European social model, but it enlightens those debates in multiple ways, not

least by promoting the kind of scrupulous empirical social science that should be the touchstone. While showing how difficult it is to reach definitive conclusions about comparative social well-being, it shows how much promise there is in trying to do so. Everyone interested in comparative social inquiry will find something of value in this book.

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