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► To cite this version:

Jean-Claude Barbier. From political strategy to analytical research and back to politics, a sociological approach of ‘flexicurity’. Henning Jørgensen and Per Kongshøj Madsen. Flexicurity and beyond - Finding a new agenda for the European Social Model, DJØF, pp.155-188, 2007. halshs-00157430

HAL Id: halshs-00157430

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00157430>

Submitted on 26 Jun 2007

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From political strategy to analytical research and back to politics, a sociological approach of ‘flexicurity’

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Draft Chapter to be published in

Henning Jørgensen and Per Kongshøj Madsen, eds., 2007, *Flexicurity and Beyond*,
Copenhagen, DJØF Publishing

Abstract

From a sociological perspective, 'flexicurity' poses important problems of definition. We will test whether, if taken in sufficiently broad terms, 'flexicurity' is susceptible to provide a broad 'portmanteau' or macro-concept collecting present reform strategies or present designs for reforms in many countries. This has however a cost: it dispenses with much of the specific substance identified in the institutional arrangements of the two original 'flexicurity' countries, Denmark and the Netherlands. This all-encompassing capacity of the word was illustrated in 2005-2006, when the notion was gradually integrated into the employment part of the 'Lisbon strategy'. All said and told, the question remains whether 'flexicurity', as a macro-concept, is worth what can be seen as a considerable loss of substance. Can the notion escape the fate of other trendy catchwords?

Introduction¹

Basic principles of social science research teach that normative and positive (analytical) approaches to socially constructed objects should be separated as much as possible. Implementing this methodological and ethical principle is however often a very difficult task in the circumstances of international research situations (Barbier 2005a). There are two main aspects to the problem: the first lies in the fact that, in international situations, social science researchers are confronted with the constant creation of new concepts/ notions² that they cannot ignore and have to use in interdisciplinary circumstances; the second aspect of the difficulty lies in the reality that much of this international research is funded by international organisations that are expecting what they call ‘policy lessons’, i.e. normative prescriptions.

In the case of ‘flexicurity’ as with other notions, like ‘activation’ for instance (Barbier 2002; 2004), sociologists of social protection systems have to be especially rigorous in distinguishing conceptual analyses from political discourses, particularly when they act as ‘experts’ and when they are, sometimes ‘naturally’ led to be full participants in some political or policy process. Our objective in this chapter is to try and disentangle some pitfalls and contribute to bringing as much clarity as we can to the delicate matter of ‘flex-security’ or ‘flexicurity’.

We will proceed in three steps: (1) after methodological remarks, we will look for a sociological definition of ‘flexicurity’ in an inductive way: because the notion originated in the Netherlands and in Denmark, it is essential to grasp how it was used with respect to the empirical situation of both countries; (2) this will lead us to try and generalize the ambiguous definition of ‘flexicurity’, both as a system of interactions and as a policy – a policy having at least two sides: (a) it is brought to existence by way of a political discourse, a political intent, based on *référentiels* – to follow Jobert and Muller (1987), here – and (b) it is made of actual programmes with distinctive means: pieces of law, funds, human resources, the mobilising of actors, etc. (3) Finally we will assess the analytical potential of the notion for social science usage.

¹ I would like to thank Flemming Larsen for reading an intermediary version of this text. Of course, mistakes are mine. I also thank WWW.

² For the distinction notion/concept in French and English, see Barbier (2005a: 59).

1 -For an inductive notion of ‘flexicurity’: empirical origins

‘Flexicurity’ was apparently used first to describe the outcome of a collectively decided reform in the Netherlands, from the mid-90s. Wilthagen (1998) was the first to tell this story in detail³. The same author later noted that “the concept of flexicurity is increasingly being taken up in other countries” (Wilthagen and Tros 2003: 12). Indeed, towards the late 90s, the term was used by diverse actors (especially Danish scholars and, later, politicians) to describe the Danish situation. It is certainly through the example of what has often been called the ‘Danish model’ in the media that ‘flexicurity’ crossed the boundaries of social policy and labour market forums and networks, from the early years 2000. The OECD explicitly concurred in that outcome along with the European Commission.

A Dutch gender-biased ‘flexicurity’?

Specialists generally consider that the Dutch reforms were pioneers in its invention. One of the important Dutch laws, enforced from the beginning of 1999, was precisely termed: *Wet Flexibiliteit en Zekerheid* (Flexibility and Security Act) and it profoundly reformed part-time work, agency work and their associated social protection in this country. Wilthagen (1998: 13) and Wilthagen and Rogowski (2002: 250-257) have attributed the invention of the term in the Dutch context to a senior sociologist and policy adviser of the then government. Wilthagen and his colleagues were probably among the main actors to contribute to the installation of the word as a common notion in the Netherlands’ policy forums. In a later formulation, the same author defined ‘flexicurity’ as a ‘nexus’ (Wilthagen 2002: 29) but it was not clear what a nexus exactly was for him, when he compared it to the ‘labour-capital nexus’; later, with his colleague Tros (Wilthagen and Tros 2003: 4) they presented ‘flexicurity’ as a “policy strategy”, slightly changing the definition given by Wilthagen and Rogowski (2002: 250). Freed from its Dutch origin, the definition of ‘flexicurity’ as a ‘strategy’, now seems to have won the day in various international publications (European Commission 2006b: 77).

It is important to note here that, in their first papers, Wilthagen and his colleagues kept drawing upon their empirical review of Dutch labour market reform. In a second stage, it was possible for them to use ‘flexicurity’ as a far reaching notion that could apply in various national contexts, as well as relating it to the broader European Employment Strategy context (Wilthagen and Tros 2003: 1-2, for instance). The Dutch reforms they reviewed were identified as starting explicitly under the banner of ‘flexibility’ and ‘security’ from 1995 – where a ministerial memorandum was issued under the very label under the rule of the Labour Party; but Wilthagen

³ He was later nominated as a member of the “Expert group on flexicurity” by the DG Employment and Social Affairs, along with six other experts.

showed that this had older roots in the past negotiation between government and the social partners, and in a particular form of what he terms the Dutch ‘corporatist system’ out of which, in a way ‘flexicurity’ emerged as an “unanticipated process” (1998: 10) of the actions and initiatives of the Dutch government and social partners.

Given this empirical review and other research (see for instance, Van Oorschot 2001), the reforms that can be grouped under a programme or a strategy of ‘flexicurity’ pertain to a long term process of reducing the inequalities of social protection rights in the 90s for ‘atypical’ and ‘regular’ employees; during this process, the regulation of fixed-term and temporary agency work was reformed, leading to fostering enhanced rights to open-ended contracts; the dismissal procedures were also reviewed during the period (Wilthagen 2002: 14).

As a consequence, it is interesting to understand to what extent the Dutch ‘activity and employment regime’⁴ was transformed over the last decade and to compare it with the Danish one, using the French regime as a mirror case (tables 1 to 4).

