**Chapter 1: Introduction: What Are European Social Problems?**

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**1.1 Introduction**

It is the morning of June 24th, 2016. The UK has just voted to leave the European Union. This is one of the most momentous historical events to occur in Europe since the end of the Second World War. It breaks a pattern of European integration that many hoped would ensure that conflict, bloody or otherwise, would disappear from the continent. For Britain, in particular, the consequences may radically change the direction of the policies that has shaped its institutions for decades. Furthermore, it could lead to the break-up of the United Kingdom (UK) and the possibility of an independent Scotland.

The last time that the UK suffered a crisis of global identity and insecurity was over sixty years ago. This followed the well-known withdrawal from Suez. The Suez crisis triggered an awareness that Britain’s global power status was fading and with it control of the Empire. Churchill’s famous ‘three circle’ strategy, denoting Britain’s intention to maintain influence in the three spheres of Empire, Europe and the Atlantic alliance suffered a terminal break-down. From this point onwards, reluctantly and dragging its feet, the UK recognised that Britain’s primary economic and political interests resided with its European neighbours. As the Empire collapsed in the 1960’s European integration grew as it moved from a European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) to the European Economic Community (EEC). The UK was pragmatically drawn towards the EEC and yet remained politically sceptical of joining a pan-European organisation with the potential to override its own sovereignty.

There has always been a political and cultural ambiguity about the British relationship with Europe. Significant as the referendum decision of the British people might well prove to be (soon no longer to be citizens of Europe but solely subjects of the Crown), the outcome should perhaps not be a surprise. Despite a shift towards the European ‘circle’ after 1956, Britain did not join the original ECSC and fudged membership of the EEC in 1961/2 and 1967/8. When they did finally join, in 1972, a referendum was soon called by 1975 to see whether or not they ought to stay in the then renamed European Community (EC). On this occasion the vote was a resounding ‘Remain’.

The history of the UK and it relationship with the various political institutions of Europe (which today, of course, we know as the European Union (EU)), has been a turbulent one. Most of the arguments that had finally won over the British politicians and public to accept full membership of the EEC in the 1970’s had been pragmatic. Being closer to Europe politically was a necessary evil in order to gain economically. This argument finally fell apart in 2016. Yet despite the UK apparently wrenching itself from the Common Market, as well as the political and legal framework of the EU, this historic change of direction has much less impact on *social* issues. The social problems which the whole of Europe still faces, ‘Remain’. Despite the potential economic and political upheaval of ‘Leave’, the social issues which have emerged as pan-European since the Second World War will not change. They are not dependent upon the UK’s membership of the EU nor, on the EU itself staying as currently is. Whether it is Brexit or Nexit or any other change to the organisational structure of the EU, the construction of social problems as European problems, is now sedimented. Organised crime, social protest, migration, religious tension, poverty, unemployment, homophobia, health and educational inequalities and all of the many topics you will find in this text all have a European dimension to their character, proliferation and possible policy resolution that will not suddenly do away.

As we have argued in our first text, *Social Problems in the UK: An Introduction,* (Isaacs:2015), social problems, while intertwined with economic and political problems may be distinguished from them. This is because the types of issues discussed in this context require an understanding of their historical construction, policy development and sociological dimension. For (a simple) example, approaches to migration will differ according to the historical-cultural acceptance of ‘others’, constructing a particular discourse around immigration. So it is that the language that surrounds debates about immigration needs analysis from a social science point of view. In the UK refugees have gradually come to be defined in predominantly negative/sceptical terms as ‘asylum seekers’. The exception to this is when tragedy occurs. Then the term ‘refugee’ tends to be restored. In countries where there is a different social context a subtly different discourse emerges. So we find that in Ireland the more positive/accepting terms ‘Asylum finders’ and ‘New Irish’ are often deployed.

Discussions about the social construction of migrants or, indeed, any of the topics set out here, requires not just an economic or political analysis to understand them but one from the point of view of the social sciences too.

