



Canada Research Chair in Citizenship and Governance

## **Converging, Diverging or Shifting? Social Architecture in a Era of Change**

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## Introduction

Currently, academic conferences as well as policy communities are consumed by the question of whether there is “convergence” or “divergence” in directions of policy change. Many neo-institutionalists claim that divergence must continue to exist, because it always has. Others see the emergence of patterns that may reflect a new consensus and therefore some convergence. If such a discussion is going to occur, in policy communities as well as among academics, it is important to have a good sense of what “convergence” might involve (towards whom? towards what?) as well as what “divergence” might mean (from what? with respect to whom?).

This topic is of long-standing interest in comparative political economy and comparative politics. This became only more true since the last decade of the 20th century, when processes of globalisation began to demand significant attention. Even among these scholars, however, there is very little agreement about the meaning of the key concepts.<sup>1</sup> As the authors of one of the major works on the issue, examining the experience of advanced industrial societies, wrote: “Our understanding of institutional change and convergence is generally more intuitive than systematic” (Kitschelt *et al.*, 1999: 438). Therefore, the matter merits more attention.

This paper will examine the issue in four steps. First it will document the range of hypotheses that are commonly used to address the relationship between globalisation and social policy governance. Then it will set out some of the reasons why thinking about convergence and divergence is inherently complicated. Thirdly, it will scrutinize two general families that provide quite different ways for thinking about change. Finally it will propose a way to think about some current patterns of convergence in policy thinking and practices.

## Converging or Divergence: Little Agreement

There is very little agreement about whether countries’ social policies are converging, despite the efforts of at least the last two decades to make sense of a series of changes, variously labelled “the crisis of the welfare state,” the invention of the “workfare” (and even “wed-fare”) state, social policy “retrenchment,” welfare state “redesign” and so on. In particular, once globalisation was recognised as a fundamentally important economic, social and political process, the dispute has broadened.

## Globalisation and Change – Three Perspectives

Bruno Palier and Robert Sykes (2001: 4ff) identify three theoretical perspectives, each assigning a particular role to globalisation, that generates a prediction of either convergence or divergence in social policies. The first perspective sees globalisation having a significant and similar impact on welfare regimes, because it brings the increasing dominance of a global market economy. As one example among many,<sup>2</sup> we can observe that Ramesh Mishra treats globalisation “as an economic as well as a political and ideological phenomenon” that “is without doubt now the essential context of the welfare state” (1999: 15). The processes of globalisation, including neo-

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<sup>1</sup> This complaint about definitional confusion was raised explicitly by Iversen and Pontusson (2000: 3) and most recently by Hay (2002: 25ff).

<sup>2</sup> For several reviews of these debates see Rhodes (1996) and Palier and Sykes (2001).



liberal economics that have accompanied it, undermine national states, eliminate the space for choosing progressive options, and so on.

Another version of this first perspective – one that is less pessimistic by far – finds convergence around a set of general principles that organise governance and social policy, although frequently there is divergence in implementation. It looks to long periods of history, drawing inspiration from, *inter alia*, the work of Karl Polanyi (1944). This is work which uses concepts such as “regime change,” “paradigm shift” and so on. It seeks to identify the large changes in ideas, such as the adoption of Keynesianism (Hall, 1989), or in practices, such as the spread of Fordism (for example, Boyer and Saillard, 1995), or towards immense social change such as towards post-modernity (for example, Beck, 2000).<sup>3</sup> We will, ultimately, come down closest to this position.

A second perspective assigns globalisation relatively little impact on social policy reforms and programs. Policy choices are described as still being predominantly shaped by domestic political factors, such as coalitional politics and societal projects. While some modifications in spending may be occurring, this perspective relies heavily on the image of path dependency. Change is bounded, involving retrenchment more than redesign,<sup>4</sup> and to the extent it does occur, is due to the maturation processes of welfare states and mobilisation patterns (for example Pierson, 1994; Stephens, Huber Stephens and Ray, 1999: 167 and *passim*).

This perspective is frequently associated with the claim that change is the result of clear and powerful mediation processes *within* welfare regimes or production regimes but not *across* regime types. This vision of within-regime or within-model change leads those working on the “varieties of capitalism,” for example, to posit adaptation within each production regime and convergence of each to a new point, but with continued divergence across regime types.<sup>5</sup> Thus, those analysing welfare regimes as well as those focussed on varieties of capitalism describe basic regime differences sustained through time despite new challenges (Esping-Andersen, 1996; Kitschelt *et al.*, 1999; Hall and Soskice, 2001).<sup>6</sup> As Kitschelt *et al.* write: “institutional

<sup>3</sup> Although not directly attributing the forces of change to “globalisation,” but emphasizing common patterns of movement in ideas, Jane Jenson and Mariette Sineau (2001: Chapter 9 and *passim*) describe a series of common patterns of movement in *citizenship regimes*. They observe five national cases that cross the traditional categories of the three worlds of welfare capitalism. Shaped by shifting values and altered representations of state, market and family, Sweden as well as Italy, Belgium and France in the 1990s began to move away from the citizenship regime associated with what has been termed the Keynesian welfare state and more egalitarian gender roles associated with it, toward a shared set of values and institutional practices, consistent with neo-liberal ideas and interventions.

<sup>4</sup> For a criticism of the “retrenchment” vocabulary and a proposal that change is more important than recognized by adherents to this perspective, see *inter alia*, Jenson and Sineau (2001: Chapter 1) and Palier (2002).

<sup>5</sup> The “varieties of capitalism” literature is expanding rapidly. Generally, those who use the approach follow David Soskice in positing two ideal typical ways that firms (aided by states) resolve co-ordination problems: liberal market economies (LME) and coordinated market economies (CME). The most recent and much-cited contribution is Hall and Soskice (2001). While this approach does not often focus on social policy and welfare regimes, it does examine the interconnections of state and economy and at times the intersection of economic and social policy. Kitschelt *et al.* (1999), who adhere to this approach, have chapters dealing with social policy spending and policy design.

<sup>6</sup> Colin Hay calls these dual convergence or co-convergence theses, which “posit a series of – *clearly specified* – institutional mediations which may serve to channel common inputs and pressures in different directions” (2002: 16).

divergence has a tendency to persist and to reconstitute itself” (1999: 444), despite the similarities of challenges, in large part because of path dependence.

A third perspective is one that admits globalisation has consequences, but sees its effects *mediated* by national institutional structures and policy responses, such that there is space for country-specific or regime specific adaptation to new pressures. Depending on circumstances, convergence *or* divergence may result.<sup>7</sup> Even if welfare states across the OECD world faced similar pressures, each was expected to respond in different ways. As Richard Simeon, George Hoberg and Keith Banting say of Canada (Simeon *et al.*, 1997: 390):

...neither global forces nor domestic societal change translates automatically into preordained policy responses. Nations preserve important degrees of freedom in reacting to contemporary pressures, and core characteristics of each country mediate between the forces for change and public policy, conditioning the ways in which it adjusts.

