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**Social Exclusion as Concept and Policy Template
in the European Union**

by

Mary Daly

School of Sociology and Social Policy

Queen's University, Belfast

m.daly@qub.ac.uk

Tel: 44 2890973164

Fax: 44 2890273943

Abstract

Drawing upon a theoretical approach that emphasizes the importance of ideas and political processes in policymaking, the focus of this piece is on how a sociological concept – social exclusion – has been mobilized and manipulated by the EU. Tracing both the sociological and social policy ‘lives’ of the concept, the paper develops an explanation for the EU’s turn to social exclusion that centers on both the properties of social exclusion as concept and the nature of the EU project. In essence it is argued that social exclusion “fits” with the current (stage of the) EU project and serves a set of crucial functions. Over the course of the last fifteen years, the EU has strategically crafted its particular approach to social exclusion which, among other things, has helped to both legitimize and advance EU engagement with social issues.

Key words: social exclusion, EU social policy, the Lisbon process, social change, European society, ideas and policy making.

Mary Daly studied sociology and social policy at University College Cork and the European University Institute, Florence. She has taught at the universities of Cork, Limerick and Goettingen and is currently Professor of Sociology at Queen’s University Belfast. She is the author of *The Gender Division of Welfare* (Cambridge University Press, 2000) and joint author, with Katherine Rake, of *Gender and the Welfare State* (Polity Press, 2003). Her current research is on social policy in the EU after Lisbon.

Social exclusion appears to be ubiquitous in Europe at present. Almost unheard of fifteen years ago, the concept has become a lynchpin of recent EU social policy and a foundational idea for the reform of some national welfare states in Europe. This paper focuses on the career of the concept, especially in the hands of EU policymakers. Tracking the development of social exclusion in the last decade or so allows us to tell a number of stories: the phenomenal rise of a new concept, the impetus for the recent expansion of EU social policy, and the tale of the relationship between the two. What is problematized is the adoption by the EU, itself not a self-consciously social project, of a very sociological concept, and the Union's subsequent elaboration of social exclusion to fashion what appears to be a unique vision of social policy. This merits a critical look for a number of reasons. In the first instance, it constitutes the boldest sally yet into social policy on the part of the EU. Secondly, social exclusion was not an obvious choice of policy focus for the EU. Centering on social relations and societal functioning, it is not immediately clear how social exclusion can serve to advance market-making. Certainly, there are more obvious candidates: social capital, for example, has a stronger focus on economic performance and its thrust is towards commodification of social relations. And yet social exclusion is the dominant framing today, particularly on the part of the EU, of what is wrong with contemporary European society and the social conditions conducive to economic growth in a globalized era.

The paper proceeds in three parts. In the first I introduce the concept of social exclusion, tracing its origins and outlining its fundamental features. The set of meanings given to the concept by academic work serves as the counterfactual for the analysis of the EU's interpretation. The second part of the paper focuses on social exclusion as it has been developed as a template for social policy by the EU. In its third part the paper turns attention to the matter of explaining why social exclusion has been privileged by the EU. The relevant statements and agreements of policy or policy intent by the highest organs of the EU, the Council and Commission, especially over the last fifteen years (since social exclusion first appeared in EU discourse) provide the empirical substance of the paper. The paper focuses, therefore, on the social policy orientation of the EU at central level as expressed in key policy documents, rather than on the "domestication" of EU policy at member state level.

Its theoretical interest also directs the paper to policy formation and paradigm development rather than policy implementation. The piece is located in a literature that problematizes policymaking (Béland 2005; Bleich 2002; Campbell 2002; Hall 1993; Schmidt 2002). It is possible, following Bleich (2002), to see the field in terms of four prominent schools of thought. The power-interest approach focuses on influential actors and how they negotiate and manipulate to shape policy so that it best reflects their interests. Policymaking in this view is essentially a process of resolving diverging sets of interests. For the institutional approach, policymaking occurs in a context where existing webs of institutions – such as prevailing norms, practices and policy legacies – serve to shape of any new policy enacted. A path dependency analysis of change is often followed. The third perspective, "policy learning," focuses on the nature of the "problem," treating policymaking as the purposive search for a solution to a specific challenge. "Policy puzzling" is central – cross-national differences tend to be seen as the result of differences in the problems faced and the learning process that ensues. The fourth perspective focuses on ideational processes and in particular those associated with framing – in the sense of how the cognitive and moral maps that orient actors within a policy sphere are expressed and developed. In EU studies the first two approaches have been dominant. While this piece draws especially from the third and fourth approaches, it is more interested in how the EU has crafted and manipulated social exclusion than how it has framed it as such; that is,

it is not so much the EU's representation of social exclusion that is problematized here as how the EU has fashioned social exclusion as a template for its social policy. This focus then leads to an analysis of how, through the use of social exclusion, the EU has been able to sharpen its interests and clarify its goals in the social policy domain and in the process empower itself. Methodologically, the piece is in the spirit of a detailed process tracing case study.

