

BOOK REVIEWS

Wolfgang Beck, Laurent J. G. van der Maesen, Fleur Thomése
and Alan Walker (eds.), *Social Quality: A Vision for Europe*.
The Hague, London, Boston: Kluwer Law International, 2001, pp. 393.
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The study of the social quality concept is a work by twenty authors, whose articles were gathered by the editors of the volume to summarize 4 years of not only scientific but also political debate on the issue that started in 1997. It was the year, when the editors published the first book attempting to deal with the social quality—*The Social Quality of Europe*. The same year, “The Amsterdam Declaration on the Social Quality of Europe” was signed after the conference under the Dutch Presidency of the European Union and a new journal was established—*The European Journal of Social Quality*, which became a very important forum for the discussion about the European social policy issue. Thus the reviewed book is another fruit of the Social Quality Initiative, whose aim is to support political and scientific discussion on the future of the European social model.

Some readers might not be satisfied, because the book does not give the answer to the question: what the social quality actually is? Its main aim is to report the state of the debate and expose the influences of this open concept within several fields of the European, state and local policy-making. The editors of the volume have announced the publishing of the third attempt at the topic, which may contain some final conclusions.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, entitled *Social Quality for Europe: Assessing the Concept* is “a wide variety of comments and reflections on the social quality initiative, ranging from deeply fundamental questions to practical strategies and policies” (p. 147). Second part, *Tendencies in Europe: Developing the Concept* is a collection of articles trying to explore several processes according to which the concept of the social quality is in the authors’ opinion relevant. The final third part of the book, *Creating a New Perspective* is a work by the editors of the book, who from the very theoretical stance discuss validity and applicability (both political and empirical) of the open concept of the social quality. It should be also mentioned that the book opens with the foreword by Romano Prodi and Anna Diamantopoulou, who was a commissioner responsible for the Social Affairs and Employment in the Prodi’s European Commission. Finally, the book ends with the epilogue written buy Gyorgy

Konrád and the appendix containing *The European Declaration on Social Quality of Europe*.

The book could be read as a whole by somebody interested in the concept of the social quality. That way would provide the reader with the possibility to look at that single issue from several perspectives: juridical (Antonio Ojeda-Avilés's chapter), gender studies (Marina Calloni's chapter), welfare state theory (Kees van Kersbergen's chapter), political studies (Svein Andersen and Kjell Eliassen's chapter), sociology of social change (Georg Vobruba's chapter) etc. Many readers of collective works study in details only chosen chapters. It would be strongly advised to this group of readers to read editors' chapters concluding the first two parts: "Reflections on the Social Quality Initiative" and "Processes Challenging the Concept of Social Quality" by Wolfgang Beck, Laurent J. G. van der Maesen, Fleur Thomése and Alan Walker, which distil the essence of the authors' work. These conclusions summarize possible applications of the concept and they can also serve as a guide to the readers to choose these chapters, which deal with the fields that are most interesting to them.

The editors are prepared for the critique that "the concept of the social quality leaves too much room for such diversity" (p. 147) of disciplinary backgrounds and try to persuade that it is rather its strength. One may agree or disagree with that statement, but the fact is, that the editors present in a very honest way the unfinished process of constructing the definition of this concept.

The authors of the first part try to deal with four themes. The first presents the comments concerning the ontological, the epistemological and the ideological background of the social quality concept. The second theme is the theoretical construction of a concept of the social quality. The third theme is a description of the reality to which the social quality concept refers. And finally the fourth theme is an attempt at political applicability and operationalization of the social quality (p. 148). This is done through the discussion and critique of the first book about the social quality and other voices in the debate that started in 1997.

