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Edited by Robert Salais and Robert Villeneuve
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Europe and the Politics of Capabilities

The social agenda of the European Union is shifting towards broad social initiatives that align social and economic objectives with the promotion of employment. This calls for an action framework that permits social dialogue and political deliberation to inform and complement legislative action at all levels. The debate, however, has been dominated by advocates of market-based solutions and their opponents, the supporters of traditional welfare states. This book, to break out of this sterile stalemate, demonstrates how an employment-oriented social policy in Europe can develop from a new, different set of policy principles, specifically 'a capability approach'. Taking inspiration from the work of Amartya Sen, this book focuses on the effective freedom people need to achieve their goals in life and work. The result of ongoing collaboration between researchers and social actors, it will appeal to social scientists, students, policy-makers and all those concerned with the building of Europe.

ROBERT SALAIS is Professor of Economics and Director of the Research Centre IDHE, Ecole Normale Supérieure de Cachan.

ROBERT VILLENEUVE is Director of EUREXCTER (Excellence Territoriale en Europe) and was Chairman of the Commission des Affaires Sociales, de l'Emploi et de la Formation Professionnelle of the ECPE at Brussels from 1995 to 2001.

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Notes on contributors

PIERRE BACHMAN is expert adviser at national level of the Economic Sector of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) and member of the Conseil Economique et Social Régional (CESR) of the Provence-Côte d'Azur region

JUDE BROWNE is Research Fellow at the Centre for Business Research, University of Cambridge

SIMON DEAKIN is Robert Monks Professor of Corporate Governance, Centre for Business Research and Judge Institute of Management, University of Cambridge

JEAN DE MUNCK is Professor of Sociology at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve

CLAUDE DIDRY is CNRS researcher CRS (CR1) in sociology at the Centre 'Institutions et Dynamiques Historiques de l'Economie' (IDHE), Ecole Normale Supérieure de Cachan

JACKY FAYOLLE is Director of the Institut de Recherches Economiques et Sociales (IRES), Paris and Associate Professor in Economics at the University Pierre Mendès-France of Grenoble

ISABELLE FERRERAS is Research Fellow of the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve and affiliate of the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, Harvard University

MARTIN HEIDENREICH is Professor of European Studies in the Department of Social Sciences at the University of Bamberg

EMMANUEL JULIEN is Head of Department of International and European Social Affairs in MEDEF (the Association of French Enterprises) and involved in UIECE activities

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JEAN LAPEYRE was Joint General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) from 1991 to 2002

ANNE LECUYER is Researcher at the Banque de France

JANE LEWIS is Barnett Professor of Social Policy at the University of Oxford

SERAFINO NEGRELLI is Associate Professor of Industrial Relations at the Law Faculty of the University of Brescia and researcher at Fondazione Regionale Pietro Seveso, Milan

PHILIPPE POCHET is Director of the Observatoire social européen (OSE), Brussels

GILLES RAVEAUD is a PhD student on economics at the University of Paris X Nanterre

ROBERT SALAIS is Professor of Economics and Director of the Research Centre IDHE, Ecole Normale Supérieure de Cachan

ROBERT VILLENEUVE is Director of EUREXCTER (Excellence Territoriale en Europe) and was Chairman of the Commission des Affaires Sociales, de l'Emploi et de la Formation Professionnelle of the ECPE at Brussels from 1995 to 2001

NOEL WHITESIDE is Professor in Social Policy at the University of Warwick

FRANK WILKINSON is Emeritus Reader in Applied Economics and Research Associate, Centre for Business Research, University of Cambridge

PIERRE-PAUL ZALIO is Senior Lecturer at the Department of Social Sciences, Ecole Normale Supérieure de Cachan and researcher at the Centre IDHE

BÉNÉDICTE ZIMMERMANN is Senior Lecturer at the Centre de Recherches Interdisciplinaires sur l'Allemagne (CRI), Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris

Preface

Odile Quintin

General Directorate DG Employment and Social Affairs,
European Commission

In June 2000, the Lisbon European Council set out an integrated and complementary strategy for achieving the three-fold aims of a knowledge-based economy, full employment and social inclusion. This triangular approach reflected the ongoing predominance of the European Social Model (ESM), and constituted the basis of the Social Policy Agenda adopted at Nice in December 2000, which was upheld as the right direction in the mid-term review of the Social Agenda in 2003.

A chief characteristic of this approach is the emphasis on *quality* – both quality of employment and quality of policies – supported by open and transparent processes. Quality also implies the commitment and involvement of different actors, in order to achieve the objective of a thriving knowledge-based economy, beginning at the local level. The quality of the interrelation between the local and territorial actors and their national or European-level representatives is an essential determinant of the quality and pertinence of decision-making and policy formulation at higher levels. The effective participation of territorial social partners, as with the national and European levels, in the various decision-making and implementation processes, depends on a well-functioning social dialogue. Social dialogue is an essential component of the European Social Model and, as such, is given specific recognition in the European treaties. Of the multifarious civil society players, the social partners hold a unique position, because they are best placed to address issues related to work and to negotiate binding agreements. This confers upon them a crucial role in promoting better governance, particularly in view of the enlargement of the Union in May 2004.

The European social dialogue has now achieved a new degree of maturity, evidenced by the social partners' adoption of their first autonomous multi-annual work programme for 2003–5. The work programme defines a range of themes of common interest to both sides of industry, and outlines a number of initiatives for the three-year period. These initiatives represent a vital contribution of the social partners to the implementation of the necessary measures for achieving economic and social progress.

They are now in a position to exercise influence over a wide range of areas, including the issue of social protection, and are taking an active part in the ongoing debate on the vitally important issue of the future of pension systems across the European Union.

Looking ahead, two clear trends can be identified. The first is the involvement of diverse civil society actors, and particularly the social partners, in an increasingly broad spectrum of issues, covering not only employment but social inclusion, social protection, skills and mobility, health and safety and living and working conditions. These different domains have acquired a new degree of interconnection in the framework of the Commission's Social Policy Agenda, which underlines the interrelation and mutual dependence between the three objectives of economic reform, employment and social cohesion. The relevant actors therefore have an important role in ensuring the positive correlation between the different issues in which they are involved, in order to optimise the quality and efficiency of the outcomes.

The second trend is the growing strategic importance of local actors at the territorial level, which demands a reinforcement of their capability for action. As the Commission's White Paper on Governance, published in 2001, demonstrates, today's society is characterised by increasing interdependence, requiring the commitment and active participation of all stakeholders, as the developments in the field of corporate social responsibility clearly illustrate. The work undertaken on the politics of capabilities, supported by European Community funding, has been extremely valuable, precisely because it has brought academic researchers together with the actors. This innovative approach represents the added value of the work which is encapsulated in this volume. It is therefore a welcome contribution to the policy debate, and strengthens the case for continued efforts to develop the capacity of actors to participate in the conception, implementation and follow-up of employment and social policies in the European Union.

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