1. Social Exclusion as Concept

Social exclusion has had a strikingly particular life course. While it has strong resonances with some of the classical concerns of the main European social philosophies (as demonstrated by Silver 1994), it is not a sociological concept in origin. Rather, the concept's birth is usually located in France of the early 1970s, when it was coined by René Lenoir, a policymaker, to refer to the many groups that appeared to be at the margins of French society. The concept has over time been taken up and developed by academics, but the EU is today the locus where most thinking on social exclusion is taking place. The concept resides, then, in the borderland between academia and policy (which in an EU context is not just a fuzzy boundary but also a very active frontier, as the EU is a major funder of research). The fact of its parallel lives has a number of implications. First, it has served to politicize the concept – social exclusion has been appropriated by a range of political actors who have reformulated it to fit varying political ends. This in turn means that social exclusion is often used normatively. It has, furthermore, led to a situation whereby some aspects of the concept (for example, empirical indicators) have received greater attention than others (*viz.*, its theoretical character, relationships among constituent elements and links to related concepts). For the analyst all of this makes social exclusion difficult terrain. Among other things, it spells the need to cast a critical eye on claims made for the concept.

Philosophically, social exclusion draws from two traditions that are embedded in European history: social Catholicism and social democracy (Chamberlayne 1997). The influence of social Catholicism (and Émile Durkheim) can be seen in social exclusion's concern about what we might call "the strength of small ties": bonds in the family and community and the importance of horizontal relationships and the most micro-level institutions (Daly 1999). The concept's social democratic credentials reside in its interest in problematizing social divisions, particularly as these are affected by relations among social classes (although social exclusion represents a move away from class as a way of understanding social division (Chamberlayne 1997: 2)). These do not exhaust the influences of the concept, however, and to focus on them would be to underestimate the extent to which the concept has had an intellectual ancestry and resonance over time in diverse national settings in Europe (Silver 1994). Its most proximate home is the French Republican tradition where "exclus" signified the condition of being outside of the social contract and, as such, a threat to it. The understanding of solidarity that informs this interpretation of social exclusion is of a contract based on reciprocal responsibilities, in contrast to the social democratic tradition whereby solidarity is directly linked to redistribution and social rights (*ibid.*).

While social exclusion is hallmarked by variation in usage and application, it is a coherent approach in that it is possible to identify a core set of elements. For one, society has a prominent place in the concept, a foundational idea being that of embeddedness in social relations. Underlying social exclusion is a normative ideal of each person being part of a complex set of social networks (Spicker 1997: 135). The notion of belonging has resonance in social exclusion but more in the sense of social connection and membership than identity or subjectivity. With society as its departure point, so-

cial exclusion differs considerably from a social rights perspective which is rooted in ideas about individual rights-bearing citizens and their relationships to the political community. However, social exclusion aims not so much to be a general descriptor of social life as to offer a social diagnosis. The “problem” is seen to be social in nature in that it is attributed to failings in the structure of social relations, especially primary ties, a lack of hold of generalized norms and values and declining integrative power of key institutions. Initially, in the French context in which it originated in the 1970s, social exclusion was a term applied to describe the condition of marginal social groups or social problem categories – drug addicts, the homeless, delinquents – who were seen to be excluded from the benefits of the French welfare state. Over time the concept came to have a broader remit as a descriptor of both the participation of individuals and groups in social, economic and political life and processes in modern society that lead to moral and social disintegration. The “social face” of the concept is not trivial because, as Chamberlayne (1997) points out, social exclusion is seeking to occupy a place in social thinking that has been dominated by economic-type approaches. Its rise also spells a more central role for sociology in providing an intellectual thrust to social reform.

A further defining feature is that social exclusion tends towards a conceptualization of deprivation that is horizontal in nature. Central to it is an idea of “distance” or separation from a core of society which consists of people who are integrated into the sets of relationships and groups that are considered “normal.” As a characteristic of society social exclusion is, therefore, distinct from inequality, which derives from a view of social life as hierarchically organized with access to economic resources as the most critical criterion. Looked at through the lens of social exclusion people are excluded not necessarily because of where they are placed on the class hierarchy but because of their remoteness from the core of social life. As a statement about the contemporary condition, society is seen to be moving away from a social order in which inequality is generated by the productive system and where individuals overcome their alienation by engaging in collective projects oriented to systemic change, to one where the crucial tendency is a polarization between “in” and “out” and where people who are outside operate within an alternative social universe (Woodward and Kohli 2000).

A number of other features of social exclusion are also noteworthy. For instance, the approach interests itself in processes associated with exclusion, especially phases of entry and exit (Berghman 1995: 27). One could say that there is an active concern with trajectory and an openness towards biography and individual life history. Hence, the concept leads us to think about (and differentiate between) groups that are permanently on the margins and those that move from vulnerability to dependence to marginalization (Rodgers 1995: 50). Another defining – and often hailed – characteristic of social exclusion is its multi-dimensionality. Although this has not been fully worked out theoretically, cumulation is implied – the concept rests on the idea that social exclusion is constituted by a layering of conditions one upon another generated by an interaction of economic, social and political circumstances. While there may be a trigger, there is no single dimension to social exclusion as a condition. The underlying idea of exclusion is as a “strong condition,” implying a state that has many dimensions and persists over time. At least part of the push for empirical work on social exclusion is to elaborate the relations among its different elements. Most typically, research has sought to identify the economic, political and social (usually conceived of as insufficient involvement in social relations) dimensions of exclusion (Barnes 2005; Whelan and Maître 2005). Here it is helpful to compare it to poverty, a concept that it has come if not to supersede then to encompass in the EU debate. The relationship between the two – arguably fundamental to understanding the phenomenon of social exclusion – is unclear. In many cases – empirical work especially – poverty is