Table 1 – Activity rates (population 15-64)

%	The Netherlands			Denmark			France		
	1994	1999	2005	1994	1999	2005	1994	1999	2005
Activity rate all	68.8	74.1	76.9	79.5	80.6	79.8	67.5	68.7	69.5
Activity rate men	79.7	82.9	83.7	84.2	84.9	83.6	74.9	75.3	75.1
Activity rate women	57.7	65.2	70.0	74.6	76.1	75.9	60.3	62.3	64.1

Source: Employment in Europe 2006

⁴ We defined such a regime in Barbier (1998: 398): “Within a specific national territory, an *activity and employment regime* represents a given historical state of the distribution of employment and activity, among the potentially active population. This distribution is consistent with and facilitated by a specific system of social protection for non-workers and workers, the distribution being visible according to standard categories such as qualifications, gender, age, etc, and related to the sharing of responsibility for domestic activities (including childcare and care for the elderly). These constantly changing *regimes* (as shown, for instance, in the increase in female labour market participation after the war in industrialised countries) are nonetheless stable over relatively long periods of time within their own national framework.” Our definition is different from other usages of ‘employment regime’ [(for instance: Muffels *et al.* 2002, cf. also Gautié’s approach (1998)].

Table 2 – Employment rates Full time equivalent (population 15-64)

%	The Netherlands			Denmark			France		
	1994	1999	2005	1994	1999	2005	1994	1999	2005
FTE									
Employment rate all	51.3	56.8	56.4	65.6	69.7	68.1	56.2	57.3	58.5
Employment rate men	68.9	73.8	71.7	74.0	77.6	75.6	67	67.8	66.9
Employment rate women	33.8	40.0	41.7	57.5	62.1	61.1	45.8	47.2	50.8

Source: Employment in Europe 2006

Table 3 – Part-time employment (population 15-64)

%	The Netherlands			Denmark			France		
	1994	1999	2005	1994	1999	2005	1994	1999	2005
Part time all	36.7	39.7	46.1	21.7	21.6	22.1	15.2	17.1	17.2
Part time men	16.3	18.0	22.6	10.5	10.4	12.7	4.8	5.5	5.7
Part time women	66.1	68.9	75.1	35.0	34.7	33.0	28.3	31.4	30.7

Source: Employment in Europe 2006

Table 4 – Fixed-term contracts (population 15-64)

%	The Netherlands			Denmark			France		
	1994	1999	2005	1994	1999	2005	1994	1999	2005
Fixed term all	11.3	12.3	15.5	11.6	9.6	9.8	11.5	14.5	13.3
Fixed term men	8.6	9.7	14.3	10.8	8.6	8.5	10.4	13.7	12.6
Fixed term women	15.1	15.6	16.9	12.4	10.7	11.3	12.8	15.4	14.0

Source: Employment in Europe 2006

With regard to the possible impact of the introduction of ‘flexicurity’ strategies in the Netherlands, we can make the following observations, related to the period 1994-2005. The activity rates of women have steadily increased over the period and their increase was not higher after the 1999 Act; this Act has apparently not led either to a significant increase of female full-time equivalent employment rates, that have gradually increased over the entire period. However, the main changes ob-

served from 1999 are in the increase of part-time prevalence, both for men and women, and also for fixed-term contracts, essentially for men (table 4). This leads to identifying one important feature of the Dutch situation with regard to ‘flexicurity’; the decrease of inequalities between different types of contracts and the facilitation of ‘atypical’ work seem to have concurred in stabilising the division of labour between men and women, despite the increased resort by men to ‘flexible’ contracts. The Dutch way of ‘flexicurity’ is, in this respect, gender-biased and cannot be linked – whatever the ‘unanticipated’ effects were – to a ‘universalistic’ strategy.

Comparing countries two by two, the main observations are the following:

- Irrespective of the wide-ranging differences that exist between the French and Dutch systems of social protection and labour law (including their industrial relations systems) the main difference that contrasts France and the Netherlands with respect to their activity and employment *regimes*, pertains to the pattern of female labour market participation. Basically, the contribution of women to the labour force has remained much lower in the Netherlands than in France although the gap has slightly narrowed [table 2 shows that the FTE employment rate is higher in France for women by 9 points (the difference was 12 points in 1994)]. This is consistent with (a) a higher Dutch female activity rate and (b) a widely diverging role of part-time work between the two countries (table 3); the role played by fixed-term contracts⁵ does not appear to be great in explaining this difference.
- When one compares Denmark and the Netherlands, the gender-biased pattern again comes to the fore, actually even more strongly than in the former comparison. Danish use of part-time work is higher than in France, especially for women, but not much for men: the French and Danish situations are much closer to one another than to the Dutch. Here again the resort to so-called ‘fixed-term’ contracts does not seem to explain much. Either for men or women, Danish and Dutch activity rates are very close but their FTE employment rates differ widely. Here again the main explanation is to be found in the role of women: table 2 shows that FTE employment rates for Dutch males are only slightly lower than for Danish males [with France this male rate differs by 5 points (France-the Netherlands) and by nearly ten points (France-Denmark) and, in both cases, it is explained by the concentration of employment in France on the 25-60 age bracket].

Before turning now to presenting a short story of the use of ‘flexicurity’ in the Danish context, we will also proceed to another comparison between the same three countries, in terms of the role played by labour law. The OECD has been compar-

⁵ Moreover, as we showed, the ‘fixed-term’ or ‘temporary’ Eurostat rates are basically flawed because of their intrinsic heterogeneity (Barbier 2005c; 2007b).

ing indicators of what it calls ‘employment protection legislation’ for quite a long time now. In their *Employment Outlook* report where they displayed a review of what they called the “Danish *flexicurity* approach” (OECD, 2004, p. 97-98), the organisation also updated its data base. The aggregated indicators are presented in table 5 for the three countries, using the *categories employed by OECD*.

Table 5 – OECD “Summary indicators of the strictness of employment protection legislation”, late 1990s and 2003.

	Regular employ- ment		Temporary em- ployment		Collective dis- missals		Overall EPL	
	Late 1990s	2003	Late 1990s	2003	Late 1990s	2003	Late 1990s	2003
The Netherlands	3.1	3.1	1.2	1.2	3.0	3.0	2.3	2.3
Denmark	1.5	1.5	1.4	1.4	3.9	3.9	1.8	1.8
France	2.3	2.5	3.6	3.6	2.1	2.1	2.9	2.9

Source: *Employment Outlook*, 2004, p. 117.

Many remarks could be made about the OECD approach and its methodological limits, that we will leave aside for the moment. Table 5 shows that the picture is false although often disseminated, according to which in Denmark hiring and firing is practically free of any limits: Denmark scores the highest of the three countries for collective dismissals. Gaudu (2007) already warned against the superficial view of Denmark in France (see also Barbier, 2007a). It is remarkable that France, with a reputation for constantly featuring among the hardcore ‘continental’ champions in terms of structural labour market rigidity, scores lower than Denmark and the Netherlands for collective dismissals; true it scores much higher than both countries for ‘temporary employment’⁶, but for ‘regular employment’, it scores significantly lower than the Netherlands, which scores at a figure double the Danish one. *What is remarkable in this comparison is that each country scores the lowest for one of the three indicators*: France for collective dismissals, Denmark for regular employment and the Netherlands for temporary employment.

The above empirical comparisons, both in terms of ‘activity and employment *regimes*’ and in terms of the assumed variation of the strictness of labour law, clearly demonstrate that it takes more in-depth analysis to understand the relative performance of countries than the superficial political discourse about ‘flexicurity’ would show for amateur comparativists. The ‘flexicurity’ empirical picture will be further complicated by a quick survey of the use of ‘flexicurity’ in Denmark.

⁶ For a methodological discussion of what ‘temporary employment’ is in international data bases, see Barbier 2007b.