The most sophisticated critique of the concept of the social quality has been done by Denis Bouget in the fourth chapter of the book under the title "Identification of the 'Problematique'." He asks two fundamental questions: "Is 'the social quality' a scientific concept which can explain the recent trends in the European societies? Or is it mainly a new ideological or ethical concept which is promoted by new middle classes or by the international ideology of globalization?" (p. 48). Bouget describes the path of the concept-development from poverty, through social exclusion, to the social quality. Answering the first question he argues that there is a need "to provide a more detailed explanation" (p. 57) of the social quality concept in order to avoid the reduction of its explanatory power. Answering the second question he says that "the social quality of Europe as a political project probably stems from several threats or fears, as reactive behaviour, the threat of dismantling national social welfare systems (SWS) in Europe, the threat of marketisation and privatisation of public goods and services and the fear of a continuing failure of the European political project." (p. 63) In both meanings (scientific and political) social quality is an effect of negation of liberal doctrine of individual responsibility, which in the opinion of the social quality

project leads to “increase in inequality, polarization, poverty and so on, which could destroy the initial aim of and popular enthusiasm for the European project.” (p. 47)

It seems that the four main themes of the first part of the book may differ only analytically. The authors declare that they want to develop a theoretical concept which has “the potential to both offer fundamental analyses of societal processes and inspire policy-oriented assessment instruments” (p. 154). In that case it is very easy only to express one’s normative attitudes and political opinions. It is admitted in the book, that many authors of the first book (*The Social Quality of Europe*) did that mistake. In my opinion some authors of the reviewed volume were also not able to avoid expressing only their worries and wishes about the shape of the European Union.

Göran Theborn argues that the European Union needs not the politics of conflict but the consensus politics. The present, strongly elitist mode of the decision taking process, which is often called as a ‘democratic deficit’ should be changed according to the Theborn’s opinion, whereas one of the main features of the social quality is establishing of participatory European democracy (p. 20). He presents also a very strong statement saying that: “Europe is no longer specifically Christian, but it is still specifically social: the legacy of the ‘social question’ that was so central to the European road to and through modernity.” (p. 21) In Theborn’s opinion the European Union should become a very strong organization (maybe even a kind of federal state) based on the common identity, which means in his opinion awareness to the social question in Europe. According to his rather utopian vision, the social scientists asking questions and debating over social concerns of the European citizens will play a very important role as a part of a mechanism of the participatory democracy.

A context of the daily life is stressed by Marina Calloni in her chapter entitled “Gender Relations and Daily Life: Towards a Cross-Cultural Approach.” She also argues that the debate on the social quality should not be limited only to the European Union. It refers to all human beings and should be conceived as trans-cultural construct. Calloni’s gender studies perspective helps to understand the connections between both the public and private spheres, which are affected by all the social policies.

Denis Bouget is also an author of the methodological chapter dealing with possible indicators of measuring the social quality. In “The Empirical and Policy Relevance of Social Quality” he enumerates several properties of these social indicators, such as: signification, objectivity, univocity, sensitivity, precision, fidelity, accessibility and fields of evaluation of the social quality, such as: ecology, family, gender, work, space (pp. 111–115). He pays special attention to the methodological problem of measuring the phenomena confounded with ethical values.

David Phillips and Yitzhak Berman also deal with indicators of the social quality in their chapter whose aim is to operationalize the concept of the social quality. The problems of measuring the social quality as a property of an individual or a society, which is connected with one of the main questions of the contemporary social sciences about the relations and tensions between levels of macro and micro i.e. structure and action.

So much attention is paid to the question of indicating the social quality, because the authors of the book agree with the point of view that the social quality should

function as a general policy yardstick (p. 166). It is an especially hard task to be accomplished, because of the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the social quality expressed in the social quality quadrant scheme, which will be discussed below.