taken as a proxy for social exclusion. But even if the exact relationship remains to be specifically worked out, there is a general acceptance that social exclusion is something more than (although not necessarily beyond) poverty in that: (a) its self-image is social rather than economic; (b) its core interest is in (the quality of) social relations; (c) as a condition it is multi-dimensional rather than uni-dimensional.

2. Social Exclusion in the Hands of the EU

At the outset a number of observations on context are in order. The EU has thus far made but halting progress in developing a social policy portfolio – advanced market integration coexists with limited welfare state integration (Hansen and Schierup 2005: 6). If one has to summarize it, the story of the relationship between the EU and social policy is best cast in terms of contestation. Member states have guarded closely their sovereignty in this domain of policy, even as they have been willing to cede authority over fiscal policy and much of their economic policy. Social policy forms an important political contest line in the EU. Apart from the fact that the EU is social policy poor because member states are social policy rich, there is contest over the functions to be served by social policy in what is primarily an economic project. The need for a social policy strand to the EU's activities has never been fully accepted nor mandated and one can read in the EU over the course of its development a continuous re-envisioning of the appropriate relationship between the economic and the social. As a result, the EU has a light touch in regard to the conventional functions of social policy – income redistribution, anti-poverty measures, social service provision. Legally it is very constrained in this domain. Decision making on matters relating to social security is subject to a unanimous agreement condition. Moreover, under the EU Treaties, the social is a contingent space in the EU – activities to promote social cohesion can be justified only if undertaken in the service of promoting economic cohesion. As things stand now, the EU's social policy portfolio mainly consists of components of employment/active labor market policy, industrial safety, promoting workers' rights, social dialogue, enabling labor mobility and gender equality. Co-existing together, these and other features underline the distinctiveness of the EU as social policy terrain, especially if viewed through the counterfactual mirror offered by the national welfare states. Leibfried and Pierson (1995: 74) describe the EU as a unique multi-tiered system of social policy with three main characteristics: a "hollow core"; a prominent role for courts in policy development; and an unusually tight coupling to market-making processes. Overall, academic scholarship has been somewhat dismissive of the EU as a social policy player. One of the most pervasive themes in the literature is of how social policy issues are addressed at EU level almost entirely through measures consistent with policies designed to advance the market (Scharpf 2002; Streeck 1995). In other words, social policy, being harnessed to the economic yoke, lacks identity and agency at EU level. In all, the EU is represented as rather unsocial. Not quite accurately, as a review of its embrace of social exclusion suggests.

2.1 The Emergence of Social Exclusion in the EU

Social exclusion made its first appearance on the EU stage in the late 1980s. Since then, it has varied in terms of priority, focus and intensity of activity.

The 1989 Community Charter of Fundamental Social Rights for Workers (the Social Charter, as it is known) was one of the first high-level EU policy documents to refer to social exclusion. That reference was passing, but within a few months the concept had made a more substantial entry

into EU thinking. The *Resolution of the Council of Ministers for Social Affairs on Combating Social Exclusion* (89/C277/01), issued in 1989, was its birth certificate. Laying the first claim to the concept as a legitimate concern and policy property of the EU, social exclusion was represented as a process that crosses different fields but is grounded in structural changes, with (reduced) access to the labor market as especially decisive. The next significant document in the career of social exclusion is the *Recommendation from the Council of 24 June 1992 on Common Criteria Concerning Sufficient Resources and Social Assistance in Social Protection Systems* (92/441/EEC). This was arguably more focused on poverty than social exclusion, but it did endorse the 1989 Resolution in making reference to the need for the right to sufficient income to be accompanied by policies for the economic and social integration of those affected. In late 1992, the Commission issued a Communication with the title *Towards a Europe of Solidarity – Intensifying the fight against social exclusion, fostering integration* (COM(92) 542). The purpose was, on the one hand, to contribute to the debate about the nature and urgency of social exclusion in Europe and, on the other, to showcase relevant recent activities of the Commission. The Communication was the high watermark of this period of EU engagement with social exclusion, providing by far the most extensive treatment of social exclusion in an EU document to date. The White Paper on social policy (COM(94) 333) published in July 1994 represented the next big moment in the history of the relationship between the concept of social exclusion and the EU. This document, while very focused on labor-market related measures and with an underlying thrust of activation, contained a chapter on social policy and social protection. After 1994, and the publication of the *White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment* (COM(93) 700), employability, labor force adaptation and job creation dominated the social agenda. For at least five years, a concern with a more solidaristic social policy – which was a genuine thrust of the period and a hallmark of the Delors presidency – came to be replaced by the exigency of modernizing social policy, as internal political problems (including opposition to Delors’s Commission) and external problems associated with the relatively poor performance of the EU in the face of an increasingly globalized economy turned the collective mind away from a social policy for the sake of the social and towards the economic.