*Some Danish empirical history*⁷

Doing in-depth comparative research in Denmark (Barbier 2006b), we tried to identify the essential steps of the dissemination of the idea and the formulation of ‘flexicurity’, in the administrative and political forums on the one hand and in the academic ones on the other.

The first formulation of the phenomenon that was later to be called “flexicurity” in Denmark is linked to the designing of a “golden triangle” by officials in the ministry of employment (Jørgensen et Pedersen 2004⁸). As Per K. Madsen has observed, they first popularised the chart in a report published by the ministry in 1999⁹, though they did not speak about flexicurity. Moreover, they insisted that the virtuous combination of the relationships (between labour legislation, unemployment insurance, employment creation and active labour market policies) that they combined in their “triangle” were linked to the *specific Danish social context* (id. p. 93-94¹⁰). It is no use to reprint once again the famous triangle which eventually found its way even into the 2004 issue of *Employment Outlook* (page 97).

At about the same time, researchers and academics were beginning to use the term ‘flexicurity’ to describe the Danish system. Per Kongshøj Madsen is the first to make a consistent reference to it from 1999, but, if I don’t misinterpret his words, he only explicitly used the term ‘flexicurity’ for describing the ‘Danish model’ from 2003¹¹. P.K. Madsen provided a list of specific characteristics pertaining to this “model” (2003: 4-5): a flexible labour market with a high level of external flexibility that is permitted by a low level of employment protection; a generous income replacement for the unemployed; and active labour market policies that allow for enhancing training and qualifications. Later on (Madsen 2006: 349-352), in his list of features for the Danish ‘flexicurity’ system, he distinguished between “basic traits” and “specific developments in the 1990s”, implying that some long-term features had been playing a role in the present situation. Moreover, noting that “macroeconomic environment” played a role, he included an item termed “political environment” that encompassed not only the role of social partners, corporatist structures (“small-state democratic corporatism”) and political support in society for re-

⁷ For the reconstruction of this short story, I am heavily indebted to the people I interviewed and who were as kind as indicating me sources in Danish, which they sometimes helped me translating, when my rudimentary Danish was insufficient. Prominent among them are my colleagues of Carma, the University of Aalborg. Thanking them warmly, I am aware that I will have to account for my own mistakes in the eventual interpretation I give here. A more detailed analysis, in the context of the European social model, is forthcoming in Barbier 2007c.

⁸ The 2004 edition I quote is the 7th edition of the well-known textbook in Denmark.

⁹ « Arbejdsreformerne – en status », 1999, København (Arbejdsministeriet).

¹⁰ “Særligt ved sammenligning med continental-europæiske lande og de øvrige nordiske lande et det nærliggende at understrege sammenhængen mellem ansættelsesforhold og indretningen af dagpengesystemet og aktiveringsindsatsen i Danmark”.

¹¹ Madsen quoted the « golden triangle » from the 1999 Danish report (Madsen 2003: 101) when he contributed to an ILO comparative study (Auer and Cazes 2003).

forms; he described an "implicit social contract concerning balance between flexibility and security". Other recent analyses converge and attribute to flexicurity an even more encompassing meaning: it seems that for some Danish researchers, flexicurity could mean a global social consensus that encompasses extremely comprehensive, complex and far reaching dimensions because it has lasted for the last 75 years (Kristensen 2006: 300) or because it is intimately linked to the nature of the Danish legal system (Rasmussen 2006: 242-243).

Danish politicians also claimed the term. The former Social Democrat Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen recently commented about the policies he implemented (1993-2001), as an instance of the realisation of flexicurity in the following terms: « *the combination of flexible labour markets and individual social security – of the Northern countries is [...] based on a) strong social security and broad welfare provisions ; b) active labour market and educational policies ; and c) a highly mobile labour market, where the social partners (trade unions and employers' associations) are key actors with a high degree of responsibility for competitiveness and social sustainability*» (2005: 51). It should be noted that his description precisely does not limit itself to a mechanism, because he stresses the role of actors and their "high degree of responsibility". Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the current conservative Prime minister has, for his part, implied, but only in front of domestic audiences, that he was the inventor of the term. He did it on the 21st of November, 2004, at his party's congress, pretending that he innovated in putting both terms together¹². From what we learned the claim is certainly far-fetched.

What can we then conclude from the identification of the Danish contribution to the dissemination of the term "flexicurity"? Danish academics all stress the fact that there is much more than the simple mechanism of a "triangle", which was so promptly jumped upon by so many hasty analyses¹³. The basis for the sheer possibility of the triangle's working profoundly lies in the intimate social fabric of Denmark. Danish politicians have also adopted the term and tend to use it – whatever their diverse personal contribution to the building of the successful 'Danish model'

¹² "Vi havde EU topmøde forleden. Der havde jeg lejlighed til at fortælle lidt om det. Den drøftelse forgik jo på engelsk. Jeg kombinerede de to ord og sagde, at vi har 'flexibility' og 'security', og så kaldte jeg den danske model for "flexicurity". Det er godt, for på fransk hedder det 'flexicurité'". [the other day, we had a European summit. There I had the opportunity to tell a little about it. The discussion was held in English. I combined the two words and said that we have "flexibility" and "security", and called the Danish model "flexicurity". It is good because in French they say "flexicurité" – our translation].

¹³ Flexicurity is often reduced to a wishful simplistic mechanism. In such visions, Danes tend to recall the Brits of whom George Orwell thought, in 1941, that they would welcome socialism. In his *The lion and the unicorn*, he wrote "From the moment that all productive goods have been declared the property of the State, the common people will feel, as they cannot feel now, that the State is *themselves* [author's emphasis], they will be ready to endure the sacrifices that are ahead of us, war or no war" (Penguin, 1941, p. 106).

– as emblematic of the example that today’s Denmark can provide Europe with. In the European debate, and especially in the European Commission and other international organisations like the OECD, the stress put by academics upon the social conditions for the virtuous connections between social protection and the labour market is generally omitted or downplayed (Jørgensen, 2002). This should not be a matter for surprise when we consider that international organisations are looking for ”good practices” in the hope for ”transferring” those to other countries. The repeated caution asked for by Danish colleagues (for a recent recapitulation, see Bredgaard *et al.* 2005) does not trouble international organisations much.

After this first inductive research, where do we stand? What is obvious is that, from the limited information compared in both countries, their activity and employment *regimes* stand widely apart. Compared to the Danish, the Dutch is heavily gender-biased: whereas a system of interactions (the ‘triangle’) seems to apply rather universally in Denmark, the flexicurity virtuous circle mainly concerns women in the Netherlands¹⁴. If we single out three elements to close this first empirical approach, table 6 shows remaining differences between the two countries. Two common elements stand out in the table: both countries have a mix of collective agreements and labour laws, but this mix – however deeply embedded in their respective forms of corporatism – is substantially different, which gives ambiguous outcomes as to whether labour law should be considered ‘flexible’ evenly across both countries (see also table 5)

Table 6 – Comparing Denmark’s and the Netherlands’ ‘flexicurity’

Flexicurity	Denmark	The Netherlands
Gender dimension	Universalistic	Gendered
Social embeddedness	corporatist	corporatist
Labour law and collective agreements	Mixed, combining high protection from collective dismissals with corporatism	Mixed, combining high protection for open-ended contracts with corporatism

It is now necessary to go beyond and try to see whether a more generalized sociological approach is possible to understand ‘flexicurity’ independently of its historical roots in Denmark and the Netherlands.