Indeed, an expectation of *perhaps* convergence *perhaps* divergence is probably the most common found in the literature today (Banting, *et al.*, 1997: 5 and *passim*; O'Connor *et al.*, 1999: 223). Colin Hay proposes, in fact, a notion of *contingent convergence*, in which “differential exposure to processes of economic integration and case-specific (institutional) mediations sustain a contingent process of convergence and divergence” (2002: 36).

### **Convergence and Divergence – What about Transnational Institutions?**

It is not only the effects of “globalisation” in general that have prompted a variety of judgements about the direction of change. The construction of the European Union (EU), and in particular the institutionalisation of new policy processes and constraints, has also provoked disagreement about whether convergence or divergence is the norm.<sup>8</sup> This case is a useful one to examine, because instead of the generality of “international constraints,” it (and some international organisations) provide examples of policies that impose constraints, and thereby shape social policy choices by limiting the range of legitimate choice.<sup>9</sup>

The three perspectives on globalisation and social policy can be identified in the literature on the EU as well. Many analysts argue for convergence, under the influence of EU institutions. In the 1980s (but still into the present), pessimists among experts and others feared that the rules of the EU would lead to “social dumping” and a race to the bottom. The optimistic among such analysts see the institutions of Europe pulling the more traditional or reluctant Member States toward a common set of practices, towards harmonisation. For example, Bruno Palier (2001) takes up the argument (announced earlier in Palier and Sykes 2001), that “Europe may not be the problem” (that is the *cause* of adjustment), it may actually provide solutions, ideas, and

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<sup>7</sup> Gøsta Esping-Andersen’s edited collection (1996) is a good example of this standpoint, as is Sykes *et al.* (2001), especially the chapters examining adaptations by five different types of welfare states.

<sup>8</sup> Looking at transnational actors such as international organizations and epistemic communities, Hassenteufel and Palier (2001) introduce an analysis of transnational actors. Additional examples are found in the same issue of *Lien social et Politiques*, entitled: *Les frontières du social : nationales, transnationales, mondiales ?*

<sup>9</sup> There is a huge literature on international organizations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund’s use of “conditionality,” which will not be considered here.



institutional locations for developing appropriate responses to common problems. In this sense, the institutions of the Union, for example the Open Method of Co-ordination, become a way “to organise a learning process about how to cope with the common challenges of the global economy in a co-ordinated way while also respecting national diversity.”<sup>10</sup>

Whatever the position, whether optimistic or pessimistic, the assumption underlying these analyses is that the new institutions and their policy actions will provoke a significant measure of convergence. The most ambitious project is, no doubt, the current goal of simply breaking with the Eastern European Communist model by requiring, as a condition of membership, that countries adopt and conform to the *acquis communautaires*. As this is achieved, it will provide a spectacular example how path dependency can be broken (de la Porte and Pochet, 2002: 11-12).

Yet others, however, point to the EU’s lack of competence for social matters, as well as continuing degrees of difference, despite the efforts of the European Commission, the European Monetary Union or the European Court of Justice to pull all Member States into line behind a common set of convergence criteria, directives, *acquis communautaires*, judicial decisions and so on. Again, for some analysts, institutional arrangements and particular challenges within regime types will lead to lack of convergence and significant path dependency (Pierson, 2001, for example). For others, the conflicts within national states remain primordial and a supranational policy regime is unlikely (for example, Streeck, 1998: 368ff).

The third perspective is represented by those who see the European Community and then Union engaged in “polity-creating” as well as “market-deepening” processes (Hooghe and Marks, 1999: 70). With the institutionalisation of new processes and practices, there is convergence in some areas with divergence in others (Jenson and Pochet, 2002).

In doing so, attention is also increasingly going to the institutions of the European Union as policy entrepreneurs and idea generators that can, through careful political work, begin to generate harmonisation or fail to do so. For example, in the family policy realm – a policy area in which European institutions have absolutely no treaty-based authority – George Ross (2001: 178) demonstrates that:

Both the European Commission and the European Court of Justice (ECJ) were designed to be advocates of more ‘Europeanization.’ ...Thus, despite the constraints of Europe’s treaties and the interests of Member States in zealously protecting their sovereignty, what Europe is politically, what it can do, and how it does what it does have never been definitively fixed. ...Europe’s constitutional elasticity, the entrepreneurial skills of European leaders, and flexibility of European institutions have allowed the Community to try to move on family policy and childcare, with certain small, subtle successes.

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<sup>10</sup> This quote is from the document presented by the Portuguese Presidency to the Council - cited by Palier (2001: 8). It is the *Presidency Note* to the Council of the European Union *On the on-going experience of the Open Method of Coordination* (Brussels, 14 June 2000, 9088/00). For more on the OMC see de la Porte and Pochet (2002).

Of course, characterising the influence as one of “small, subtle successes” also implies that divergence continues to exist.

Assessments of the Open Method of Co-ordination (the most recent effort to implement a European social policy) also fall into the three scenarios or perspectives described above. The OMC can be seen as provoking policy convergence, as having no effect because Member States continue along their usual paths, or as limiting divergence and helping each welfare regime “modernise” its social policy according to some common principles (de la Porte and Pochet, 2002: 15-16). Significant literatures exist to support each perspective. Experts compare the same processes and cases, to arrive at difference assessments of the experience.

## **Why so Little Agreement about the “Facts”? The Nature of Comparative Analysis**

What is going on here? Putting aside the arguments *ex cathedra* advanced for political or journalistic reasons and examining only theoretically and empirically based studies by researchers, we are still confronted with a good deal of variety in the appreciation of the situation. In other words, some experts observe convergence where their colleagues find divergence. Why this level of disagreement and dispute among those arguing from – often the same – empirical data? The answers are found by unpacking some of the recurring issues of comparative analysis, because *comparison* is inherent to any question about convergence and divergence. Are two (or more) situations becoming more similar or more different, are they the same or not?

Three major grounds for the presence of disagreements over the “facts” can be identified.

### **Defining “Same” and “Different”**

A first, and inevitable, reason that such doubts exist is an ontological one. The empirical world, and the cases analysed, are always *different*. Nothing is ever exactly the same as anything else. Therefore, the crucial issue is whether we choose to see that the differences are *significantly* different or whether they are *sufficiently* similar to say that the two objects share something. “A common issue in all comparative analysis is whether to be impressed by and to emphasize differences or to be impressed by and emphasize similarities” (Banting *et al.*, 1997: 4-5).