Languishing during the second half of the 1990s as “activation” took center stage, social exclusion blasted onto the EU stage again in 2000. The agreement reached at Lisbon in March of that year by the EU heads of state ushered in a very active period not just for EU social policy but also for social exclusion at EU level (and also but to a lesser extent at member state level). From a social policy perspective Lisbon brought two core developments: an agreement that member states would develop a coordinated policy on poverty and social inclusion; the application of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), a method of following common guidelines (rather than edicts and laws), to social exclusion (later extended to pensions and health care among other policy domains) (Council of the European Union 2000a). The culmination of a number of attempts to raise social policy higher on the EU agenda, a central idea in Lisbon is that economic performance (*viz* competition) and social cohesion are not mutually exclusive but rather can be (made to be) mutually reinforcing.

2.2 The EU’s Engagement with Social Exclusion

This discussion is best organized in terms of tendencies in the EU’s mobilization of social exclusion.

Two periods of engagement with social exclusion: The reason to identify two periods is substantive rather than temporal. In the 1989-1994 period the EU more or less limited its engagement with social exclusion to the discursive level. One could depict it as a “naming and claiming”

stage. The EU sought not just to substantiate the meaning of social exclusion as a social phenomenon in and for Europe but to imprint its stamp on the “problem.” In addition, as outlined above, social exclusion in this period was mainly developed in a Resolution of the Council of Ministers of Social Affairs, a Council Recommendation and a Communication from the Commission, all of which are non-binding. There was little compunction for action at member state level – social exclusion was identified by the EU as an undesirable feature of modernizing society, one that should be the object of reform. While some monies were made available for work to combat social exclusion, there was no significant program of activity. Lisbon is different. It has instituted a coordinated program on social exclusion, emanating from Brussels and designed so that member states adopt the fight against social exclusion as the centerpiece of their social policy planning and development. Towards this end, the Lisbon process has involved: (a) agreeing to common objectives on social exclusion, which set out common goals for member states; (b) presentation on a regular basis of national action plans in which member states set out their policy plans for an agreed time period to meet the common objectives; (c) peer review and evaluation of these plans and strategies by the EU; (d) the development of indicators on social exclusion (intended to make for target setting, evaluation and greater cross-national comparability); (e) a five-year Community Action Programme (2002-2006) to fund cooperative and complementary research, review and networks across member states. To turn to implementation for a moment, it must be said that the EU’s ideas about social exclusion have been reflected but imperfectly back in member states’ social policy plans and programs. While they have engaged in the process, albeit with varying degrees of commitment, and themselves acknowledge that some learning has taken place, there is only limited evidence as yet of concrete effect at member state level (Zeitlin and Pochet 2005). In truth, those countries that have adopted a social exclusion frame, mainly Ireland and the UK, already had it before Lisbon. As it stands now, member states have not significantly remodelled or reframed their social policy in the image of the EU template. However, this should not take away from the significance of Lisbon in light of our purpose here which is to enquire into the EU’s engagement with social exclusion.

Significant development of social exclusion as policy template: The EU has served to elaborate the nature of social exclusion as both a feature of contemporary European societies and a template for social policy. In the former regard, the social diagnostic strengths of social exclusion have been exploited. The EU has over the course of time tended to endorse a view of social exclusion as a phenomenon, if not generated by then, closely associated with rapid social and economic change in European societies and beyond. People become dislocated from economy and society as the nature of employment changes, as migration increases and as familial and other social bonds loosen. As a template for social policy, there have been three “constants” in the EU’s interpretation of social exclusion: multi-dimensionality; the need for greater coordination between economic and social policy; and mobilization of those affected. “Multi-dimensionality” seems to have achieved the status of gospel. It has a number of different interpretations, among which two could be said to be predominant. The first is complexity. One of the best examples of complexity is the 1992 Communication from the Commission which names social exclusion as “the inability to enjoy social rights without help, suffering from low self-esteem, inadequacy in their capacity to meet obligations, the risk of long-term relegation to the ranks of those on social benefits, and stigmatization which, particularly in the urban environment, extends to the areas in which they live” (European Commission 1992: 10). One gets a strong sense of cumulation here. The second core meaning to “multi-dimensionality” is of social exclusion as a phenomenon that extends beyond the market. In other words, it requires a social as well as an economic policy.

However, when we compare it to the post-Lisbon period, social exclusion functioned in the first period as an umbrella term or loose ensemble of ideas around problems associated with economic and social change whereas in the second it has occasioned a set of policy responses. The Lisbon process has given social exclusion a much fuller identity and has especially sought to develop the second and third consistent aspects of the EU's engagement with social exclusion: the relationship between social and economic policy and the need for mobilization. The Lisbon policy program to combat social exclusion is framed in terms of the following four sets of objectives and activities:

- to facilitate participation in employment and access by all to resources, rights, goods and services;
- to prevent the risks of exclusion;
- to help the most vulnerable;
- to mobilize all relevant bodies.

