

Title of Dissertation: Re-Making Social Europe After the Great Recession. Actors, Networks, and Social Fields

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Published on SUB eDiss Göttingen 2023

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Summary

At the beginning of the year 2012, Social Europe was in ruins. Austerity in peripheral member states, especially in Southern Europe, and the adoption of new and strict fiscal consolidation policies in the euro area had led to massive social turmoil, to high rates of unemployment and poverty. Many viewed the EU – and the EMU specifically – as a neoliberal project which saved banks and financial markets at the cost of citizens and welfare states. Member states were on an unstoppable road-to-the-bottom. However only five and a half years later – in November 2017 – the European Commission, Council, and Parliament adopted a social policy milestone: the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). How was this possible?

This dissertation analyses the re-making of Social Europe after the Great Recession, in the years 2012-2019. It captures policies, their legal and institutional forms, and implementations, and in particular actors and their networks. Following Pierre Bourdieu's theory of fields, the dissertation conceptualizes Social Europe as a social field of action, where actors fight over contested issues and where their relations are defined by specific configurations of social, cultural, and economic capital. Further points of reference are actor-centred perspectives, both in agreement and rejection to Bourdieu, and Social Network Analysis. The central guiding question is: Why and how did the social policy response to the Great Financial Crisis, the euro crisis, and the Great Recession culminate in the EPSR?

The dissertation investigates three case studies which are dominated by the conflict, how – if at all necessary – European social policy should relate to the European macroeconomic and fiscal governance regime. The debate on the social dimension of the EMU was started by European Employment Commissioner László Andor in 2012 to counter the dominant austerity policies. Proposals for a European Unemployment Benefit Scheme (EUBS) accompanied the EU since early designs for a monetary union in the 1970s and had been revived by Keynesian economists who argued that an EUBS would bring social, fiscal, and macroeconomic benefits. Finally, the EPSR built on Commission President Juncker's promise that social policy should equally be important as macroeconomic crisis management.

As a result, Social Europe after the Great Recession differs from its pre-crisis framework as it was informed by the polycrisis of capitalism, democracy, and European integration. Policy-wise, it is built on an approach of reconciling social and economic policies as well as a moral and symbolic proclamation of social rights. The social investment paradigm is less important

and the attempts to create a fiscal solidarity element have largely failed. Correspondingly, the politics of its renewal are informed by the rise of far right and populist parties and the decline of social and Christian democracy. At the height of these crises, actors who had already shaped Social Europe during the late 1990s used their political power and networks to create a new point of reference for Social Europe in the future: the European Pillar of Social Rights. The question, whether the EPSR will turn out as a crucial step on our road to Social Europe or as mere window-dressing of a neoliberal European project will be the manifest contested issue, the central conflict, of the social field of Social Europe during the 2020s.