For example, in his now classic *Patchworks of Purpose*, Gerald Boychuk demonstrates that Canada is not, as many would have it, a straight-forward example of a liberal welfare regime. Rather “their distinct origins marked fundamental differences in how the provincial states acted to reinforce or undermine the market, on the one hand, and the traditional family, on the other... [they] have followed unique trajectories of development, and important differences among them persist” (1998: xvii). In contrast, Julia O’Connor, Ann Orloff and Sheila Shaver set out to compare “four countries with significant similarities” (1999: 37), and treat Canada, along with the United States, Britain and Australia, as standard examples of a liberal welfare state.

Boychuk is no more correct than O’Connor, Orloff and Shaver, of course. Each made a decision, based on a different level of tolerance of variety in the indicators chosen. What Boychuk labels a





unique trajectory, in his comparison of 10 provinces, is treated as a “significant similarity” by O’Connor and her co-authors, who seek to compare four countries.

This issue is neither avoidable, nor fundamentally difficult. It does, however, merit attention because it leads to the following conclusion. That which we label “convergence” and that which we label “divergence” will be a construct of theory and operationalisation of concepts. They can be named *only* once they have been located theoretically. For example, whether we label the *trente glorieuses* the years of the Keynesian welfare state and Fordism – that is, years of convergence – or the years of three (or more) welfare regimes – that is years of divergence – will depend on the theory deployed and the level of analysis used.

### Theory and Level of Analysis

A second reason there are disputes over the “facts” of convergence and divergence is then related to the theoretical choices made about level of analysis. Certain perspectives, as a result of their foundational premises (and therefore inherent to the theory) lead to a prediction of similarity, and therefore convergence. Others, also as a result of their theoretical premises, will search for differences, and therefore map divergence. These expectations of similarity or difference apply both to cross-sectional analyses of cases (cross-national comparisons, for example), and to analysis across time.

The most popular way, established by the founding fathers of comparative analysis, is to posit a trajectory towards shared conditions – towards “modernity,” “capitalism,” “development,” “industrialism” and so on. Long before theorists of globalisation predicted convergence, theorists of macro change identified common conditions associated with *modernity*, the *logic of industrialism*, or its Marxist versions which called the process the *logic of capitalist development* (and underdevelopment).

Therefore, it is not surprising that we find in recent writings by structuralists such as Ulrich Beck (2000: 21) assertions of this sort:

Globalisation calls into question a basic premise of the first modernity: the conceptual figure that A.D. Smith calls ‘methodological nationalism’, according to which the contours of society largely coincide with those of the national state. With multidimensional globalisation, it is not only a set of connections and cross-connections between states and societies which comes into being. Much more far-reaching is the breakdown of the basic assumptions whereby societies and states have been conceived, organized and experienced as territorial units separated from one another. Globality means that the unity of the national state and national society comes unstuck; new relations of power and competition, conflict and intersection, take shape between, on the one hand, national states and actors, and on the other hand transnational actors, identities, social spaces, situations and processes.

Such thinking, both in its earlier and more recent versions tends to lead to the search for common (if not a single) factor driving change in similar directions. Thus, for example, in this tradition, Bob Jessop (1993) describes a shift from the Keynesian welfare state to the Schumpeterian workfare state, one that is common to virtually all industrial economies and associated with the



breakdown of Fordism and the appearance of transnational neo-liberalism. This argument was very similar in form if not content to earlier ones provided, for example, by Peter Flora and Jens Alber (1981) who described a common pattern of movement toward welfare states occurring as modern industrial relations broke down traditional social institutions or Charles Tilly (1990) who described the management of war-making by states as a key factor accounting for the emergence of modern citizenship, including social citizenship.

Yet, theories at this level of generality have also always been subjected to criticism, and particularly by theorists who prefer the institutional level of analysis. As Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990: 12) said in his landmark text on welfare regimes, and with respect to what he terms classical political economy (such as undertaken by Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Maurice Dobb or the Myrdals):

...classical political economists had little interest in historical variability: they saw their efforts leading towards a system of universal laws. Although contemporary political economy sometimes clings to the belief in absolute truths, the comparative and historical method that underpins almost all good political economy is one that reveals variation and permeability.

Analysis of welfare regimes, just as that focused on varieties of capitalism and production regimes *seeks* to track divergence among regime types. The task of identifying difference was as much that of the classic 1940s study of T.H. Marshall on social citizenship, as it was of Esping-Andersen in the 1990s. The automatic response of other researchers is then to dispute the generalisations, even about the convergence within diverging regimes, and to seek to improve them. Feminists took Marshall to task for only telling the male version of the story, while Esping-Andersen's typology was "improved" by the addition of a fourth regime, the southern one (Ferrera, 1998) as well as by attention to family circumstances, after pressure from feminist theory and analysis of gender relations (for example, Orloff, 1993).

Inherent to the traditions of new institutionalist analyses, in other words, is an analytical *proclivity* to seek divergence.<sup>11</sup> For example, some early comparative studies begin because of a basic discomfort with high-level generalisations about structures of gender relations as well as from criticisms of grand theory (for example, Jenson, 1986; Dobrowolsky, 1998).

## Designing Research

The third reason for dispute about the "facts" in comparative analysis derives from decisions made about research design. The goal of the demonstration will have a significant effect on the research design selected. The questions posed are not the same, even by analysts working with the same concepts; differences persist within the same theoretical approach and not only across them.

This factor, and its consequences for expectation and observation of convergence or divergence, can be illustrated by comparing, as examples, two studies that both employ the concept of

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<sup>11</sup> As Desmond King says of this literature, "cross-national policy convergence is not normally expected by new institutional analysis" (1992: 219). See for example, O'Conner, Orloff and Shaver (1999), who examine the differences within one regime.



welfare regime, and work at the institutional level of analysis: that of Esping-Andersen (1990) and that of O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver (1999). Because Esping-Andersen's intent was to demonstrate that welfare capitalism could resolve the challenges of organizing the transfer and production sectors in three distinct patterns, thereby generating three different worlds of welfare capitalism, he sought to document convergence *within* types and divergence *across* types.

In contrast, O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver, working within a single class – that of a liberal welfare regime – assume that the policy regimes converge; they concentrate on determining whether, even within a single welfare regime type, variation can be found in gender regimes during a decade of economic restructuring. This is a variation-finding research design.<sup>12</sup>

Given these three inherent characteristics of comparative analysis – lack of a stable ontological notion of “same” and “different”; theoretical approaches that predict system-level similarities or institutionally mediated differences; research designs intended to demonstrate either convergence or divergence – it is hardly surprising that when comparative analysts ask whether social policies are converging or diverging the answers vary, and are often over-determined theory and research design, as well as by ideological, disciplinary or other foundational premises.

There is more to it than that, however.

## The Varied Meanings of Converging

One of the most troubling aspects of the literature on convergence and divergence is that there is often little agreement on the objects of convergence. As Kitschelt *et al.* (1999: 438) write:

We think we know what we mean by convergence but in fact several alternative understandings are possible. Institutions and policies could become more alike, for instance, by becoming more like those already in existence in one country, or they could all change to some new configuration. And when we speak of convergence, do we recognize it by similarities in the direction of movement (shared trends) or by a narrowing of differences, or both?