These objectives, which function as a guiding set of ideas for how member states should (re)organize their social policy (or how they report on it at any rate), spell a broad-ranging social program. In essence, the radical potential of the concept of social exclusion is recognizable in this EU vision – participation, prevention, assistance and political mobilization are the four core processes that will eliminate it. So, rather than concentrating on access to the labor market only, emphasis is placed on access to social services (with social protection, housing, health, education and justice, among others, expressly mentioned), measures to prevent exclusion (with access to technology, the prevention of life crises and the promotion of family solidarity specifically mentioned as well as culture, sport and leisure) and measures to help particular “disadvantaged” groups (especially those with disabilities, those at risk of poverty and children).¹ While there are limitations in implementation, the vision is expansive. In fact, Lisbon represents one of the boldest attempts yet by the EU not only to carve out a social policy vision for itself but also to reshape the existing social policy models of the member states. Furthermore, the Lisbon vision continues the tradition of EU social policy uniqueness in that: (a) it rests on a concept that had not heretofore served as the lynchpin of a model of social policy in any part of Europe, and (b) the model developed does not favor a particular national tradition but is broad enough to encompass a range of approaches.

Social exclusion has had an unstable set of meanings: When one takes an overview, the “elastic” nature of the EU's usage of social exclusion is hard to avoid. In the first period, the nature and challenge of economic changes and how these serve to alienate and impoverish particular sectors of the population was the dominant framing. The need for better coordination (and hence efficiency) between economic and social policy is the common refrain in the second period. There are, in fact, three pivotal instabilities in the EU discourse (which could also be seen as revelatory of the terrain that the EU has to negotiate). The first is about the nature of social exclusion. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the EU cannot make up its mind about whether social exclusion is a characteristic feature of contemporary European societies or a living condition visited on particular individuals and social groups. The latter is a fragmented discourse – it is also the more conservative of the two discourses because such groups are usually discussed in relatively isolated terms. Essentially, what is at issue is the question of whether social exclusion is the result of a specific or general set of processes. A second instability in the EU's usage is between social exclusion as a national and trans-

¹ See the agreement reached at the Nice Council in December 2000 which developed the objectives originally agreed at Lisbon into a set of guidelines (Council of the European Union (2000b)).

national phenomenon. EU discourse varies between representing social exclusion as produced by forces operating in a national, bounded entity and those that have a pan-European character. Thirdly, there is the matter of the contradiction between the EU's conceptualization of exclusion and inclusion. While the EU has a relatively expansive understanding of the former, it has a limited vision of the latter (as effected mainly by inclusion in the labor market) and there is no problematization of how social inclusion follows from social exclusion. Hence, the EU mobilization of social exclusion allows for a radical analysis but a conservative policy response. Here is one of Robert Castel's (1995) fears about the concept being realized: that social exclusion represents as marginal processes that are actually central to society. The effect is not just to falsely homogenize "mainstream" society but to overlook key causal processes as wage-earning society and the welfare state built on it begin to unravel.

A strong current of modernization in all debates: Social exclusion tends to be invoked by the EU in the service of a discourse of (compulsion to) change. Modernization, both text and sub-text, is indicated especially by the widespread use of the adjective "structural." The word "structural" is used to imply immutability. In the initial period of its use, "the structural imperative to change" was attributed to technology and the changing nature of employment associated with increased international competition – they were represented as rendering outmoded cherished values and practices related to job security and specialization. The "structural problem" as articulated in Lisbon is globalization (mainly the U.S.'s consistent out-performance of the EU economy). Looked at more closely a large part of the European "structural problem" as expressed in Lisbon is a lack of modernization on the part of national welfare systems. The imperative to modernize is two-fold. It is first necessary because of the impediments the welfare state poses for Europe's economic development, a form of regulation in a world where regulation is passé. Secondly, change is necessary for its own sake – dynamism, innovation and openness are central to the modern condition. Institutions such as the welfare state that are characterized by a lack of flexibility are automatically out-dated ("The status quo is not an option" (European Commission 2005: 3). Ideally, in a climate where everything is in flux, social security systems should be flexible, self-reflexive, innovative and dynamic – in fact they should be as versatile as economic and fiscal policies have proved themselves to be.² Here then is another way to view the turn to social exclusion: it is part of a modernization discourse to "sell" the need for a European social model that embodies a better alignment between economic and social policies.

No consistent theorization of social exclusion: While it would be quite wrong to characterize the EU's usage of social exclusion as atheoretical, there is a lack of consistency and rigor in the understanding of how social exclusion comes about. In academic work, social exclusion is attributed to two main factors: decline in solidarity and failings in integrative institutions. One gets little sense of either in the EU characterization. Indeed, it is very difficult to identify where the EU locates causal agency and, in the Lisbon process, it sometimes appears as if social exclusion is the cause of the problem. Looking at the EU documents, one can see elements of structural dislocation, structural dualism and institutional exclusion (Rojas 1999). Structural dislocation considers the excluded as a residuum, a group (rather than a social category in a particular relation to the power structure) that can be reabsorbed into mainstream society with the right kind of policy (ibid: 23). Structural dualism, in contrast, identifies a dynamic of polarization and exclusion as a constitutive part of capitalist development, one outcome of which is a permanent social group or class sharing similar con-

