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**Jens Alber, Tony Fahey, and Chiara Saraceno (eds.), Handbook of Quality of Life in the Enlarged European Union. Abindon: Routledge, 2008, 430 pp.**

(doi: 10.2383/29575)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2009

**Ente di afferenza:**

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## Book reviews

**Jens Alber, Tony Fahey, and Chiara Saraceno (eds.), *Handbook of Quality of Life in the Enlarged European Union*. Abindon: Routledge, 2008, 430 pp.**

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The promotion of the quality of life of European Union citizens is of central concern to the European Commission. Increasing quality of life, and promoting social cohesion (i.e. equality of quality of life) between countries and regions within the EU, are two essential ingredients of any policy aiming to fight social exclusion, developing a “social Europe,” and making the EU “the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment.” Challenges to these aims are numerous and of different nature, they arise from processes such as: population ageing, changing family structures, economic globalization, and the present economic recession. One of these processes is specifically connected to the creation of the European Union, i.e.: the enlargement of the EU to include 17 new countries. Despite its importance, existing knowledge on the quality of life in the EU and, in particular, on recently admitted countries is very scarce. The aim of this book is to fill this gap and, thus, to present a comprehensive description of various aspects of the quality of life in the EU. In doing this, the book combines several innovative and interesting aspects. Firstly, special attention is given to analyzing, in a comparative perspective, key aspects of the quality of life in the twelve new member states. Secondly, together with the usual objective and macro level indicators it also takes into consideration how EU citizens themselves evaluate the quality of their lives. Thirdly, it provides a first assessment of the extent to which the enlargement has contributed to increasing inequality in economic and social well being among Europeans.

The book originates from a research project on quality of life promoted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Working and Living Condition and whose centerpiece was the first European Quality of Life Survey. This survey was conducted in 2003 in 28 countries, the 27 member states and Turkey. The volume, therefore, covers a wide range of European societies. Furthermore, following the idea that by focusing on quality of life scholars should “move beyond narrow or one-dimensional views of human personality in assessing people’s situation” [p. 201], the volume analyses a large number of areas that define individuals’ quality of life. Accordingly the book is organized into five main parts, including a total of 17 chapters, covering various quality of life issues: *i*) fertility, families and households; *ii*) employment and working conditions; *iii*) material living conditions (income, living standards and housing); *iv*) social capital and social cohesion; *v*) processes of Europeanization.

In the first section of the book the chapters by Fahey, Saraceno, Keck and Blome, and Bahle analyze the role of family relationships, patterns of family formation and family policies in affecting individuals’ quality of life. The findings presented in the first and last of these contributions are particularly interesting. Analyzing the gap between actual and preferred fertility, Tony Fahey’s contribution documents that in almost all of the 28

countries and three age groups considered the actual number of children falls short of the desired level of fertility. Most importantly, he finds that “under-attainment of family size preferences is a function of social advantage rather than disadvantage” [p. 41]. The policy implications of Fahey findings are not trivial. Firstly, there is one clear rationale for policies aiming at increasing fertility rates: we will improve individuals’ quality of life if we can help them have the number of children they want. Secondly, if we want to increase fertility rates in the EU we need to implement policies that remove constraints that prevent people having the number of children they want. Thirdly, these policies should be addressed to the most educated women rather than to the economically deprived ones. As noted by Fahey, the difficulty in targeting these policies to (relatively) well-off people is that they are regressive and that they can be justified only on the basis of a vertical equity argument [p. 43].

The chapter by Thomas Bahle on family policy patterns in the EU raises two key questions: “which ‘families of nations’ of family policy can be distinguished and how can they be explained? Do the new member states form a separate group or join other ‘families of nations’?”. Answering the second of these questions is fundamental to our understanding of European societies. In fact, European sociology has quite a hard task in trying to incorporate new member states societies into preexisting analytic schemas or, alternatively, in parsimoniously modifying the existing schemas so as to be able to fit this “enlarged scenario.” Unfortunately, so far, what many scholars have done is simply to add data from new member states into their analyses, and cluster all of them, or at least all the former socialist countries, together into a unique family of nations often called “former socialist countries.” What Bahle does, instead, is to carefully examine to what extent new members states fit into the historical map of European variations. His findings clearly show, in relation to family policy, that the new member states do not constitute a homogeneous group, but rather they belong to different ‘family of nations’. He also argues that pre-communist cultural and institutional inheritance has played a relevant role in how family policy in new member states has evolved in the last few decades.

The second part of the book is concerned with employment patterns, working conditions and institutional change in EU countries’ labor markets. Alber’s contribution shows that characteristics of people excluded from the labor market tend to be fairly similar across all EU countries; however, the new member states labor markets’ stand out for the particularly bad situation of young and low-skilled citizens. Wallace and Pichler carry out a comparison, based on EQLS 2003 survey data, of working conditions in Eastern and Western Europe. Not surprisingly they found that despite EU workers experiencing similar problems, these problems, and particularly those related with wages and job security, are more severe in Eastern Europe. Finally Visser’s chapter analyses recent developments in labor market institutions in EU15 and eight ex-communist countries. The author argues that it is quite unlikely that new member countries labor markets evolve towards a model based on sectoral bargaining and upward harmonization; furthermore, he also states that EU framework directives have very limited standardizing power on labor market institutional regulation.