In this text, then, you will find an argument that European social problems are a distinctive set of issues, entangled with but relatively autonomous from economic and political debates. European social problems are also not defined here as issues that are only found within the EU’s member states. In the chapters that follow it is maintained that European social problems may be separate from the policies or organisational concerns of the European parliament, its courts, the European Commission and so on. Just as in our previous text it was argued that UK social problems are not defined by what government prioritises or what might be newsworthy debates, so here European social problems are defined as a matter of social research concern, identified by the authors. To go further it may be added that while the idea of a ‘social Europe’ has been a much discussed issue in academic literature over the past twenty years or more, the reality is that the EU barely touches upon social issues except where they affect labour laws within its jurisdiction. Therefore, any meaningful discussions about European social problems must go well beyond the limited horizons of the EU. The understanding of ‘Europe’ used in this book is much broader and opaque than the boundaries provided by the EU. So much so that it could be argued that while this text is the first to examine European social problems from a social science point of view, it does so while arguing it is not possible to have a catch-all definition of ‘Europe’ at all.

**1.2 Europe: a theory**

There is no such thing as Europe. But there are European social problems. How can these two statements make logical sense? The premise of this text is that Europe is an unstable, contingent, shifting entity. A brief history of Europe, even over the last thirty years or so, would be enough to illustrate this. Nation-states come and go. Territorial boundaries change regularly. The volatile Balkans is often the most graphic example of this. This instability goes back over 500 years (Larrabee, 1992: Ascherson, 1995) and was accelerated after the end of the Cold War with a rebirth of nations and the break-up of Yugoslavia. But it is not merely geographical boundaries that alter with such changes. The constitutive and fluid dynamic of regions brings into question the integrity of the state. If the state cannot be relied upon to be a focus for continuity then a broader framework of analysis is needed to understand regional political and social issues. This has been recognised across the social sciences, even in the normally conservative and realist area of security studies (Buzan & Hansen, 2009).

The internal coherence of countries also resides on shifting sands. In the 1920’s during the Weimar period, social theorists like Weber and Heller were desperate to establish liberal democracies in Europe as a way to avoid war and political extremism. Weber argued that only a limited ballot-box democracy; that allowed for the expression of a very narrow range of political views could do this. Heller maintained that a basic social homogeneity was necessary in order to make the stability of modern democracies possible. Ultimately they both admitted that such a project was unlikely to succeed given the increasing heterogeneity of Europe. This can be illustrated today by the Scottish independence movement in the UK, Basque regionalism and the Catalan call for autonomy. The federalism of France and Germany are set up to try to negotiate this lack of social homogeneity. Elsewhere in countries like Italy and Ireland the lack of state penetration builds in tensions between polities and ‘clients’.

Institutional and cultural haziness are also characteristics of modern European states. The ability of state institutions to make unilateral decisions has been highly questioned, in relation to globalisation and localised decision-makers. The implementation of state policy is similarly fragmented in practice. Cultural heterogeneity is an influence on the way that centralised state prescription fails to function universally. In some regions this may be partly due to the increase in multicultural and multi-faith identities, as well as changes to occupational roles and social class. The rise of a fragile sense of identity, as Guy Standing has noted in his work on the ‘Precariat’, is prevalent among European populations.

To write of ‘Europe’, then, as simply and transparently synonymous with the EU would be a reduction of a complex truth. ‘Europe’ is a construct, a meaning for an empty vessel that is bounded only by a hazy regional boundary and abstracted only generally from the continents it does not geographically define. In this text the contestation is that any notion of Europe must be open to particular contextual understanding. Many European states are connected by formal, legal and institutional ties, not only through the EU. However, internal tensions within states at a political, institutional and cultural level means that these formalised arrangements are not sufficient to synthesise Europe into a single fixed object of study. It could not be otherwise, unless we were to ignore the heterogeneous make-up of Europe at multiple levels: local, national and regional

For any thorough comparative analysis of European countries to take place different levels of analysis are needed. A monolithic notion of ‘Europe’ would be a very crude perspective indeed, one that does not mirror the diversity of experience of modern Europeans. Rather at the very least a sense of the inter-relatedness of local, national and regional analysis has to be part of any discussions around ‘Europe’ given that we can only speak of and analyse parts of what is associated with Europe in particular contexts.