² Part of the sub-text here is that social security systems might well have been too inclusive in the past.

ditions of life and developing well defined cultural and ideological responses to exclusion. The challenge for policy is not reabsorption but a radical transformation of the social fabric that generates exclusion. The only real criticism of policy from the EU comes in the guise of the third theoretical variant: institutional exclusion. This is most widely framed as “imperfections of policy delivery.” A number of failures are recognized (but not connected into a critique). On the one hand, a disjunction between economic and social policies, a form of inefficiency, is implied. On the other hand, the excluding tendencies of policy institutions themselves are recognized, in their removal or distance from citizens, for example, and their sometimes failure to meet need. Notably, there is little or no critique of the content of policies and in particular the de-inflationary and supply-side orientation of economic policies which privilege flexible labor markets, employability and budgetary discipline.

Boundaries with other approaches blurred: Another feature of the EU’s engagement with social exclusion is that it often uses it interchangeably with other concepts and approaches. Poverty is the main rival to social exclusion in EU discourse – indeed the empirical indicators for the Lisbon process concentrate on poverty and one could argue that the most widespread understanding of social exclusion in the EU usage is of persistent poverty. In addition to poverty, one finds access to social rights peppering the relevant texts. In fact in the EU usage these two perspectives – which have different origins and view the “problem” divergently (in terms of a deficit of rights or of inclusion respectively) – tend to be elided. More widely, social inclusion is used interchangeably with social exclusion – a major sleight of hand in changing the policy focus and the definition of the problem – without any systematic working out of why inclusion should be the solution to exclusion. The matter of the antonym of social exclusion is quite contested in the literature. Goodin (1996), for example, considers participation as the antidote to social exclusion. Some have argued that social inclusion should be treated separately, not least because it is not rooted in a social problems approach. For Woodward and Kohli (2001: 4), social inclusion is located in a theoretical context of social integration and institutions of social membership.

3. Explaining the Relationship – Why Has the EU taken up Social Exclusion?

To explain the relationship between the EU and social exclusion one must take into account both the features or properties of the concept and the nature (and current stage) of the EU project.

3.1 Features of the Concept of Social Exclusion

Social exclusion has many features that make it attractive to the EU. One that I wish to highlight first is the resonance of the constituent set of interests and ideas. Social exclusion is a quintessentially European concept in that the themes that it raises are ones that have long animated European societies and those who study them. It has, in short, deep roots in Europe. Social exclusion as concept focuses on such old European (although not EU) chestnuts as the relationship between the distribution of resources and social integration, the nature of the state and the boundaries of citizenship, the dynamics of social inequality and the functioning and role of systems of political, economic and social organization. My point here is that social exclusion speaks in a familiar register and has the capacity to pick up on and contribute to debates that are widespread in Europe. This lends it legitimacy and gives it an advantage over other “non-European” terms, like social capital for example. Theoretically, this point underlines the importance of embedding ideas and framing issues in terms of culturally accepted repertoires (Béland 2005: 11).

A second feature of social exclusion is that it has wide resonance but is not closely identified with any national model of welfare in Europe. Nowhere has social exclusion been a template for national social policy. This lack of identification, ownership even, gives the EU the opportunity not just to appropriate the concept but to place its own brand on it, while respecting subsidiarity (or the interpretation of it as not duplicating a function or set of functions that are allocated to the national or sub-national level).

A third characteristic of the concept is its malleability, which lends it ambiguities that prove helpful for EU policymakers. At issue here is what could be termed the concept's facility to speak with forked tongue. As pointed out by Silver (1994), social exclusion can relatively easily resonate with alternative visions of welfare and a good society. It has, therefore, the capacity to fuse different traditions of thinking and social policy in Europe and to allow a conversation (learning process, the EU hopes) to take place among member states with very different ideological orientations towards welfare (Atkinson and Davoudi 2000: 437). A less benign interpretation would characterize social exclusion as elastic, a concept that operates as a shifter among divergent discourses. This is the quarrel that Levitas (1998) has with it. She has shown how, in a UK context, the concept has sustained three quite different (and contradictory) discourses. One is an underclass debate, which sees inclusion as being effected by a remoralization of those who are excluded. The second discourse emphasizes social integration, focusing mainly on the integrative functions of involvement in paid work. Redistribution is the lodestar of the third discourse, in which inequality is identified as the source of the problem and greater redistribution as the most appropriate response. This kind of (over)stretching of the concept, among other things, facilitates a relenting analysis of what the "problem" is. Of course, this could well be part of the appeal: policymakers have a tendency to favor polysemic concepts which allow them leeway in interpreting problems and freedom to move from one interpretive repertoire to another (Jepson and Serrano Pascual 2005).