Chapters from 8 to 11, part 3 of the book, concentrate on material deprivation and housing conditions in the enlarged EU. Whelan and Maître’s chapter, by providing a quite thought-provoking picture of material deprivation in the EU, convincingly show

the limitations of unidimensional approaches to the study of social exclusion and, most importantly, of alternative solutions such as switching the focus onto EU-wide relative income lines. Also, beside the methodological arguments, they well document the fact that “while the economically excluded constitute substantially larger groups in the poorer [countries], they are much more sharply differentiated from others in the richer [ones].” This latter finding is perfectly echoed in the chapter by Petra Bönke on subjective perceptions of social exclusions. There is consistent evidence, therefore, that paradoxically as it might appear economic disadvantage represents a greater threat to social inclusion in affluent European countries than in richer ones. In the following contribution Cantillon, van Mechelen and Schulte analyze the implementation of minimum income policies in the EU countries. As observed in other domains, they found that greater differences can be found within the old EU15 than between new and old member states. Most importantly they show that, so far, the Open Methods of Coordination on social inclusion has been quite unsuccessful. The following two chapters of this section provide an interesting picture of differences between countries on housing conditions and the institutional contexts within which these differences have arisen.

The fourth part of the book is concerned with patterns of sociability and social inclusion in the EU, and with existing tensions between classes and/or ethnic groups within countries. In their challenging contribution Olagnero, Torrioni and Saraceno provide an extensive description of differences in patterns of sociability across the enlarged EU. Their results show that six distinct patterns can be identified, i.e. *wide range*, characterized by collectively oriented sociability; *commitment to community*, characterized by less political engagement than the former; *convergence*, in which both family and non-family networks play a major role; *proximity*, characterized by the high prevalence of face to face (and mainly family) contacts; *mutual help*, in which we observe low involvement in politics, a routine experience of mutual help and high relevance of non-family networks; *closeness*, characterized by low involvement in politics, and extremely high relevance of face to face contacts with family members. The authors thoroughly document that these six country clusters only partially overlap with the classic threefold welfare regime typology. In addition, similarly to what has been found in other domains, they find that former communist countries are as internally differentiated as the old EU15 member states. In the following chapter Petra Bönke analyses feeling of marginalization in the EU and their possible explanations. She finds, as might be expected, that self-perceived social exclusion is strongly connected with unemployment status and economic deprivation. However, her results also stress the importance of family and non-family social networks in people’s assessment of their feelings of socially inclusion. The relevance of this latter finding for EU policy cannot be underestimated; as they argue: “the role that family back-up and social network support play in preventing social marginalization has been severely underestimated” [p. 324]. Delhey and Keck’s chapter on perception of group conflicts concludes this fourth section of the book. The key findings of this contribution are, firstly, that well-off and disadvantaged groups of the population do not differ much in their view on conflicts, whereas huge differences exists between countries. Secondly, while people in new member states are predominantly concerned about tensions between ethnic groups, new member state citizens are particularly preoccupied about traditional class conflicts.

The fifth section, the most heterogeneous of the book, concludes by addressing different processes of Europeanization. Kriger's chapter analyzes mobility intentions of EU citizens by drawing on the Eurobarometer data. Delhey and Kohler's contribution, on the other hand, examines how citizens evaluate the quality of life in their own country relative to the EU. They show that people have quite a clear idea about where their country stands, relative to the EU average, in terms of material living conditions. And, most importantly, their results indicate that, *ceteris paribus*, a low ranking position of their own country negatively affects individuals' satisfaction with their lives. Chapter 17 concludes by providing a qualitative assessment of major European surveys.

Overall the book is quite successful in its aim of providing a comprehensive description of the quality of life in Europe. It also makes a significant contribution to our understanding of recent social changes in new member countries. However, one possible criticism relates to how, on occasion, data from these countries are incorporated into the analyses. In some chapters cross-country differences are analyzed simply by comparing the EU15 with the 10 countries that joined the EU in 2004 and the 3 countries that in 2003 were still candidates to join the EU. In other contributions the 28 countries of the EQLS are treated individually without too much effort to cluster them together. And eventually other authors often compare the situation of the group of former-communist member states with the old EU15 countries. This eclectic analytical framework is sometimes confusing. A second criticism is related to what might be missing in this book, and that is: *i*) an extended theoretical discussion of the advantages of focusing on quality of life in assessing individuals' situation – instead of adopting the usual one-dimensional approaches; and *ii*) a methodological chapter dealing with the problems of measuring individuals' (subjective and objective) quality of life at EU level. This said, it is worth underlining that this book has the great merit of adding to our knowledge of new member states' societies, stimulating research that focuses on a broad definition of what EU citizens' well being is, and addressing the problem of including subjective measures of quality of life in social policy analyses. Most importantly, this book provides ample evidence on the most difficult obstacles to achieving the goal of improving EU citizen's quality of life, and creating a knowledge-based and social cohesion promoting economy.

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