The range of these meanings can be illustrated by a brief digression to look at three types of analysis, leading to an observation that not only is there little agreement about *patterns* of change, but there is little consensus about *objects of convergence*.

## Convergence Towards What?

A first example is a recent book entitled *Convergence or Divergence? Comparing Recent Social Trends in Industrial Societies*. The team headed by Simon Langlois of Université Laval conducted a major cross-national comparison (France, Quebec, USA, West Germany), and found (Langlois *et al.*, 1995: 29): “Over all, there can be no doubt that we are looking at highly parallel social trends. ...As a first approximation, then, we maintain that there was indeed a dominant pattern of social change since 1960 across the four societies on two continents.”

<sup>12</sup> As they say in their introductory chapter, “in the following chapters, we take on the task of empirically describing and analysing the cross-national variations among these four welfare states across the three policy areas – labour markets, income support, and regulation of reproduction” (O'Connor *et al.*, 1999: 41).

For these analysts, convergence exists when the *direction of change* is analogous, such that the trend line is parallel. It does not mean that the four societies are moving closer together, however. It just means they are changing in a similar way; initial differences could be maintained.

Secondly, social trends could converge while policy and other outcomes might diverge. Parallel social trends did not lead to the same policy outcomes. Indeed, the study reports that, while there was “perfect similarity” in trends in the categories of ageing, women’s labour force participation and labour markets, the same can not be said for matters that depend on the exercise of political power. As the team writes (Langlois *et al.*, 1995: 33): “We may say that trends in the basic social structures – social hierarchies, anthropological structures and major institutions – have been more similar from one society to another than have the forms of enactment of social relations.”

In other words, in those areas in which political choice intervenes, the patterns of three decades were most varied, and social relations which depend on such choices – such as social stratification, state and service institutions and ideologies – show less similarity (Langlois *et al.*, 1995: 31-33). This study, in other words, documents convergence of policy *inputs* but divergence in outputs.

For their part, the authors of *Degrees of Freedom. Canada and the United States in a Changing World* defined convergence quite differently, and provide our second example. First, convergence would exist only if there were movement towards *similar conditions*, not simply parallel trends. Secondly, they require movement in four areas, before they are willing to say convergence between the two countries exists. They assess: (a) whether the Canadian and American economies have become more similar; (b) whether ethnic, racial, family and gender relations, religious practices and so on have become more similar; (c) whether political institutions and processes are more similar; and (d) whether or not policy agendas and policy programs reflect “distinctive approaches to the problems of contemporary life” (Banting *et al.*, 1997: 5). Moreover, as we have described above, the hypothesis drawn from their neo-institutionalism is that even if (a) and (b) move towards greater similarity, neither (c) nor (d) will automatically do so. Indeed, the fundamental changes in which these authors are interested are those in (c) and (d), that is, convergence of *process* and *policy*, and especially the latter.

A third example comes from the classic study, *The Political Power of Economic Ideas. Keynesianism across Nations*, and especially Peter A. Hall’s treatment of Keynesian theory as a set of shared framing ideas. Convergence occurred as countries adhered to these basic ideas. The book documents how they were taken up by a large number of countries, beginning with the United States in the 1930s, and were used to frame a similar commitment to counter-cyclical spending, demand management and many social programs (Hall, 1989: 6-7):

Although Keynes was by no means responsible for the expansion of the welfare state that is sometimes linked to his name, his theories placed increasing responsibility for economic performance on the government’s shoulders, and his attacks on the priority which classical economics attached to a balanced budget helped to loosen a fiscal constraint that stood in the way of more generous social programs. In these respects,



to study the emerging influence of Keynesian ideas is to consider many of the factors that lie behind the development of the modern state since the 1920s. Partly for this reason, of course, Keynesianism has acquired a rather broad set of connotations... Indeed, the very ambiguity of Keynesian ideas was one source of their influence. They became a cloak with which to cover or dress up a wide variety of economic practices.

Key to the analysis by Hall and the other authors in the book is the fact that the policies pursued by each country were often significantly different from those of their neighbours who also adhered to a commitment to Keynesianism. The convergence, in other words, was of *paradigms* and *discourse*, but within a national universe of political discourse (Hall, 1989: 383 and 361-92). Widely varying policy goals, program designs and delivery mechanisms could be accommodated under the umbrella of a common set of ideas.

### **Two Families of Thinking about Convergence**

These three examples, selected from a wide number of possible studies, demonstrate a major reason why discussions of convergence and divergence are so difficult to grasp hold of; the object of convergence is not always the same. In a recent paper, Colin Hay identifies at least six different objects of convergence easily identified in the literature.



**Box 1**  
**Objects of Convergence**

1. Convergence in the pressures and challenges – *input convergence*.
2. Convergence in the policies – *policy convergence*.
3. Convergence in the process in and through which challenges are translated into policy outcomes – *process convergence*.
4. Convergence in policy outcomes, usually gauged in terms of indicators of policy performance – *outcome convergence*.
5. Convergence in the policy paradigms through which such pressures and challenges are identified and understood – *paradigm convergence*.
6. Convergence in the ideas used to legitimate policy choices – *rhetoric convergence*.

Source: The categories are adopted directly from Hay (2002: 27); the order and discussion are ours.

Convergence on one of these objects does not necessarily, and often will not imply, convergence on all or even any of the others.

This list is useful because it reveals in a dramatic fashion the extent to which the same term – convergence – can be used to mean many different things. Nonetheless, closer examination of the literature, as we have done thus far, reveals that within comparative analysis of social policy there are really only two distinct streams, or families.