A fourth feature of the concept of social exclusion is that it does not significantly threaten existing understandings or power structures. This is true even after Lisbon. As mentioned earlier, the tendency in social exclusion is to direct the searchlight on the problems of society, especially as they are manifested at the margins. There are two assumptions that go untouched here: that there is a core to society and that this core is relatively unproblematic. Instead of tackling the question "exclusion from what?" scholarship and policy (especially within an EU context) have become pre-occupied with empirical questions such as "who are the excluded and how do we identify them?"³ A second notable point about the development of the concept is that the agency prominent in the original framing has tended to disappear. Peace (2001) suggests that in the process of moving from the French *exclusion sociale* to the English social exclusion, a process of nominalization has occurred whereby exclusion as a verb is replaced by exclusion as a noun. In the EU usage, there is no identifiable collective actor and very little idea of who is actually doing the excluding. The idea of a dichotomous social order between in- and excluded is stated rather than challenged, either as a phenomenon in its own right or as a market effect (Andersson 2005: 15). Given this, it could be argued that existing power configurations are safe in the shadow of the EU's mobilization of social exclusion as the dominant framing of the "problem" in Europe today.

³ It has, moreover, provided a list that looks relatively similar across member states. Ethnic minorities, the unemployed, the disabled and immigrants are regulars on every list.

3.2 *The Nature of the EU Project*

The features of the concept are insufficient on their own to explain why social exclusion has been taken up by the EU. Recognition that the concept has been manipulated turns the spotlight on the nature of the EU's interests. There are a number of ways in which social exclusion could be said to "fit" the current stage of development and political purposes of the EU. Of these I wish to emphasize three.

First, drawing on a policy learning approach, the adoption by the EU of social exclusion may represent the culmination (thus far) of a learning process about economic and social problems in Europe. The EU, it should be pointed out, has some prior history of engagement with poverty, having funded three anti-poverty programs in the 1970s and 1980s, and a European Observatory on Policies to Combat Social Exclusion from 1990 to 1994. Elucidation of the nature of social exclusion was a key purpose throughout. Whilst the poverty programs were of limited duration, scope and means, mainly focused on a small number of grass-roots, anti-poverty projects in member states, they had a strong intellectual (and activist) core. For example, their guiding framework identified conceptual development, analysis and evaluation as signature activities for the funded projects, which were organized around action research, transnational exchanges and dissemination. Ideas mattered. This series of programs, which built closely on each other, yielded considerable knowledge about the nature of poverty and how to deal with it. According to Rojas (1999: 20), one of their most important contributions was to offer to the EU an understanding of poverty as being one of many possible expressions of a complex process of collective deprivation occurring simultaneously in several strategic locations – in effect, social exclusion. We must entertain the possibility, then, that the EU's mobilization of the concept of social exclusion is founded in a knowledge accumulation process spanning at least a decade that made available a concept or set of ideas to be seized on when the opportunity presented itself. That "opportunity" arose when some member states developed an aversion to the term "poverty" in the late 1980s. This is Berghman's (1995: 16) interpretation of what happened: the initial adoption of the term in the 1989 Resolution was political in that it was a direct product of the desire on the part of some member states to avoid the negative connotations of "poverty." What they objected to was not the fact of poverty but the cultural and political connotations of the term. Looked at in this light, social exclusion was, in the EU context, a pre-existing idea waiting for an opportunity to become prominent.

A second point draws upon an understanding of policymaking as a contest for authority. In this regard the use and development of social exclusion as a new concept or approach served not just to update the discourse but to advance EU interests. As Silver (1994: 533) points out: "In symbolic politics, the power to name a social problem has vast implications for the policies considered suitable to address it." Consideration of the significance of innovation in the *raison d'être* of the EU (and especially the Commission) and the institutional and other constraints on the EU in the domain of social policy serves to reinforce the plausibility of this view. In a context where its sphere and depth of activity is highly circumscribed, the EU has found (or been given) a corridor of social policy activity marked with the labels of "innovation," "added value" and "best practice." With its legitimacy hinging on its leadership in experimentation and innovation, the Commission has a habit of picking up and developing novel concepts so much so that sometimes it resembles a warehouse for ideas. In the case of social exclusion, its relative novelty and the fact that nobody already "owned" it were significant. We therefore cannot rule out the possibility that the use of social exclusion is part of a strategy of self-aggrandizement on the part of the EU (Rumford 2002: 271). Precisely because

social exclusion is underdeveloped as a template for policy, the EU has the authority to shape the concept's identity and to fashion it in its own interests. Recognition that the EU has interests of its own to advance leads in the following direction.

All economic and political projects must articulate their relations with society, social life and social policy. Such articulations are always normative. From this viewpoint it could be contended that social exclusion is being developed as part of a normative project on the part of the central EU actors. Such a normative project should be conceived neither as unidimensional nor unambiguous. By its very nature, though, it is likely to represent an inroad into society. Mirroring the process of expansion into welfare undertaken by the national states in Europe at key moments in their history, the EU may be in the process of extending its influence to defining and influencing "the social." As mentioned earlier, the relationship between social and economic policy has always been contested in the EU. Over time the EU has vacillated on this. Lisbon develops the idea of a co-dependence between economic and social policy, although it must be said also to hover between seeing social policy as a positive contributor to economic and productivity growth and as an unacceptably high cost on such growth (the groaning weight of the welfare state has become too heavy to bear). Regardless of the lack of settlement, the presence of the social is significant in Lisbon. The underlying point to be made is that the EU's recent engagement with social exclusion, through Lisbon in particular, may serve to advance its social ambitions. In this view, while the EU attends to the needs of the market and economic and political integration, it also extends beyond them to define and influence how economy and state are embedded in society. Hence, the view of "Europe" as an emerging normative area – a loosely coupled system of regulatory norms – and of the creation of a set of supranational, suprastate normative institutions as the EU's singular achievement to date (Therborn 1999: 24). If this is the ambition of the EU, then the agenda of social exclusion may be interpreted as an attempt to provide a social underpinning to the ideal of Europe (Rustin and Rix 1997: 13). Given this, the fact that the territory of the concept is social rather than economic enhances its appeal. To be sure, social exclusion has an economic register – in particular it can speak well to a neo-liberal vision of integration as being integration into the market – but its view of society is not one of a market society.