¹⁴ In a way, it is not surprising that ”combination security” (“the security of a worker of being able to combine his or her job with other – notably private – responsibilities and commitments than paid work”) (Wilthagen and Tros 2003: 6) was first particularly stressed in the Dutch context, with its gender-biased feature.

2 - Looking for a comprehensive definition of ‘flexicurity’

The task of a comprehensive review of the uses of ‘flexicurity’ across Europe is obviously beyond reach. In its comparative chapter about the theme, the European Commission (2006b: 75-118) has implemented a benchmarking exercise, mobilising a certain number of indicators and combining an Principal Components Analysis (PCA) with a clustering of countries. They mainly use four indicators: the ‘strictness of employment protection legislation’; expenditure on labour market policies; the share of participants in life-long programmes and the average tax-wedge, and their analysis ends up in a grouping of countries into “five flexicurity/labour market systems” (European Commission 2006b: 102-109), as is shown in table 7. Remarkably, social dialogue does not figure among the indicators chosen, whereas its role is constantly stressed by researchers (Madsen 2006; Auer 2006).

Table 7 – “flexicurity/labour market” clusters in Europe

Table 3 – Results of the clustering analysis, using the K-means method				
Continental	Eastern	Nordic	Mediterranean	Anglo-Saxon
AT	CZ	DK	EL	IE
BE	HU	FI	PT	UK
FR	IT	NL	ES	
DE	PO	SE		
	SK			

Sources: DG EMPL calculations from Eurostat and OECD data.

Source Employment in Europe, 2006

Moreover, the remarkable achievement of this sophisticated benchmarking against a spate of indicators leaves open the question of the definition of ‘flexicurity’: it implicitly starts from the premise that there exists a ‘universal’ form of flexicurity that can be captured by a list of indicators.

To try and be as comprehensive as possible, a sociological approach has to fulfil three main tasks: describing, explaining and understanding; these tasks are (and should be) distinct from a potential assessment or relative valuation of performance of the type benchmarking implements. In table 8, we distinguish between research tasks and other activities linked to politics. Social science research figures on the upper left of the table (analytical-positive goals) while normative activities appear

on the right side; some activities are in-between (analytical and normative: this is the case of benchmarking but, more broadly, of many economic studies¹⁵).

Reviewing usages of the term ‘flexicurity’ leads to distinguishing two main possible definitions, which are not exclusive from one another: (a) flexicurity as a policy/strategy and (b) flexicurity as a system of elements. In the first case, the policy explicitly states that it pursues the goal of reconciling flexibility on the one hand, and security on the other. In the second, it is a system¹⁶ inserted within a society that is instrumental in provoking the reconciling. A policy/strategy (a) can obviously be seen as part of a system (b) of flexicurity.

Of course many interrogations arise as to the dimensions of flexibility and security. It is essential to recall that the notion comes to be discussed in a definite context, i.e., the present flexibilisation trend that is driven by globalisation. The ultimate basic rationale for flexibility lies in the contemporary transformation of international monetary norms and labour cost competition; as empirical data amply demonstrate in Europe, the gradual flexibilisation of jobs has entailed the degradation of conditions of work and protection for a significant part of the population, especially those with lower qualifications. It is then highly improbable that, against this common and powerful economic background, institutional arrangements will be easily built to marry flexibility and security, unless equally strong social conditions for negotiations, compromise and the redistribution of resources are met. However, the economic constraint is one of *labour flexibility* – labour as a factor of production, for reasons of cost competition – which can be disconnected from *employment flexibility* (Barbier and Nadel 2000; 2003). This distinction and further dimensions of flexibility and security have now been systematically explored in Wilthagen’s “matrix” (European Commission 2006b: 78).

Flexibility as a ‘strategy’ belongs to the first category, while flexibility as a ‘nexus’ (a social relationship), a ‘golden triangle’ or a ‘system’ belongs to the second. Sociological policy analysis distinguishes between ideational dimensions of policies, as opposed to their material elements. This is why, in table 8, we separate (a1) political discourses from (a2) programmes and actors. Discourses can take many aspects: while they convey cognitive messages, they are also instrumental (conflicts of power), normative and sometimes manipulative (in the case of political communication, for instance). According to Jobert and Muller’s (1987) analysis, they con-

¹⁵ Without discussing them here, we follow Passeron’s classical distinctions (Passeron 2006) between “historical sciences” (sociology, history, political science, etc..) and “Popperian” sciences (economics and demographics). Moreover, economic research is very commonly linked to the pursuit of prescriptions, which is not the case for historical sciences.

¹⁶ Actually, a sub-system centred on the labour market (Barbier 2007a). Wilthagen and Tros (2003: 5) also write: “flexicurity could not merely be seen as a species of labour market policy/strategy but also a certain “state” or condition of the labour market”.

vey values, norms, images, but also ‘algorithms’ (i.e. normative theories of action). For instance actors discussing about ‘flexicurity’ in the European Parliament oppose one another about the mere possibility of flexicurity: some see it as a chimera, some as an interesting strategy or a plausible theory of action for a programme.

Once elements and some interactions are identified, the task remains as to objectifying and explaining their aggregate functioning: here we enter the domain of flexicurity as a system (b), as a complex web of interactions, complementarities, etc.. between various sub-systems within a particular society. For instance, in one country, it is possible that flexicurity policies were implemented, and that they failed, whereas in another country, a flexicurity policy was implemented and contributed to making the twin objectives compatible, also because the history of the country and its institutions allowed for doing the right choices at the right moment. Both political discourses and the implementation of specific programmes participate in the achievement of the goal of ‘flexicurity’ as a system. Discourses are obviously essential for furthering interests.

Contrasting the French and Danish situations with the grid in table 8

The implications of our distinction will be clearer if we contrast the French and the Danish situations. France is a country characterised by a high level of union fragmentation and a low union density, where a relatively high level of social conflict accompanies the implementation of reforms, with great uncertainty about eventual outcomes. In this country, labour law overwhelmingly prevails over collective agreements. Often, as was the case again in 2005-2006, with Prime Minister de Villepin, the government tries and passes Bills in Parliament to reform either social protection or labour law, without really consulting with social partners or unions. This often leads to reforms being controversial and provides legitimate motives for conspicuous street demonstrations¹⁷. In 2005-2006, the government was proud of his success in introducing a new employment contract (*contrat nouvelle embauche*, August 2005) with shorter notice periods, for firms with less than 20 staff, and it thought the introduction of an additional one of a similar type for the young was going to be easy in early 2006. The de Villepin government always claimed that

¹⁷ During the 90s, apart from a period of intense demonstrations triggered by Prime minister Balladur in 1994 over a government proposal to create a special contract with a lower minimum wage for the young, two main significant social movements took place. The first one (winter 1995) was organised over pensions in the public sector and the healthcare insurance reform; the second (winter 1997-98), over the situation of the unemployed, was organised by the unemployed’s NGOs. A fourth moment was the reform of the unemployment insurance. Although it did not spark off demonstrations in any way comparable to the 1994, 1995 and 1997 waves, it did indeed provoke very active and fierce debate. On a smaller scale, recurrent debate and strikes supported by the unions have also accompanied the series of the most significant (and media reported) waves of redundancies.