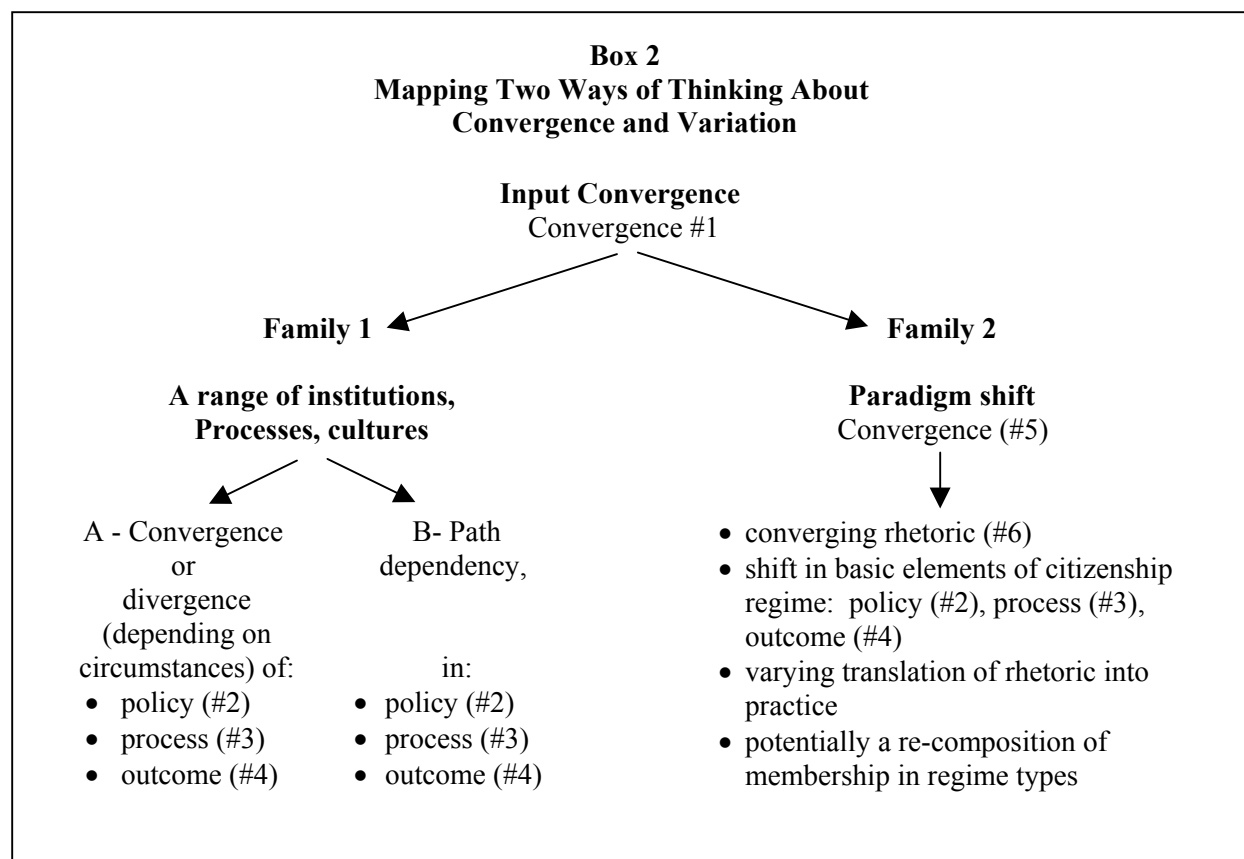
Both start from the notion that there *has indeed been* a significant change in structural factors over the past decades. Only the most simplistic, however, think that it is sufficient to stop with an examination of inputs; we have gone beyond what Colin Hay calls the “airport lounge” versions of hyper-globalisation (Hay, 2002: 6ff). Now, with more sophistication, both groups seek to understand via empirical analysis, how these acknowledged change in structural factors are altering policy. It is here that there is much less agreement.

We can regroup the literature under two general headings, distinguishing them primarily in terms of their analytical goals, a difference which also implies that their theoretical underpinnings, traditions and expectations are not precisely the same. The fundamental distinction is that Family 1 concentrates on comparison across space (despite asking about change over time), while Family 2 seeks to compare across time, in particular over long periods. A concrete result of this difference in analytical starting point, as we will soon observe, is that the first family often is “more impressed” by differences, while the second will “emphasize similarities” to use the terms of Banting *et al.* quoted above.

Family 1 to seeks to analyze the relationship between input convergence and policy, process and/or outcome convergence. Family 2 seeks to analyze the relationship among changing inputs



over time, by focussing on paradigm and rhetoric convergence. In doing so, however, it accepts the possibility that there may well be large differences in the way that a new paradigm is implemented, defined, taken into each country's circumstances and even that previous patterns of commonality may shift so as to regroup membership in regime types.

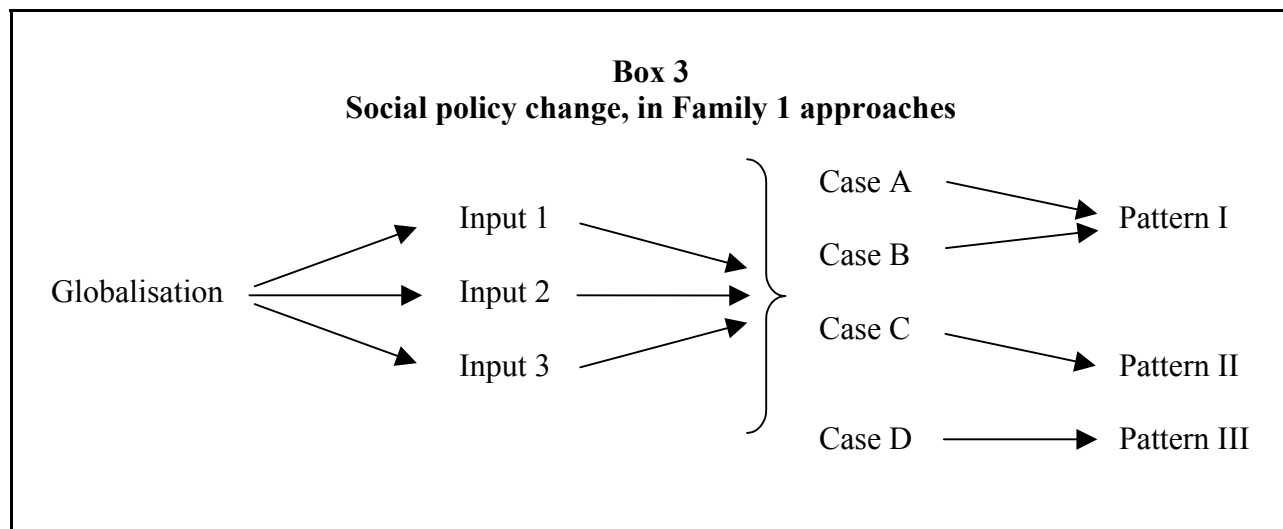


Depending on the particular objects selected for analysis, the discussions of and expectations about convergence and divergence will differ. Thus far, the bulk of attention has gone to efforts to uncover the relationship, if any, between objects #1, #2 and #3, with some, albeit lesser, attention to #4. One claim of Family 1, as we have seen above, is that globalisation leads either directly or in a mediated fashion to policy reform.<sup>13</sup> Neo-institutionalists – such as Banting, *et al.* (1997), Hall and Soskice (2001), Boychuk (2001), Kitschelt *et al.* (1999) and many others – do identify increasingly similar socio-economic changes, yet they are often agnostic about whether policies, outcomes and processes will converge or diverge. For a significant sub-group, however, neo-institutionalism also predicts path dependency, and therefore, only limited adjustments within existing parameters, which may themselves be characterized by earlier experiences of similarity or difference.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> These are the first and third perspectives identified by Palier and Sykes (2001) and listed above.