4. Some Conclusions

This piece has traced the development of social exclusion and underlined its key features, as concept and as policy template in the hands of the EU. As regards the concept or approach, a number of things are clear. First, there is no single set of references in social exclusion and to some extent it firms up its identity *in situ*, by drawing from the prevailing philosophical traditions. Secondly, there is no settlement about it in academic work. Current scholarship has several tendencies: on the one hand to concentrate on material inequalities with the semi-automatic focus on those who are excluded from the market and on the other a concern about the direction that society is taking (*la question sociale*) and the ongoing challenge of reconciling welfare (states) and capitalism.

That scholarship is signally influenced by the EU, which is now the locus or sponsor of most development of the concept. As the analysis has shown, the EU has been selective in its elaboration of social exclusion, jettisoning some features while developing others. Among the core set of ideas in the EU version of social exclusion is an acceptance that economic change serves to alienate sectors of the population in a multi-dimensional fashion. The EU has varied over time in how it sees that process of alienation being overcome. As one might expect, integration into employment is

prominent in its reform register but social integration is also present. Looked at over the course of the past fifteen years, the analysis has identified four critical points about the EU usage of social exclusion: meanings have been unstable; modernization has figured prominently; a consistent theoretical underpinning has been lacking; the boundaries with other approaches have been blurred. Rigor seems not to be a priority. Three conclusions are to be drawn. First, social exclusion did not appear on the EU stage overnight, as many people believe about Lisbon. Rather, it is an idea that had a relatively long gestation period by EU standards. Secondly, during the process of making social exclusion a template for policy, the EU engaged in a “crafting” of the concept. This molding has a political undertow in that in social exclusion the Union has a concept that gives it purchase on issues that would otherwise be outside its purview. Thirdly, the EU’s engagement with social exclusion is to be explained by both the properties of the concept and the EU project. Usage of the concept allows the EU to bolster its image as an “expert” in social policy and to advance its own interests.

What wider significance should be attributed to all of this?

It is possible to regard the EU as the stage where political philosophies which have long been in competition in Europe now face each other down. At stake especially is the vexed relationship between the economic and the social. This is what makes the EU case so theoretically and methodologically compelling. Over the course of its (still) short history, the EU has gone from a situation of no social policy to one where social policy is either a necessary spillover, a compensation or mitigation, or a complement to or precondition (suitably refashioned) of market development under globalized conditions. What is now beyond doubt is that social exclusion is the major social frame in the unfolding debate in Europe about the relationship between the economic and the social. The adoption of an agenda of social exclusion by the EU gets to the heart of Europe’s vision (conceit?) about itself. For the concept is pivoted uneasily on the contradiction between the two ideals of Europe: as social in ideology and inclusive in its citizenship or as ready to seize its place in Anglo-American capitalism with the exclusionary and divisive dynamic that that implies.

It is, I believe, too soon to characterize the EU project on social exclusion as unidirectional. The evidence leads to (at least) two readings. Let us take the neo-liberal interpretation first, not least because it is by far the more fashionable view (Hansen and Schierup 2005; Levitas 1998). In this view, social exclusion is a flag of convenience for the EU, the flagship of an empty vessel, especially given the concept’s capacity to fuse different traditions of thinking and social provision in Europe. This reading foregrounds the understanding of exclusion as exclusion from the market and suggests that the EU’s main engagement with the concept is to craft a social (policy) model that is as deregulation-friendly as possible. This conclusion seems to me too sweeping on the basis of my analysis of the orientation of recent EU social policy, especially as relating to social exclusion. I concede that, if one looks beyond social policy to employment and economic policy, the neo-liberal credentials of the EU project are very prominent. But there are other tendencies. We should at least admit of the possibility that the social has a place in its own right in the EU project, that part of the appeal of social exclusion is as a quintessentially social idea. This opens the way for the second view: the EU’s mobilization of social exclusion represents an intensification of EU engagement with European society. There is a benign interpretation of this – that in the service of the EU social exclusion represents the high point, thus far, of a build-up of knowledge about the polarizing tendencies in European society and a political commitment to addressing them. But there is also a less benign loop – that the project of European integration aspires to extend much wider than the economic and the political and that the EU’s engagement with social exclusion is meant to serve such ambi-

tions. Both interpretations underline the EU as, if not exactly an intellectual project, then as one heavily influenced by and engaged in the production of emerging ideas and knowledge.

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