this was a policy initiative due to its learning from Denmark (Barbier 2005b; 2006a; 2007a). But the reform for the new contract for the young was eventually defeated in the streets. When presenting his ‘social testament’, de Villepin concluded that at all costs France would have to find a “*flexicurité à la française*”¹⁸. The French case illustrates the fact that a strategy was attempted to introduce various reforms that, may *at first sight* pass for a ‘flexicurity strategy’. Because of the failure of the government to really implement the strategy, the French situation of the labour market remained for a great part unchanged¹⁹. Hence, one year on, the Prime Minister acknowledged that reforms for flexicurity as he saw it were still projects for the future. Consequently, it would certainly be difficult to describe the French system as allowing for the combination of flexicurity and security, along the Wilthagen’ and Tros’ s definition quoted by the Commission report (European Commission 2006b: 77), i.e. “ a degree of job, employment, income and combination security that facilitates the labour market careers and biographies of workers with a relatively weak position and allows for enduring and high quality labour market participation and social inclusion, while at the same time providing a degree of numerical (both external and internal) functional and wage flexibility that allows for labour markets’ (and individual companies’) timely and adequate adjustment to changing conditions in order to maintain and enhance competitiveness and productivity”. While analysing France in the context of a comparative project about the precariousness of employment in Europe, we showed that one of the most conspicuous and prominent features of the French system lay in the fact that the negative consequences of flexibility on the labour market were concentrated on certain groups who additionally lacked access to mainstream social protection rights, while at the same time being trapped in lower quality jobs. This was the case even in the presence of relatively well developed policies against ‘employment precariousness’, and explicitly designed to foster ‘security’ (Barbier *et al.* 2002a).

By contrast, in Denmark, politicians and academics adopted the term ‘flexicurity’ for policies that, in the first place, were not conceived of as ‘flexicurity’ strategies, the term coming only later to Danish forums. These policies have amply shown that the present Danish situation fits reasonably well in Wilthagen and Tros’s definition, as is demonstrated by many researchers already quoted: moreover, most of these Danish scholars tend to think that the elements of the ‘flexicurity’ system in Denmark have roots in a rather long past history that is key to understanding today’s performances (Madsen 2006; Kristensen 2006). Last but not least, the elements which Danish scholars tend to associate with features of the Danish flexicurity system are hardly if at all heard of, or documented in the French case: for instance, the

¹⁸ Prime Minister’s speech at the *Conseil économique et Social*, February, 26, 2007 where he told there were three main axes for this future “*flexicurité à la française*”: reforming labour law; reforming vocational training, and reforming the Public employment service.

¹⁹ Not homogeneously ‘rigid’ as is shown in table 5, the French score is especially high for fixed-term employment.

French system of unemployment assistance and insurance is very ungenerous when compared to the Danish, and the system of active labour market programmes in France is much less effective than the Danish. Moreover, the contrast is maybe at its highest for the support for reform in both countries and for the widely diverging systems of industrial relations, not to mention the basic rules of the French polity.

To sum up our findings so far, it is possible to find two countries with explicit flexicurity policies that are quite at odds with each other in terms of their substance. Secondly, these policies can be consistent with a wider societal functioning, as in the case of Denmark, but they may also appear as inconsistent with it, as in the case of France. This brings an additional puzzle to the fore, which is exemplified by the Danish case: what is the role of history in ‘flexicurity’? Apparently, from the mid-90s to now, and into the years 2000, the ‘fit’ between a flexicurity strategy and the functioning of the labour market and of social protection is of a great quality and, even, sustainability for the near future seems probable, despite some caveats (Madsen 2006: 366-374). But, at the same time, features deeply embedded in the Danish society also figure among the explanatory causes or variables for accounting for the present success, as Madsen (2006) and Kristensen (2006) suggest. Seen in this light, the Danish flexicurity *system* is a complex web of interactions, of collective action and of individual adaptation to societal norms and rules (Barbier 2007a), which is in a way unique.

Table 8 – Social science research about ‘flexicurity’: mapping tasks and approaches of concepts

Tasks	Tasks	Social science (analytical-positive)	Analytical and normative: in-between activities (economics)	Normative activities
Describing	Describing ‘flexicurity’=> its elements and the ‘system’ they make -Elements -System of interactions (institutions, rules)	Identifying a – policies 1) discourses (cognitive) of which: <i>référentiels</i> (values, norms, images and algorithms) 2) actors and their strategies, programmes implemented b – phenomena, institutions and arrangements: elements that are candidates for featuring within an analytical (universal) stylised framework/ <i>system</i> of flexicurity - interactions between elements		Political discourse about elements of flexicurity Articulated by actors participating in the promotion/demotion of flexicurity as a political strategy (politicians, experts, academics, etc)
Explaining And understanding	Causal attribution/ ‘affinities’) of effects/situations, etc.. to the impact of the elements/the system of flexicurity	- Explaining actors’ strategies - Attributing changes (dependent variables) in certain phenomena to public activities/strategies/institutions and the system they build with actors’ responses, strategies - Assessing potential effects of ideas	Evaluation studies and benchmarking: mainstream economics/correlations, etc. , econometrics	Political discourse about the goals of flexicurity (idem)
Valuing/assessing	Recommendations for policy makers		Economic studies, modeling strategies, based on stylised facts, leading to one or more ‘better strategies’ => ‘policy lessons’	Political communication as legitimization/delegitimation discourses for strategies

At first sight, the choice to consider ‘flexicurity’ as a strategy or a policy is the less demanding. One can accept at face-value any policy or strategy that claims its ultimate goal is to foster the compatibility of any form of security and of any form of flexibility in the area of work and social protection: social science being neutral, there is no reason to deny this acceptance, *a priori*. Sociology’s task, at a second stage could then be to classify different types of policies/strategies. One can distinguish between ‘flexicurity policies’ that are symbolic in Edelman’s sense (1964) and those who give life to actual programmes and legislation. Obviously policy analysis is able to address the question of the effects of introducing such policies and to compare them with one another, sorting them into types or models, linking them for instance to other regimes, like ‘welfare regimes’. However, in this analysis two questions arise: (1) the first pertains to the added value of qualifying policies as ‘flexicurity’ ones instead of simply keeping naming them *labour market and social protection policies*; (2) the second pertains to the challenge of singling out ‘flexicurity policies’ as identifiable factors, leading to specific outcomes and comparing them with one another across countries without ignoring their ‘context’. In this analysis one is confronted with the difficult task of explaining what is the particular role present policies (with distinctive features, and the central feature indeed of their goal of reconciliation) can play in a ‘holistic’ *outcome* – a “state” where, as Wilthagen’s and Tros’ definition suggested, combines a great number of phenomena. Hence, even in the case where one was able to identify a clear set of policies, with almost universal value²⁰, and because present policies only constitute one possible factor, one is bound to analyse a ‘flexibility outcome’ (or degree or level) as the ‘product’ of a system, a societal combination of sub-systems, placed in their historical development and path-dependence, with a considerable interplay of factors. Here, Amable’s (2003) approach to ‘institutional complementarities’ is extremely useful. In sociology, establishing genuine causal links between present policies and an holistic ‘outcome’ or ‘state’ that characterizes a particular society has always been especially tricky. Hence the ever lasting discussion about the degree of ‘causality’ which is present in Max Weber’s use of the term ‘affinities’, and which can be easily applied to the case of Denmark today (Barbier 2007a).