The second part of the book, entitled *Tendencies in Europe: Developing the Concept* is collection of the case studies of the fields relevant to the social quality concept. The authors of that part were asked by the editors to answer questions about their visions of the social processes changing the daily life of the Europeans. In the volume editors' opinion these studies are going to reach the conclusion that in our times traditional concepts are worn out and the need rises to develop the new ones such as the concept of the social quality. Beck, van der Maesen, Thomése and Walker seem to be dissatisfied with three patterns of thinking about the European Social Model. The first one expressed in the so called Lisbon Strategy is describing the European model as economically motivated binary competitiveness which may lead to social pacification leaving people only the room to adapt to the changing social and economic environment without any chance to create it. That way of thinking is strongly attacked by Guy Standing, who argues that neo-liberal policy may create more jobs but in his opinion work is something more than a job that gives only financial income. Work is essential for the meaning of life by bringing personal satisfaction. The second pattern described by the editors is technological and pragmatic one. Authors of the book are also dissatisfied with that technocratic tendency to describe citizens as consumers of the products of markets and social services. The third pattern of thinking focuses on transformations that increase the complexity and diversity of daily life. In their opinion this discourse is incoherent and too fragmented. The social quality in the second part of the book is to serve as a landmark to new open horizons in these discussions on the European Social Model. The most important idea of changing these patterns of thinking is referring to the concept of the social quality in the terms of processes not in terms of products.

In the first chapter of the second part Jan Berting and Christiane Villain-Gandossi focus on the French social studies and political debate on the issue of the 'difficult quarters' of the cities. They claim that one of the most important reasons of mediocre results of social policies applied to these quarters is inadequacy of application of the industrial frames of reference to the postindustrial conditions. The old 'social exclusion paradigm' is recognized as a way of dealing with negative consequences of the social processes but not as a way of emerging new society, which is the possibility revealed by the new social quality approach. Another virtue of the social quality initiative in the opinion of Berting and Villain-Gandossi is that it treats people to whom the social policies are addressed as participants of those policies. In the former paradigm of thinking they were just objects, now they may become subjects of the policy.

The very important context of the Lisbon strategy is the competition between European and American economies. Georg Vobruba makes the provocative comparison between the American and European social models. By comparing the modes of flexibilization present in both models, he claims that the European innovative flexibility is a better tool for dealing with drastic social change than the American adaptive

flexibility. We can see some similarities when we make analysis of these two concepts as well as when we analyse differences between the Berting and Villain-Gandossi's 'social exclusion paradigm' and the social quality paradigm. The American adaptive flexibility gives only a possibility to react to social processes but innovative flexibility leads to forming social environment. The conclusion of the Vobruba's text is that the European social model in the long term is actually more effective from the point of view of the economics!

The ideas of Jürgen Habermas are the broad reference framework of analysis present in the second part of the book. The social quality is said to be a cure for a danger of 'privatistic retreat from citizenship'. For example Ota de Leonardis focuses on the role of the third sector in the contemporary welfare state. Non-governmental organizations very often no longer can be called non-profit organizations, because they are engaged in the free market of social services. This situation rather promotes welfarism, dependency and passivity instead of empowerment and capability of choice and action. De Leonardis argues that in Italy vocational training grants do not have effect on decreasing the unemployment rate but they usually work to "the benefit of the trainers, and of trainer's trainers, not of the trainees." (p. 206) the social quality initiative aim is to defend the third sector—the core of the civil society—from marketization.

In the chapter entitled "Democratic Modernity and Social Quality" Svein Andersen and Kjell Eliassen analyze the emerging of the European political system, which they describe as "a complex multi-level system that lacks a clear authority centre and structure, and is administered by overlapping institutions" (p. 272). In their opinion one of the most characteristic features of this political system is its lobbyfication. In this post-parliamentary democracy, lobbying is the most important channel for direct expression of interests. Such political system affected by democratic deficit cannot introduce the social quality policies. The European Union requires broader political participation of its citizens, who would in turn force the broader implementation of the social policy. Unfortunately the authors do not provide the answer how to reform the European Union institutions in order to improve the social quality of Europe.