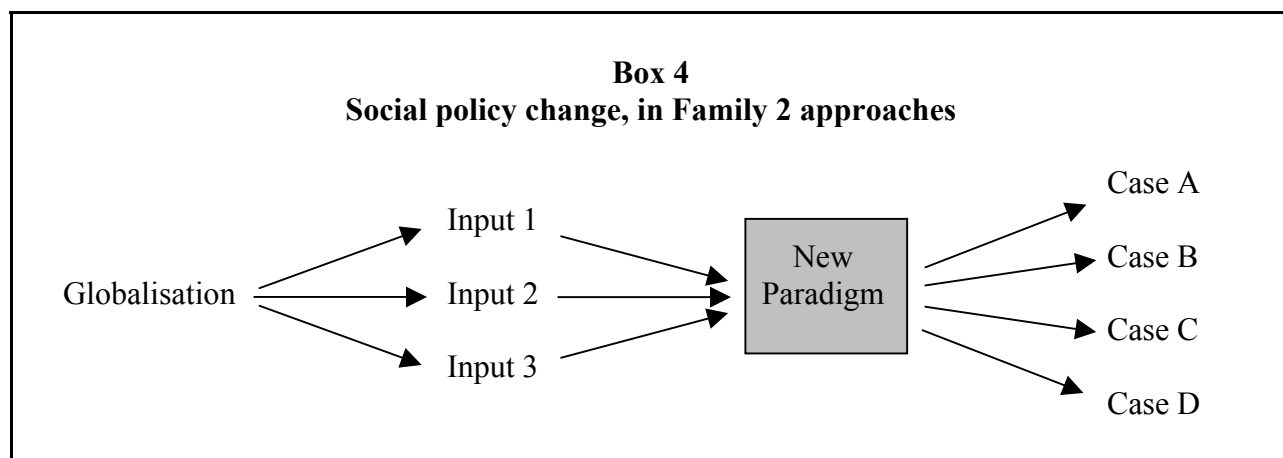
<sup>14</sup> This is the second perspective identified by Palier and Sykes (2001) and listed above.

As Box 3 maps, for Family 1 even though all four cases experience the same inputs produced by globalisation, Pattern I (policy, outcome and/or process convergence) might emerge for Cases A and B, but so too might Pattern II (policy, outcome and/or process divergence) for Cases B and C, or Pattern III (continuity in outcome and process) for Case D.



Family 2, however, focuses on paradigm shifts (and convergence), and attributes importance to shared rhetoric and ways of identifying problems, as well as the range of possible solutions. These studies have their origins in cross-time analysis, observing that certain moments of history are characterized by significant shifts in world-views and commitments to new and fundamental definitions of problems and solutions. Thus, as described above, Keynesian ideas were hegemonic for three decades after the Second World War, as more and more countries adapted their economic and social policies to common principles.

Box 4 maps this argument.





These differences in ways of mapping change are due to the theoretical stance adopted and the research design. In particular, they follow from the place assigned, within what are all basically neo-institutionalist approaches, to ideas and to social learning. Among those researchers who go beyond analysis of institutions and interests to analysis the influence of ideas and, therefore, social learning, there is a tendency (albeit not a one-to-one relationship) to use a reasoning similar to the set out in Box 4.<sup>15</sup> The distinction between Family 1 and 2 is, then, one of theory, as well as comparative perspective and research design.

In the rest of the paper, I will rely on a Family 2 approach to set out an argument for one kind convergence, based on a key analytic distinction between *convergence in policy visions* and *divergence in implementation*.

### **Convergence Around a New Paradigm**

Without denying the importance of discussions of convergence and divergence generated by Family 1 and their nuanced readings of continuity in change, we propose another way of “reading” the current situation, that is that is a period of *paradigm shift*. One way to characterize this attention to paradigms and shifting architecture is to think about the way the concept of *time* is dealt with by Family 2.

For Family 2, cross-time analysis is the key focus. It is, however, conceptualized neither as a developmental path, nor a series of choice points. Rather, there is conceptualization of history as being composed of two kinds of times: those in which there is a certain stability in basic social, economic and political relations and those in which there is a process of break or rupture with organizing and legitimating principles. In the second type of situation existing models are likely to give way to be replaced by different organizing principles (Jenson, 1989; Hall, 1989; Jenson and Phillips, 1996).

We are not alone, of course, in seeing the current moment as one of change and potential convergence around an alternative paradigm. Gøsta Esping-Andersen (2000: 1) - Mr. Different-Regimes - wrote recently to the Portuguese presidency of the European Union, using a notion of time very similar to that presented above. He writes of “epochal redefinitions” and “normal time”:

The history of European welfare states combines brief moments of epochal change with long periods of politics as usual. More than one hundred years have now elapsed since Bismarck launched modern social policy, and over a half-century has passed since the welfare state emerged from war-torn Europe. In both instances, visionary thinkers and practitioners of bold statesmanship redefined public responsibilities and social justice. The architecture of the state was fundamentally altered. But since then, the conduct of social policy has been largely a matter of fine-tuning and incremental adaptation of the existing edifice by the bureaucrats and technicians who usually look after things during normal times.

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<sup>15</sup> It is well-known that neo-institutionalists attribute different weights to ideas, interests and institutions (Thelen and Steimo, 1992). Indeed, this difference weighting is one of the reasons for the debate about “path dependency” and “path breaking” (Pierson, 1998; Palier, 2000; 2001, for example).

Epochal redefinitions occur during periods when basic goals are being reconsidered. Over a half-century ago, the designs for modern welfare states associated with Gustav Möller in Sweden and Lord Beveridge in England were responses to the urgent need to consolidate democracy and new social solidarities. While democracy is now an established fact in Europe, social cohesion is not. We are moving toward a new type of economy and society, both of which call for a new model of social policy.

Today, Europe stands at a crossroads which is similar to that of the post-World War II era and the invention of the modern welfare state.

Such moments of epochal change may lead, among other things, to hybridisation across regimes, and even path-breaking or path-shifting change (see for example, Hemerijck, 2002: 213; Palier, 2000; 2002).<sup>16</sup>

For Family 2 the goal is to mark change over long periods of time rather than document cross-national similarities and difference (and change within one or two cases), as it is for Family 1. The appearance of Family 2 marks a swing of the pendulum back to a concern with widely shared patterns of change, after several decades in which comparative analysis focused more on examining “policy continuities within countries and policy variations across countries” (Thelen and Steimo, 1992: 13).<sup>17</sup>

However – and this is its innovation – Family 2 does not by any means mark a swing back to grand theory or to the system-level of analysis.<sup>18</sup> Rather, it is taken up by neo-institutionalists who seek to map, *based on empirical observation*, what seems to be a significant amount of convergence around certain new principles. Sometimes this is termed a paradigm composed of new architecture, new principles and new instruments (Palier, 2001: 7). Sometimes it has been called a new citizenship regime (Jenson and Phillips, 1996; Jenson and Sineau, 2001). Sometimes it has been termed a new state form (Saint-Martin, 2000). Here we will adopt a general name as a metaphor for the pattern of changes observed in social citizenship and call it the LEGO™ model.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Those who consider this a moment of significant change including for the social contract, are increasing in number. For example, in his contribution to the Background Report to the Greek Presidency (Amitsis, *et al.*, 2003: pp. 76-82), Anton Hemerijck picks up on categories developed for the 2000 Portuguese presidency and presents four forms of “recalibration,” which if enacted would mark significant changes in practice as well as discourse.