There is certainly little interest in trying *to devise only a taxonomy* of policies or strategies, that present themselves as pursuing the goal of reconciling the twin objectives of flexibility and security. What is more interesting (and important for policy lessons) is to test whether the specific analysis of national systems from the angle of ‘flexicurity’ yields innovative and useful findings, differing from the already existing comparisons of labour market and social protection regimes. In this respect, ‘flexicurity’ might even be seen as a possible ‘cross-

²⁰ At least in the developed world.

regime' dimension. This certainly does not downplay the interest of a so-to-say *localised* use of 'flexicurity', as a sort of *yardstick* to assess identified programmes in a particular context: for instance Leschke *et al.* (2006) have attempted to discover whether piecemeal programmes (picked from the wider Hartz IV German reform) achieved a 'local' reconciliation of flexibility and security. Doing so, they very aptly pointed to the fact that it is insufficient to see 'flexicurity' as simply a set of trade-offs and synergies (or complementarities): between flexibility and security, "vicious circles" could emerge, thus complicating Wilthagen's original matrix (*ibid.*: 3-5). However useful for policy advising, such analyses have limits: one does not learn from them how the aggregation of various programmes translates into a holistic 'state' (or 'degree' or 'level') of 'flexicurity'; their second limitation is the absence of clearly identifiable, empirical actors. Indeed the role of actors has probably been underestimated in a great part of the benchmarking literature dealing with 'flexicurity'.

Summing up the above discussion we can conclude that two options exist for social science: (1) From the first one (mainly open to economic studies) we may expect various complex exercises of benchmarking along the type presented by the European Commission in 2006 (see table 7 here). This option delivers little in terms of the definition of flexicurity: one indeed could even say that it is an adequate way of avoiding the difficult task of definition. The search for an analytical and theoretical definition is substituted by correlations, principal component and cluster analyses. In a nutshell, this is an extension of previous analysis combining the review of labour market policies, labour law and unemployment compensation. In a way this amounts to a 'trivialization' of the interesting and challenging substantial features reviewed in section 1. (2) The second option is theoretically more demanding, as will be seen now.

A theoretical basis for the identification of flexicurity systems?

Undeniably, 'flexicurity', as it was conceived of at its origins (see section 1 above) had to do with the result of social negotiation between politicians and social partners. It is not by chance that both the Netherlands and Denmark have a corporatist system of industrial relations. It is neither by chance that the notion of 'trade-off' was central since the beginnings of 'flexicurity': a trade-off over whatever, logically supposes that collective actors, at a certain point, are able to trade off something with one another²¹. Hence it seems quite logical to try and find bases for theorizing it among disciplinary approaches that pay central attention to corporatism and to the role of social compromises. In the political science and sociological tradition, as well as in institutional economics, the ap-

²¹ True, there is also an individualistic approach to trade-offs, where individuals make trade-offs with one another, but we will leave aside this approach here.

proaches which immediately come to the mind centre on the question of ‘regulation’ of society (in the sense of *régulation* in French and *Regelung* in German). In this perspective, apart from Mayntz and Scharpf’s “actor-centred institutionalism” we find very useful support in Jobert’s approach (1998) and Boyer’s (1986) as well as Amable’s (2003). From a Jobertian perspective, the question of flexicurity boils down to the organisation of power relations between actors which are constructed into a ‘political order’ and ‘flexicurity’ is a political *référentiel* (cognitive frame) that can be used by certain actors to change the existing relationship. The French “regulation” school, with Boyer, has emphasised the key role played by “institutionalised compromises”²², which emerge from social conflicts and political processes (Boyer 2006). B. Amable, for his part, has produced an analysis of five types of capitalism (Market-based, Asian, Continental European, Social-democratic and Mediterranean) on the basis of the analysis of institutional complementarities linking together five sub-systems (product-market competition; wage-labour nexus; financial sector; social protection and education).

In this perspective: (1) if flexicurity may be built as a concept, it would have to find its place at some crossing-point in the wider ‘wage-labour nexus’ (*rapport salarial*)²³, and in the social protection institutional area²⁴: for flexicurity to become a significant feature of the wage-labour nexus, around the trade-offs, complementarities and vicious circles between the various forms of flexibility and security that various actors demand, accept or reject, compromises have to be institutionalized at national level. Hence flexicurity, quite different from a technical toolbox is, *throughout*, of a *political nature*. (2) secondly, it is necessary to analyse more closely the relevant complementarities that are (or were) able to creating the conditions under which potential ‘flexicurity’ institutional compromises could be struck in the future (or have already been).

²² Inspired notably by this perspective, we have proposed to analyse in details ‘flexibility-quality-security regimes’ and, from this perspective, we have produced a cross-country analysis of France, Italy, Spain, Germany and the UK (Barbier et al., 2002b).

²³ In this “institutional area” (or institutional form – for Boyer), Amable (2003: 124-142), uses three indicators: employment protection; industrial relations; employment policy. In the “social-democratic” model, Amable notes that “strong external competitive pressure requires some flexibility of the workforce. But flexibility is not simply achieved through lay-offs and market adjustments; re-training of a highly-skilled workforce plays a crucial role in the adaptability of workers. Protection of specific investments of employees is realized through a mixture of moderate employment protection, a high level of social protection, and easy access to retraining thanks to active labour market policies. A coordinated wage-bargaining system enables solidaristic wage-setting which favours innovation and productivity. A centralized financial system enables firms to develop long-term strategies” (id.: 105-107). In Amable’s typology, the Netherlands belong to the continental European type.

²⁴ In this “institutional area”, Amable (2003: 149-160) uses a number of indicators related to the structure of social protection.

Let's risk the assumption here that, by introducing political regulation, power relationships and industrial relations systems, one would probably end up with the finding that, if it has any distinctive substantial content, 'flexicurity' fits only within certain types of capitalism. Whatever their important differences, both empirical examples studied in section 1 would pass the test of a negotiated national compromise with a majoritarian support leading to a *substantive balance* of security and flexibility among individual members of the workforce (and across households) (Barbier 2007a for Denmark).

On both counts, for instance (i.e. the institutionalization of new compromises in society and the existence of institutional complementarities between 'institutional areas') it would appear that flexicurity has been put at the core of the Danish system in the last decade, on the basis of a deeper and longer historical legacy. For the Netherlands, the passing of a new societal compromise is also well documented; how this fits into a wider complementarity with social protection also appears rather established, but with a different compromise, where women are not treated in an equal position within households. By contrast, the French situation cannot really be seen as having yielded any new compromise so far, at a time when fragmentation (social protection and labour market) and inequality have increased (Barbier, 2007d). In this sense, the invention of a flexicurity system has still to emerge in this country – notwithstanding its insertion in table 7 as a country of the continental 'flexicurity' cluster. To add another extreme example, the recent introduction of 'WorkChoices', an Australian reform that allows for a complete 'opt-out' of employers and employees from labour law, can hardly pass as a type of 'flexicurity' where flexibility is at its maximum and security scores zero. We need now to turn to the right part of table 8 and deal with a complementary aspect of 'flexicurity', i.e. its politics.

The importance of politics for 'flexicurity': a new référentiel?

We have just seen that the concept of 'flexicurity' – if it can be eventually grasped – has to be intrinsically political. In table 8, we mention actors and their strategies and political discourses: their politics have to be included in the comprehension of 'flexicurity' as one 'universal' system (or many national systems), but we also have to focus on the contribution the EU-level makes to 'flexicurity' policies and politics. Additionally it is important to also consider the role researchers play as experts in various forums and networks that deal with flexicurity.

