

Amandine Crespy (2022), *The European Social Question: Tackling Key Controversies*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, £24.99, pp. 256, pbk.
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One of the key issues of the 19th century, in the wake of the industrial revolution, was “the social question”: how to avoid that capitalism results in the pauperization of the working class? This debate would lead to the first forms of social protection in Western Europe. These were initially sponsored by enlightened conservative elites that realized that unrestrained degradation of working conditions would undermine their long-term interests. To ensure that laborers would remain healthy enough to work, to avoid that they would emigrate, and to contain social upheaval, the first social legislations were introduced. By the turn of the century, national trade union confederations and social-democratic parties had been established that would reinforce the demands for social protection. The two World Wars and the sacrifices made by the working classes would further strengthen these demands. Bolstered by the introduction of universal suffrage, this resulted in the establishment of full-fledged welfare states across Western Europe. While pockets of poverty continue to exist and the flexibilization and digitalization of the labor market results in new challenges somewhat reminiscent of the 19th century, like zero-hour contracts, working and living conditions in Western Europe have greatly improved over the past two centuries.

Yet, giving a book on social policy within the European Union (EU) the title “the European social question” should not be seen as hyperbolic. It nicely captures one of the key debates in European Union politics and studies: how to avoid that European integration undermines the social progress that has been and could still be made? The controversy, as Amandine Crespy discusses in the introduction of her book, begins with the fundamental question if European integration actually *is* problematic for social protection. This question is difficult to answer because it requires the development of a counterfactual: how would European social protection have evolved under different conditions? While some European welfare states have shown great resilience in the face of European integration and globalization, we do not know if they would not have become more generous and protective if European integration had taken a different course. The key social challenge that European integration raises is that in the EU the supranational level is exclusively competent for single market, competition and monetary policies while social policies remain primarily the responsibility of the member states. This may create legal tensions, when the economic rights of freedom of movement are considered to have supremacy over social rights. Besides these *de jure* effects, this architecture of the European Union also constrains the social policy space of governments *de facto*, as they must consider the realistic plausibility that companies escape costly social policies by relocating to other member states, from which they can sell their goods and services across the single market.

As a result, discussing the European social question in a comprehensive yet accessible way is a herculean challenge. It requires one to show how the absence of policy (competencies) at the EU level negatively affects (potential) social policies at the national level. There is no clear culprit that can be pointed out in this story, which rather results from a path-dependent process that started with the decision at the launch of European integration to leave social policy at the national level. Crespy succeeds in telling this complex story in a marvelously clear and compelling way. She does so by organizing the book into nine key controversies about the relationship between European integration and social protection. While the author has her own view about the European social question – she thinks it is real; why otherwise go to great pains to write this book – she always carefully presents different views on each of the issues, so that the reader can make her own judgments. This approach makes the book invaluable to

practitioners who want to navigate the debate on “Social Europe”, but also for (young) academics exploring the literature on this topic: who will find all the main contributions to the debate irrespective of authors’ ideological or theoretical approach to the question. The book will also be useful as a textbook for courses on “Social Europe”, as the structure along nine questions makes for an engaging approach, and each chapter ends with a useful list of further readings and questions for debates or essays.

Amandine Crespy has decided not to organize her manuscript chronologically. That has been the right decision, as the current structure gives the book much more analytical power. Still, throughout the book it becomes clear that the current state of the European social question is the result of a number of critical junctures, moments or periods during which the relationship between European integration and social protection could have taken a different course. Besides the ‘original sin’ during the negotiations of the Rome Treaties in the 1950s to allocate market-making and market-correcting policies to different levels of government, these include the neoliberal revolution of the 1970-1980s, the failure to qualitatively strengthen Social Europe during the heydays of European social democracy in the 1990s before the enlargement of the EU to central and eastern Europe, and the response to the global financial and euro crisis. In the final chapter, Crespy reflects upon the current juncture. How will Brexit, covid-19 and the climate transition – and today one may add the war in Ukraine – affect the European social question? While in response to these challenges the EU has certainly taken unprecedented decisions at an unprecedented pace, Crespy argues that the EU is still not fit for purpose to tackle the social challenges of the 21st century. This, she argues, requires that new (social) policy innovations are not just fabricated through technocratic and/or executive politics. Instead, responding to the European social question in an effective, legitimate and sustainable way can only be done by undertaking substantial democratizing steps. But there is little evidence that today, like in the 19th century, elites are convinced that this is necessary to preserve the system, or that new powerful progressive forces are forming that can extort these changes.

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Jonathan Wistow (2022), *Social Policy, Political Economy and the Social Contract*, Bristol: Policy Press, £24.99, pp. 190, pbk.

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The key purpose of this important book is “to identify and challenge the social contract in England” (p. 13). Much has been written about social policy and more about political economy. Wistow attempts to bring these together and explore the nature of the social contract that exists. He sees the way forward as resetting the equilibrium and making the social contract work ‘for the many and not the few’.

Wistow raises big and complex issues and shows deep thought and considerable candour about difficult questions, while being straightforward about his own political views. This is not a book for students new to social policy and sometimes the direction of his argument is less than clear and analysis and prescription get muddled. Yet the issues are so important that perseverance is worthwhile. He draws on a wide range of literature: sociology, political science, social policy, economics and history. This might be termed an inter-disciplinary approach, but