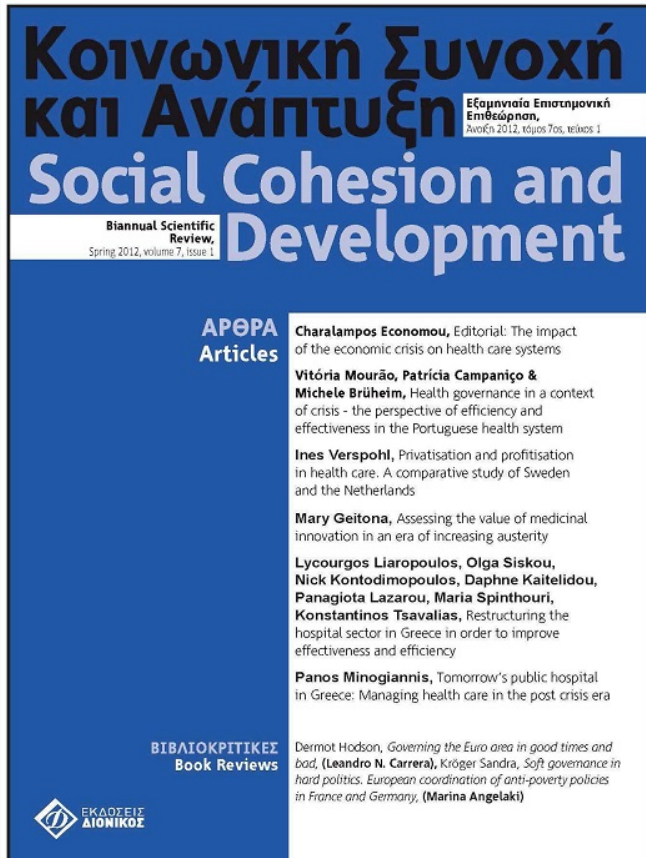


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Kröger Sandra, *Soft governance in hard politics. European coordination of anti-poverty policies in France and Germany*, VS Verlag Fuer Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden 2008

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In the context of the current economic and financial crisis, the debate at EU level revolves primarily around the economic governance architecture, crisis management and prevention in the euro-area, while the 'Europe 2020' strategy and its social goals have been put on the side-lines. Yet, it was only a decade ago –with the launch of the Lisbon strategy- when EU leaders were inaugurating a new era for European social policy. A basic component of the (then new) strategy was the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), a new governance tool based on the moral and political commitment (in contrast to the traditional Community method) and the voluntary collaboration of actors participating in the process. Despite the concerns raised in relation to its actual impact at national level and its strength as an instrument of Europeanisation, the significant number of publications on the subject –inversely related to its actual weight one could argue- allow us to draw conclusions on the method itself. More importantly, though, these analyses provide useful insights as to the future direction of social policy which could be of particular relevance and importance in the present context.

The book of Sandra Kröger focusing on the OMC in the field of social inclusion provides an insightful contribution to the OMC literature. Based on extensive variable-based research, Kröger aims at assessing the extent at which the OMC/inclusion has contributed to the goals of effectiveness (through mutual learning and monitoring) and legitimacy (through the participation of all relevant stakeholders) in France, Germany and at EU level through an examination of its implementation. The book comprises seven chapters. The first –introductory- one presents the poverty debate at EU level and the way this has been framed over the years through a narrative of the major steps in the development of European social policy, while placing particular emphasis on the Lisbon process and the OMC. A brief reference is also made to the main actors involved in the process (both state and non-state ones). The second chapter discusses questions of effectiveness and legitimacy (central to the book's analysis) by placing them in the framework of the different theories regarding the evolution of the European integration process. The third chapter presents the research framework of the book. It starts by highlighting the shortcomings of the OMC literature and proceeds in the operationalization of effectiveness and legitimacy (in the context of the OMC) through a set of evaluation criteria (namely the precision of information; the organizational capability building; monitoring; receptivity of the OMC by involved actors; representation; accountability). The chapter also provides a justification for the choice of policy field and of the countries under study. In relation to the latter, Kröger supports her choice –which has been missing from the introductory chapter- on the basis of the 'most different case design'; as argued by the author 'France and Germany are guided by different rationales, norms and institutions, rendering the comparison of the two member states a worthwhile enterprise'.

The following three chapters-constituting the core part of the book- focus on the implementation of the OMC/inclusion at national and EU level as well as its evaluation by the actors involved in the process. An in-depth analysis is provided based on the evaluation criteria set in the previous chapter. Notwithstanding the differences found in the implementation of the OMC/inclusion in the countries under study, the analysis leads to a rather pessimist conclusion with

regard to the method's capacity in the Europeanisation of anti-poverty policy, leaving negative integration unchallenged while foreclosing the possibility of supranational learning, despite its intentions. The final, concluding, chapter summarises the main findings drawn from the previous analysis. The resistance on the part of member states regarding the development of a European anti-poverty policy (corroborating the findings of other research regarding the limitations of the OMC) helps to explain the limited dynamics and the draw back during the revision of the Lisbon strategy. As Europeanisation is a two-way process limited uploading also meant limited downloading, even though EU-level dynamics have been stronger when compared to those at member state level. Overall, the book offers a well-researched comparative analysis of the OMC in France, Germany and EU-level.

With the benefit of the hindsight, as the book has been published in 2008, the issues raised in relation to the political economy of the OMC/inclusion and the EU more broadly acquire particular importance. The concern expressed by the author regarding the OMC's inability to contribute to the Europeanisation of anti-poverty policies, thereby diverting the attention away from a discussion on the structure of welfare states have resulted in social issues being further marginalised in the context of the current crisis and the dominance of the economic discourse at a time when Europeans are in need of a stronger and not weaker welfare state.

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