As in many other social matters, an opposition between the national and the European levels is obvious. At national level, even when they are not termed explicitly so, the matters related to 'flexicurity' are hotly debated; by contrast, at EU-level, the now classical process of de-politicization (Radaelli 2003) seems to prevail. However, as will be seen, the opposition is not so simple. In national

politics, the contrast between France and Denmark is again prominent. In Denmark, although a divide and competition exists among parties and politicians about ‘flexicurity’, as we saw in section 1, Left and Right seem to combine in the common objective of reconciling the twin goals by implementing reforms over which they consult with one another; true, they implement different *policies*, but the general logic of the *system* remains unchanged. In France, by contrast, fierce opposition exists to the principle of ‘flexicurity’ not only from extreme-left parties, but also from a significant part of one of the bigger unions. This is the case of CGT, of which only a fraction militates for the introduction of a ‘wage-earner status’, which would oblige employers to keep employment contracts alive during transitions, until employees have found another job²⁵. CFDT, the other big union, militates in favour of more sectoral reforms to “secure” the transitions from one to another job, and it stays cautious vis-à-vis the ‘flexicurity’ framework. On the other hand, the employers’ associations are in favour of introducing new contracts with less obligations for employers in case of individual or collective dismissals. The large conflict sparked off by the introduction of the new contract for the young (*contrat première embauche*, CPE) in spring 2006 was a typical conflict for the refusal of the sort of ‘flexicurity’ the French government was trying to introduce without negotiating with the unions. These basic oppositions constitute a huge obstacle on the road to what would amount to a combined transformation of France’s ‘social dialogue’ and labour code. Hurdles are downplayed when ‘flexicurity’ is seen as the potential generalization of ‘best practice’ examples: this is for instance the case of Auer and Gazier (2006) who, convincingly detailing the real benefits of a selected group of sectoral reforms in France, tend to avoid the difficult question of their political pre-conditions. An EU-level general definition of a flexicurity strategy, like the one suggested by Wilthagen’s definition, leaves open a great number of normative and political questions which can only be solved by discussions and confrontations between political actors and social partners at national level: to take just one example, this definition normatively privileges “the careers and biographies of workers with a relatively weak position” (European Commission 2006b: 77). Hence, a sociological approach to ‘flexicurity’ should explicitly recognize its politically conflictual aspect and should be able to map out the various interests of various groups towards reform at a given point: for instance, women and men, low skilled employees and the self-employed, civil servants with jobs for life and so on, owners of capital and workers, etc.

The French case briefly mentioned here is no exception in ‘continental’ as well as in ‘liberal’ Europe: by contrast, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries rather appear as exceptions. Consequently, the EU-level de-politicized ap-

²⁵ The question of how the funding of such a proposal could be possible has not been explained in detail so far.

proach of ‘flexicurity’ is unlikely to bridge national controversies based on the confrontation of powerful interests. Additionally the politics of flexicurity take place at EU-level, while, on a formal basis, the present approach in forums and arenas tend to underestimate their role. Whereas the political and industrial relations dimension is clearly set as one of the crucial items in Madsen’s (2006) definition²⁶, the translation of the debate to the EU-level has tended to avoid it or mention it only perfunctorily. In their recent documents, the Commission and the Council tend to display a de-politicized version of ‘flexicurity’ that apparently ignores politics, while they, themselves, as actors, are nevertheless fully-fledged participants in the political debate over the development of European capitalisms.

This empirical fact is well documented (Barbier 2004). It must be stressed that the reference to flexibility and security has been present for a long time in the various prescriptive frameworks adopted by EU institutions since the Delors White Paper adopted by the Council in 1993. Vague references were already present in the 1994 Essen priorities and the normative necessity of a “balance” between flexibility and security appeared in the first Amsterdam European Employment Strategy guidelines in Autumn 1997. The history of the new interest for this balance in the last years remains to be told²⁷. To contribute to this analysis, we will present an assumption to explain the emergence of the theme at EU-level. This assumption certainly is, by itself, unable to account for the whole story but we think it is part of it.

At a time when ‘flexicurity’ figured higher and higher on the Commission’s agenda, at the end of 2006, a special item was added to the Eurobarometer survey. The way it was done, we think, shed an interesting light over EU-level politics. In its Eurobarometer October 2006 survey (p. 14-15), the Commission inserted a section labelled “Europeans’ approval of the concept of flexicurity” and concluded it by saying that “a large majority of citizens agree with all the proposals and thus indirectly agree with the concept of ‘flexicurity’ (between 72% and 88%)”. The proposals interviewees were deemed to agree with were pre-

²⁶ In Amable’s approach, as we have already noted, the system of wage-setting is explicitly part of the definition of the Scandinavian type of capitalism.

²⁷ One of the important recent communications was made by V Spidla, the Commissioner for Employment and social affairs, on the 14th of September, 2005 [speech/05/506] where he argued: “The Nordic ‘flexicurity’, which has quickly become ‘this month’s special offer’ in the supermarket of ideas, is first of all this overall coherence between social security systems, the respective roles played by the government and the social parties, between employment policy and the workings of the labour market.” (Speech/05/506, September, 14th). He concluded that Member states were to increase their economies and societies’ flexibility precisely through the introduction of new securities. From the end of 2005, the ‘flexicurity’ question was on the agenda of a number of meetings during the year 2006.

sented them one by one, within the frame of a single question²⁸. The interpretation along which the survey demonstrates an “indirect” support for ‘flexicurity’ is methodologically difficult to accept from a sociological point of view. However, when seen from the point of view of politics, this statement appears as a classical exercise of ‘political communication’. It is important to recall here that, after the double failure of the referendums in France and the Netherlands over the project for a constitutional treaty in 2005, the Commission decided to step up its communication policy. As the Spring Summit report went: “Last but not least, with only a few exceptions, public ownership of the Lisbon growth and jobs strategy falls short. Media coverage has also been fairly limited. We cannot yet say, therefore, that broad sections of the population have been made aware, let alone taken ownership, of the strategy. This points to the need for a dedicated communication strategy, making full use of economic analysis and showing how action will bring real benefits for individual citizens. Similarly, social partners, who have an important role to play both as participants in the process and as message multipliers, should become more actively involved in the governance process.” (European Commission 2006a:7). In other words, the Commission attributed European citizens’ indifference or hostility to the Lisbon strategy to their insufficient information. Implicitly, this argument, at least as a partial one, was also used to account for the failure of the referendums in the Netherlands and in France in 2005.

Issued during the same period, *Employment in Europe* (2006) conveys an analysis which is strikingly convergent with this political analysis of the Commission. Notwithstanding the sophisticated analysis of ‘flexicurity’ proposed in the document, the “political” argumentation that serves as a framing²⁹ to the analysis can be summarized as follows: (1) because of the “challenge of globalisation”, Europeans fear flexibility [“large segments of the public seem to have come to the conclusion that there is an irreconcilable dichotomy” (id.: 75) between flexibility and security; “anxieties about job losses and downward pressure on wages and working conditions” (id.: 75) dominate]. (2) This leads to problems of “political feasibility” of reform (id.:112). (3) the “concept of flexicurity”, is useful because it calls “for appropriate combination of policies” (id.:112); hence the emergence of “a growing interest in the promotion and implementation across Member States of ‘flexicurity principles’” (id.: 75). Consequently, the innovation brought by the Commission in 2006 does not lie in the

²⁸ These were: « regular training improves one’s job opportunities »; « life time jobs with the same employer are a thing of the past »; « Being able to change easily from one job to another is a useful asset to help people find a job nowadays »; « Work contracts should become more flexible to encourage job creation »; « In [OUR COUNTRY] many people retire too early » (QC 18: please tell me, for each of the following statements to what extent you agree or disagree with it).