Summarizing these (so called by the editors) empirical explorations from the part two, I would say that the concept of the social quality is to serve as a means for making the mentioned above third pattern of thinking about the European societal model (concentrating on transformations which increase the complexity and diversity of the daily life) more coherent. As in the first part of the book the social quality concept was called the general policy-making yardstick, in the second part authors sometimes tried to use this yardstick to 'measure' very different social processes.

The third part of the book *Creating a New Perspective* is a work of four editors of the volume. Following several attempts to use the social quality yardstick in several fields with several theoretical backgrounds this part of the book is to clarify the concept of the social quality and the knowledge how to apply it.

Beck, van der Maesen, Thomése and Walker start with the considerations pertaining to ontological end epistemological status of the basic concept of the social quality, which are highly theorized. Next they express their views from the ethical and ideo-

logical angle, which are mostly a repetition of Zygmunt Bauman's recent ideas about poverty of post-ideological thinking in which worries for public good were replaced by the worries about private satisfaction.

The author's favourite way of explaining the social quality concept is discussing the so called social quality quadrant. The quadrant was also discussed in the first book of the Social Quality Initiative; it is depicted in the introductory chapter of the reviewed volume where the authors of the chapters often refer to the visualization of this concept. Here the quadrant analysis is much more sophisticated and advanced. The horizontal axis representing the tensions between systems, institutions and organizations from the left side and communities, configurations and groups from the right side crosses the vertical axis representing tensions between biographical processes going from the bottom and the societal processes going from the top. In the opinion of the authors studying the ceaseless confrontation between the tensions of these axes—the fields of interaction and transformation of values—one can understand the social quality as an outcome of that confrontation. As a consequence of the social quality quadrant analysis the authors enumerate four components of the social quality: socio-economic security, social cohesion, inclusion and empowerment.

Pointing out the conceptual problems with the social quality, the authors write that it is “a function of permanently changing and flexible configurations among actors in everyday life” (p. 354) and it does not have one-dimensional nature. It means that the social quality does not have the virtues of the decent yardstick which should be stable and one-dimensional. But in the post-industrial reality one cannot find better tools. It seems that the idea of the stable and one-dimensional concepts is an anachronism in the frame of reference presented by Beck, van der Maesen, Thomése and Walker.

I was surprised by the lack of references to the works of Anthony Giddens, who in his books on sociological theories deals with the tensions between structure and action (*The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*) and who also as an advisor of the Labour Party was dealing with the new challenges of the welfare state (*The Third Way. The Renewal of Social Democracy*). Some of his ideas, which were very influential in the 90s, at the time when Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder announced their manifesto entitled ‘The Third Way’. Giddens's idea was that the Western European countries welfare states reached their goals. In his opinion unemployment and social exclusion does not any longer endanger the human being in the way that it might cause death or health damages. Now the welfare state has to help people find the meaning of life. In the European culture the most important characteristic of identity is a job identity, so the people who are unemployed, as well as pensioners feel excluded from the society of people having their strong identification. Somewhat similar ideas are expressed by Guy Standing in his chapter, where he is voicing for jobs not for the work places. He understands job as something more significant than work. The concept of job has several values attached to. Work is just an economic term. The book *Social Quality: A Vision for Europe* and the whole Social Quality Initiative is a voice of protest against ‘over-economized’ discourse about the European Union, which is used by the Single European Market technocrats.

I am quite skeptic about the idea that a state or a supranational organization such as the European Union should be responsible for helping an individual in self-realization. It is, in my opinion, an utopian idea, which could have some even tragic consequences. There are many threads in the book, which remind of the utopian ideas of the states in which very important role is played by the wise men or scientists. Of course the authors of *Social Quality: A Vision for Europe* do not want to rule the European Union but in my opinion they have too high and naive expectations regarding the role, which should be played by the social science in the modern world.

Social Quality: A vision for Europe is a very significant book, because it shows the way of thinking of the scholars, who are very influential advisors of creators of social policies of the European Union. It is obvious that realization of their ideas depends on politicians, but if social-democrats gain the power in most of the member states, the governments of some of them may try to implement them.

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