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Ireland and the European Social Inclusion Strategy: Lessons Learned and the Road Ahead (European Anti Poverty Network Ireland., 2010): Book Review

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As the title indicates, this text provides a timely reminder of Ireland's longstanding emersion in all things European social policy and how membership of the European Union (EU) has shaped and continues to shape the trajectories of the Irish welfare state, particularly in relation to social inclusion policy formulation and delivery. The book is divided into twelve well structured and user friendly chapters. Each chapter is produced to a high standard both in actual content and presentation. This is not surprising given the contributions of the 'who's who' of Irish social policy scholars and practitioners (Séamus Ó Cinnéide, Niall Crowley, Gerry Mangan, Fintan Farrell and Helen Johnston to name but a few) who have committed their careers to advancing issues around marginalisation and social exclusion and, in so doing, have consistently invoked progressive EU policy prescriptions to welfare state dysfunctionality in Ireland.

Broadly, the book is divided into three sections: section one focuses on the historical contexts of Ireland's relationship with an evolving EEC social policy agenda and how Ireland, despite its relative lack of geo-political clout, significantly contributed to the shaping of this agenda during the late 1970s; section two seeks to advance the ways in which EU social inclusion policies cascaded purposefully and meaningfully on to a number of indigenous social policy spheres including anti-poverty initiatives, employment, minimum income, access to social services and equality and anti-discrimination; section three adopts a more prognostic approach inviting contributors to anticipate the most likely future contours and policy preoccupations of EU social policy in 2030.

What is particularly attractive about this offering is the inclusion of short chapter separator contributions from key social inclusion actors and stakeholders reflecting on the role EAPN has played since its inception. For instance, Maureen Gaffney - former Chairperson of the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) - reveals her deep appreciation for the work of EAPN. Roisin Shortall TD and Labour Party spokesperson on social and family affairs, asserts of EAPN's function: 'As our country deals with profound economic set-backs, your work has never been more important' (p. 51).

Throughout the text readers are introduced to what must be one of the most cogent attempts yet at describing perhaps the most potentially innovative yet politically convoluted decision-making process in the history of EU integration, namely the Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC). One quarter of the text is devoted to various explorations of OMC. For readers unfamiliar with OMC, the offerings of Candy Murphy (chapter three), Gerry Mangan (chapter four) and Mary Murphy's (chapter eleven) are a must. In summary, OMC

was conceived in the lead in to the Amsterdam Treaty (1997) because of a historic clash of theoretical impressions as to whether the EU was more intergovernmental (i.e. that the member states pulled the decision making strings) or supranational in orientation (i.e. that the EU and its institutions – the Commission, Parliament, Court of Justice, Auditor, Committee of the Regions etc. – had evolved into an entity capable of exercising independent decision-making in certain policy spheres). The OMC is different from existing methods of EU governance in that it calls for general standards and guidelines instead of detailed rules. Essentially, it has been labelled an example of ‘soft-law’ in that flexibility and variation are encouraged (López-Santana, 2004). Ultimately, the member states have the option of either accepting or rejecting the OMC process. De la Porte (2002) has surmised that OMC is intended to facilitate the voluntary attainment of targets and common policies that focus on reaching common objectives and common indicators that the member states, the Commission and the Social Partners have agreed (Sharpf, 2002). One of the key guiding principles of OMC is that it respects the principle of subsidiarity i.e. that actors and organisations closest to specific policy responses are best positioned to develop and implement such policies rather than waiting for the EU to do so. Throughout the chapters on OMC, the authors diligently assemble a plethora of examples and cases outlining the ways in which various social inclusion policy initiatives have emerged.

Intriguingly, and this is reflected throughout the various chapter assessments of EU social policy initiatives geared towards enabling greater social inclusion, considerable ideological cleavages have existed and continue to exist on the very nature and status attaching to social policy at the EU level. Conceived as an adjunct to economic policy in the original Treaty of Rome (1957) (Collins, 1975), European social policy – as a number of the various contributors acknowledge – has evolved to attain a more enhanced and broader status since Jacques Delor’s Commission presidencies during the 1980s and early 1990s. If there is one key area that this text somewhat neglects, it is the absence of a chapter devoted to a thorough exploration of the politics of European social policy and, by extension, European social inclusion policy development. For instance, since Ireland’s ascension to the EEC in 1973, of the nine Irish commissioners, three have held the Social Affairs portfolio. It is inconceivable that these commissioners did not help shape EU social policy discourse during their respective tenures. Moreover, given the advocacy and campaigning function that EAPN Ireland performs, an insight into how – in conjunction with sister organisations and other anti-poverty campaigning groups and actors across Europe – it has contributed to policy development in Ireland and especially at the European level would have enhanced readers knowledge considerably about the manner in which specific social inclusion policies materialise and/or disappear from the policy-making agenda.

The book concludes with two very thoughtful contributions. Fintan Farrell provides a very well informed account of the main issues likely to contextualise and influence the development of inclusion policies both nationally and at the European level to 2030. He provides a very clear account of the Commission’s ‘Europe 2020’ strategy albeit one he believes ‘falls short of the shift in paradigm which EAPN and other actors believe is necessary’ (p.186) i.e. that it focuses far too heavily on ‘smart, sustainable and inclusive growth’ (p.184) (my italics) and not sufficiently on concrete measures, policies and all important resources targeting the eradication of poverty. It falls to Proinsias De Rossa (MEP) to bring proceedings to a close. Reviewing the various contributions, he strikes a

cautious note of optimism that despite the historic oscillatory position of EU social policy vis-à-vis predominant economic and competition policy objectives of the Union, significant treaty commitments and obligations around issues such as gender equality, fundamental rights, anti-discrimination and a commitment to a social market economy all serve to indicate that much progress has been achieved on the road to constructing a Europe (and Ireland) that takes seriously the human tragedy that is social exclusion.

Readers interested in pursuing their knowledge of European social policy and particularly social inclusion policies might be interested in exploring Steffen Mau and Roland Verwiebe's (2010) most recent text: *European Societies - Mapping structure and change*.

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