²⁹ It is set at the beginning of the introduction and in the conclusions of chapter 2 of the *Employment in Europe* issue.

substantive content of the Lisbon strategy, already present from 1993/4 on; on the contrary it lies directly in the *wording* and the use of the “concept of flexicurity”. Typically this can be seen as the search for a new *référentiel* à la Jobert (1998).

This innovation, (i.e. adopting the word *flexicurity*), it must be noted, did not occur by chance and at any moment. It was also supported by governments from countries like Denmark (see the quotation by Anders Fogh Rasmussen in section 1) all active in what can be seen as a ‘war between social models’ at EU level between Member States (Barbier 2005a; Théret 2005). It happened at a moment when the Commission – destabilised by the consequences of the Dutch and French referendums – has been trying with much difficulty to counter its decrease of power and (especially for the ‘social actors’ within the Commission) to fight against the relative depreciation of the OMC processes in the social domain. Hence, at the end of the day, it may well be the case that the activity initiated by the Commission (and approved by the Council) could be seen as a ‘political communication’ exercise, to try and overcome some of the consequences of the 2005 shock. Would this happen, the potential development of a new cognitive frame (*référentiel*), really instrumental, would be possible.

However, the gap between the apparently de-politicized framing and wording of the ‘flexicurity’ question found in EU documents³⁰ appears very clearly when one compare them with the substance of debates held in the European Parliament specialised commissions; in early 2007, the Employment and Social affairs Commission discussed ‘flexicurity’ in March and April³¹: in the March session, the Commission discussed the Green Paper and heard a report by Eurofoundation experts G. Vermeulen and J. Hurley³²; representatives of the Alliance of Liberal and Democrats of Europe (ALDE) and of the European Popular Party (EPP) mentioned that the notion of ‘flexicurity’ was “utterly artificial because flexibility and security were contradictory”, while other MEPs thought that, despite its artificial character, it was possible to bring it to life; the Swedish President of the Commission mentioned that it was essential that all stakeholders should participate in the reform process so that street demonstrations could be avoided, and he raised the question as to whether there was a real “added value” for the European level in the matter. The Greek representative of the GUE/NGL group (which groups, inter alia, communist MEPs) was not convinced and thought that ‘flexicurity’ was akin to ‘flexploitation’.

³⁰ This discourse is displayed in various other documents, like for instance the more dedicated EES documents (for example, see the ‘Draft Joint employment report’, (6076/07, Feb, 7, 2007).

³¹ Minutes by *Confrontations (Brussels)*, March 21st, 2007, and April 11 and 12.

³² “Varieties of flexicurity: reflections on key elements of flexibility and security”, Eurofoundation, 21.3.2007.

In the light of such political controversy, which adequately mirrors the national debates in some Member states, it seems that the political dimension of ‘flexicurity’ should be, from a sociological point of view, more clearly addressed. And indeed, it should also be addressed at EU-level, as the analysis above in terms of ‘political communication’ hints at: we think that, after the 2005 debates in France and the Netherlands in 2005 (along with large debates in other countries about the ‘Services Directive’), an analysis that only focus on the ‘depoliticized’ aspects of EU-level coordination of social policy (or the ‘European social model’ policies) will remain flawed.

Finally, we would like to note briefly that the political nature of the EU-level policy discussions and processes have not been sufficiently taken into account so far in the interdisciplinary community of academics who engage in contractual research with the Commission (Barbier 2005a; 2007e). As table 8 clearly shows, academics – including of course this author – are often participants in the political processes. They ‘naturally’ participate in the production of the Commission’s documents. When they are parties to research contracts, they are obliged to also produce ‘policy reports’ and ‘policy lessons’ for the Commission or their national governments. One too often tends to neglect that documents produced by the Commission are always political, exactly just as OECD ones are political documents – because the OECD is a political organisation with a political agenda dominated by the United States. Actually in both cases ‘hybrid’ documents are produced, with a varying mix of political dimensions and orientations and of analytical stuff drawn from academic research: the Employment in Europe 2006 (chapter 2) report is a striking example of this situation, as was analysed above. For economists, this is often not seen as a big problem, but for historical sciences (following Passeron 2006), we have proposed a number of guidelines to try and keep boundaries as clear as possible between research and politics: (1) an internal (independent) debate within the community should be preserved, which entails the necessity of distinguishing between standards for different types of texts, and different evaluation procedures and actors for such evaluation; (2) against the political tendency to select facts and sometimes twist them according to interests, researchers have to fight for the acceptance and the respect of (for) facts, even ‘annoying facts’ as Max Weber once said (1992: 129³³); (3) thirdly, also against the political practice, they have to be extremely rigorous in establishing causality; (4) this leads to a fourth guideline, which we have tried to abide by in the present text, and which calls for the precision of notions and concepts; (5) and finally, again following Passeron (2006: 46), we social scientists have to defend ourselves from a certain danger of interpretative fantasy, a fantasy indeed very present in political forums and networks.

³³ « *faits désagréables* » in French.

3– Conclusion: a macro-concept of ‘flexicurity’?

From the above discussion, a picture emerges: notably because its insertion in the political debate, and its very birth as a political discourse notion in the Netherlands as well as its hybrid usage later in Denmark and on a wider European level, the concept of ‘flexicurity’ has still to be worked more in-depth. We hope to have brought here some more clarity to it, although we are certainly conscious that we brought only suggestions as to a possible connection/association of the concept with social science ‘regulation’ theories. In any case, at present, as a consequence of the definitional uncertainty, the analytical comparative assessment (across countries) of existing/ future strategies/policies for achieving some form of ‘flexicurity’ arrangements (system) is extremely tricky.

As is clear from the political usage by the Commission, the innovative notion of ‘flexicurity’ brings undeniable advantages with itself. It is potentially a new cognitive framework that could last more than for a political communication exercise. Quite apart from the furthering of special political interests, ‘flexicurity’ studies have been a challenge to doing more social science research and more precise comparison. But, on the other hand, from a political sociology point of view, it has also important drawbacks for rigorous policy analysis.

More research, we suggest, is necessary to tell whether ‘flexicurity’ will appear in a few years as a modish notion, or if it will be possible to define it more clearly. The essential stake, to us, lies in the *wertfrei* comparison of systems across Europe and the United States. The assumptions we have made here tend to let us think that ‘flexicurity’ could be seen as a *specific complementarity of institutional domains, which would only be present in certain types of contemporary capitalism*; these complementarities can also be analysed in terms of political exchange and compromises between social actors through the debate over new formulations of policies (some leading to substantive trade-offs, some to conflicts of power, some even to blocked situations where no compromise is possible). In this sense, despite its uneasy connection with politics and its proliferating fuzzy usage, ‘flexicurity’ could be seen as a useful identifier of certain characteristics of certain labour market and social protection systems within certain political conditions. Otherwise, the concept will probably fade away rapidly, once its innovative political content is exhausted.

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