<sup>17</sup> In the work cited here Kathleen Thelen and Sven Steimo (1992) seek to add a cross-time perspective to neo-institutionalism. They succeed in doing so, but only for two-country comparisons of single-country analyses.

<sup>18</sup> As Thelen and Steimo (1992: 4) remind us, a large part of the new institutionalist project developed as a response to the “grand theorizing” that characterized both behaviouralist and structuralist (including Marxist) research in the 1950s and 1960s. They emphasized similarities and convergence in trends and processes, ones that reached across a wide range of countries and jurisdictions and therefore involved very different political, economic and social institutions. The result was description of shared systemic-level patterns and large social forces of economic and social development. While theorists debated whether it was economic, social or cultural development that mattered, whether it was capitalist or industrial relations that fashioned political institutions, there was general agreement that a single trajectory for development could be discerned. New institutionalists are critical of that view.

<sup>19</sup> This next section is drawn from Jenson and Saint-Martin (2003).



## Thinking about social architecture and LEGO™

In the past 20 years, analysis of variation has undoubtedly helped to illuminate differences in social policy that were previously obscured. Even if welfare states across the OECD world faced similar pressures, each was expected to respond in different ways – essentially because politics, institutions and history matter. As Ferrera and Rhodes summarise in a book arguing for the importance of internal rather than external (that is, globalisation) challenges to welfare arrangements (2000: 3):

These transformations have generated mounting pressures on institutional arrangements that were not only designed under very different ‘environmental’ circumstances, but which have become increasingly rigid over time. .... The scope and intensity of such pressures are obviously filtered (or obstructed) by ... national institutions and traditions and the web of vested interests that welfare programmes tend to produce. As the case studies in this volume clearly show, in each country the reform agenda responds to specific problems with differentiated solutions – necessarily given particular national circumstances, both facilitating and constraining, and different types of problem constellation.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously, it would be difficult argue that such factors of national circumstances and tradition are not important. To focus almost exclusively on the sources of variation, as done by much recent research on welfare regimes, however, may blind us to patterns of similarity in welfare regime redesign.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, there is no point going to the other extreme and suggesting that social policy is simply converging because of globalisation, Europeanisation, neo-liberalism, or OECDism. The criticisms made by historical institutionalists of the generalisations of grand theory remain as valid today as they were in the 1990s. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to ask whether there are *certain* patterns of convergence within policy communities, and then to ask why they might occur.

Convergence does not mean uniformity.<sup>22</sup> The expectation of convergence used here is to a very large extent comparable to the convergence that resulted in the implantation of Keynesianism in many countries after the Second World War, albeit in different ways and with more or less

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<sup>20</sup> They do go on to describe, for the purposes of the introductory chapter, a number of “common trends and key orientations that can be observed across systems” (Ferrera and Rhodes, 2000: 3 and ff.), but even within the description of commonality, the variation-finding continues.

<sup>21</sup> Books, especially edited collections, still tend to follow outlines based on national variations or regime differences, with introductory or concluding material seeking common trends. See, for example, Sykes *et al.* (2001), whose Part II reports on types, either as regimes or countries/regions. Ferrera and Rhodes (2000) is organised by country and sometimes policy areas within them. Pierson (2001) is something of an exception to this pattern, having only a minority of chapters focused on countries/regimes and the rest on policy areas or broader issues. Nonetheless, all chapters follow the theoretical perspective of the editor and work within the variation-finding tradition.

<sup>22</sup> As we shall see, for different actors the LEGO™ model means different things. It is thus more accurate to talk about *varieties of the LEGO™ model*. Rianne Mahon (2003) recently made a similar suggestion that there are three blueprints for defamilialization strategies in Europe.

respect for John Maynard Keynes' basic theoretical principles (Hall, 1989). This notion of convergence does not mean an elimination of differences among countries or that institutions and policies are mimicking those developed elsewhere (the idea of Americanisation, for instance). Rather, we use it to imply that there is movement toward a new configuration comparable in scope to that of the Keynesian welfare states of the post-1945 decades.<sup>23</sup>

Because our goal is to strike a better balance between the study of social policy differences and similarities, it is useful to work with a key distinction between *convergence in policy visions* and *divergence in implementation*. This distinction is important because our major proposition is that most advanced democracies are currently in the process of renegotiating the terms of the post-war social contract. Therefore, they are in a phase of basic redesign that goes beyond retrenchment and is no longer one of permanent austerity.<sup>24</sup> It is a moment for re-thinking the blueprints for the very architecture of welfare, that is the respective responsibilities of families, markets, and communities as well as states. Our second proposition is that, as they undertake this redesign, many are converging around a policy vision that we describe by using the image of *LEGO*<sup>TM</sup>, the building blocks invented in Denmark in the 1930s.

We appropriate the name in two ways. One is as a metaphor, to describe convergence around some basic *building blocks* of a possible emerging model. The other is as an ideal-type to capture the key features of the future-oriented, investment-centred strategy currently advocated as a blueprint for welfare state redesign in an increasing number of policy circles.

This process of identifying the building blocks for a new social architecture is comparable to the search for the virtuous circle in Keynesianism, when social spending and social policies were a support for a healthy economy. During the last decades of neo-liberalism another notion became hegemonic; this was that social spending was actually hindering economic well-being. With the emergence of a certain consensus around a congeries of ideas - those that we label the *LEGO*<sup>TM</sup> model - we see again the identification of a certain kind of social policy as supportive of a healthy economy, albeit with forms of spending and types of programmes very different from the stimulus model of Keynes.

## The *LEGO*<sup>TM</sup> Model

The *LEGOTM* Brand sees “*children as natural learners. These are precious qualities*

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<sup>23</sup> Because any new model is still in-becoming, it is not surprising that many debates - even among advocates of modernisation - exist. For example, in a very interesting paper Bernard Gazier (2003) contrasts two models for the future. One is what he terms social-liberal, and he associates it with Anthony Giddens and the influence of John Rawls. He contrasts it to a renewed social democratic model, influenced by Ronald Dworkin. However, Frank Vandebroucke (2002) and Esping-Andersen *et al.* (2002) describe their approaches as *both* “broadly Rawlsian” (Vandebroucke, 2002: xvi; xix) and quite different from the British Third Way (Esping-Andersen *et al.* 2002: 4ff), which is too selective about its social democracy. Such a debate about naming, as well as about content, is a sign that any new model will have different versions, just as Keynesianism did.

<sup>24</sup> The reference to permanent austerity as well as retrenchment is to Paul Pierson's influential work (1998). As the choice of the term “redesign” indicates (Jenson and Sineau, 2001) we are aligning ourselves with those who speak of “recasting” (Ferrera and Rhodes, 2000), “defrosting” (Palier, 2000), a “new welfare architecture” (Esping-Andersen *et al.*, 2002) and “recalibration” (Anitsis, 2003), as well as those who see a move toward a new form of state (Saint-Martin, 2000).



*that should be nurtured and stimulated throughout life... 'Play' in the LEGO sense is learning. By helping children to learn, we build confident, curious and resourceful adults. For their future. And ours".* <http://www.lego.com/build/>

This quote from the corporate web site, describing the company's philosophy, illustrates at least three key features of what we term the LEGO™ model.<sup>25</sup> First, it clearly focuses on life-long learning. Play is educational, and such play is invaluable for the future; it fosters the capacity for continuous learning, flexibility and adaptability as an adult. Second, this philosophy is clearly future oriented. And finally, it suggests how activities in the present are, ultimately, beneficial not only for individuals themselves, but for the community as a whole. For LEGO™, the goal of play in childhood is to enrich the future good of the community as well as to prepare children for their working years.

This *metaphor* of constant learning, knowledge acquisition, involvement and engagement as well as the notion of open-ended results and variety (who knows what LEGO™ sessions will produce) is particularly appealing in the "knowledge-based" world we supposedly inhabit. While LEGO™ is a toy, involving play, it is also about "work." We can, therefore, *identify* and classify a social architecture that is emerging from the various efforts to "recast," "redesign" or "restructure" the welfare mix.

Our proposition is that out of these processes of redesign there is convergence toward a LEGO™ model, which is a policy vision standing on three key principles. One involves identification of *new social risks*, protection against which state policy must be directed. These are first and foremost the new risks of a knowledge-based economy. Therefore, life-long learning and education in general as well as early childhood education are identified as the main route to security (still understood, as in the years of Keynesianism, as coming primarily from market income). But there are also other social risks associated with the labour force needs of this knowledge-based economy. The need for old forms of social protection is not eliminated, of course; pensions are still important to protect against income insecurity in old age, health services are needed, and so on. But, for the promoters of the LEGO™ model, the new risks must also be taken in hand. These include new inequalities and "divides" created by unequal access to technology and skills.

A second principle shifts the definition of equality to anchor it more firmly in a liberal notion of equality of opportunity, and therefore a focus on future life chances. This is an "investment" more than a "consumption" model. Temporary inequalities are less of a problem than long-term ones and certainly than poverty traps. Poverty, and especially child poverty, is therefore a key problem, because it mortgages the future.

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<sup>25</sup> One might compare the LEGO™ model to that of Fordism. Simplifying greatly, that model described relations of production in which the goal was a standardised result, performed by a standardised gesture. As many observers have noted, it deprived workers of any intellectual contribution to production, as well as limiting forms of engagement to institutions of mass representation such as trade unions and political parties. It downplayed all forms of tacit knowledge and relied exclusively on formal accreditation, acquired once and for all in standard schooling or apprenticeship. The notion which we attribute to the LEGO model of life-long learning as well as the idea that production of goods and services might represent something other than "alienated" labour, is difficult to accommodate within the standard understandings of the paradigm of Fordism.



Thirdly, then, there is the idea that activity enriches the collectivity. In particular, the LEGO™ model tends to conceptualise social rights in terms of effective guarantees against social exclusion. For LEGOists, the task of social policy is to address risks of social exclusion, and in particular to ensure an active society.

The model described in this way is fully congruent with the policies of activation that so many countries have put into place. It also can accommodate new fears of declining birth rates, of low employment rates, and so on. Our claim is not, then, that the LEGO™ model has gone unobserved, or we are the first to identify its components. Our claims are much more modest.

Our first claim is that there is a shape to what is happening, a new blueprint emerging, and that it is shifting the welfare mix. Therefore, it is a moment when new *hybrids* may take shape that cross the welfare regime types, and that break with the principles of the past.<sup>26</sup> Our second claim is that if there is convergence around a LEGO™ model it is around a framing *vision*, implementation may vary quite widely. Our third claim is that LEGO™ is a *good name* for this vision because of its emphasis on the future, on human capital investments and life-long learning, and on the benefits to the collectivity of making work of play.

## Concluding Caveats

At this stage, several clarifications are worth stressing. First, to say that ideas about a LEGO™ model are circulating widely does *not* mean either that they have become hegemonic or that they will. There is no inevitability to this process; political action will determine the future. Second, the fact that we describe this tendency does not mean that we embrace it. This is not necessarily our view of an ideal or normatively preferable social order. It is a description of an ideal only for the proponents of the LEGO™ model; *they* are the ones who speak this language. Third, to say that policy circles use a language of investment or of active citizenship and that is child-centred should not be interpreted as meaning that they actually do much to *ensure that these actually occur*. When the architects of post-1945 welfare regimes embraced an equality discourse, they did not all provide equality. Similarly not all LEGOists provide new forms of security.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, when these policy communities think about *what* to do, they often phrase their prescriptions in terms we can attribute to the LEGO™ model.

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26 As Anton Hemerijck (2002: 213) has written of hybridisation, with respect to the OMC:

The Open Method of Coordination constitutes a powerful stimulus for policy learning and innovation... It may expand the repertoire of potentially effective policy responses, that is, trials that policy-makers might not have discovered through the examination of their own policy experience or history ... Welfare reform in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will increasingly involved a combination of domestic learning, learning from and with others... Moreover, innovative combinations of domestic policy learning and supra-national learning may cause considerable hybridisation in welfare and labour market policy.

27 As well as other forms of inequality, two of the countries where LEGO™-talk is most prevalent also have high child poverty rates, and low rates of access to quality child care as well as other benefits for families. The United Kingdom is only playing catch up with the other countries of the EU, while Canada is lagging seriously in developing early childhood services.



Therefore, *this* form of convergence is worth assessing, as much as are the divergences in the ways it is actually being implemented. By examining the emerging logic of LEGO™ it will be possible to better understand evident tendencies in policy direction, as well as the places where gaps have and will continue to emerge. For example, a child-centred and investment-focused policy paradigm is quite likely to leave outside social policy protection the category of single adults, whether young or older. It also likely to be willing to make “investments” in human capital and social capital, both concepts that seem to fit well with a future-oriented logic, but perhaps less susceptible to spending on “insurance.”

This said, there will of course still be divergences among countries, and they also merit careful attention. Countries will not only diverge in policy design, but they may also - indeed are probably quite likely to - diverge from the very lofty promise LEGOists make to children, families, and citizens. Therefore, *caveat emptor*.



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