This argument impacts upon social issues and social problems as it points us towards a position where the most pressing European social concerns can be said to be based around diversity and this fragile sense of definition and identity: issues of class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, poverty, wealth, health, housing and all the related social problems to be found in this book. All these social problems have at their heart the question of convergence and difference. In other words, it is the very lack of a homogenous, single objectifiable Europe that makes an understanding of European social problems all the more urgent. A recognition of the diversity, heterogeneity and need for various levels of analysis is a necessary context for exploring social problems that appear common across Europe.

Many decades ago Michael Oakeshott, writing as a political philosopher, noted that the character of the European state, since its modern emergence in the Sixteenth century, had never had a complete or fixed identity but was always, ‘an association in the making’ (OHC 196/7). By this he did not mean that Europe was still incomplete as a single political entity. Nor that it was on some kind of teleological journey to become whole. Rather, he was voicing the very same non-foundational point of view set out here that Europe will always be, ‘in the making’. It can never be complete because politics is never complete. It resides, as Oakeshott famously stated, ‘on a boundless and bottomless sea’.

Perhaps the most well-known thesis that best captures the sense of Europe that is being proposed here is in Benedict Anderson’s notion of nation-states being, ‘imagined communities’. This classic argument maintains that nation-states are socially constructed entities based around the same core perception of a people, however different the nuances of their ideas about nationhood might be. (Anderson: 1991) Without wishing to diverge into discussions about the theoretical premise and arguments of Anderson’s work, of which there have been many, suffice to say that here the social construction of ‘Europe’ is taken as a matter of perception among individuals, social cleavages, political actors and the media in the same general manner that Anderson understands nation-states. These perceptions may differ and clash in many respects but these over-riding arguments do not disrupt the underlying foundations upon which the debate engages. So, for example, for all their differing points of view about the EU from the ‘Leave’ and ‘Remain’ camps in the UK, they were able to converse because they shared a basic common ground regarding their construction of the role of the EU.

Philosophically, historically and conceptually it has been argued above that ‘Europe’ is a construct. Speaking more recently, with the voice of political practice, the great German sociologist Jurgen Habermas has similarly stated that nation-states in Europe are becoming more and more fragmented. This, he argues, also affects their capacity to act politically (Juncture, IPPR, March 2014). Since the periods when Oakeshott and Anderson were first setting out their arguments it has become more and more of a mainstream position in political theory and political science to assume that nation-states are not singular political actors. Rather theories of governance have arisen that understand political and social change being enacted in terms of a network of policy making institutions operating at various levels from local to global. Alongside this sits NGO and informal networks of power, be they social movements or organised criminal gangs. This myriad and non-linear understanding of how policy and practice emerges can be said to be the broad working model of contemporary studies in European politics and society. It is into this body of literature that this text on European social problems fits.

It is, then, argued here that Europe ought to be understood as constructed and contextualised in particular debates. The discourses on European social problems can, it reasonably follows, include or exclude particular nation-states without setting limits or boundaries as to what constitutes ‘Europe’. In this text you will find that countries including Kazakhstan and Turkey may be included in ‘Europe’. While at other times Europe appears as Western Europe or North, South, West but not Eastern Europe. Europe is throughout this text taken as a fluid, ambiguous construct of which, say, the EU is just one construct, a ‘nodal point’ (Laclau:1990, Torfing:1999) but not a foundational one. There is, in this sense, no such thing as Europe. What we take to be Europe (and what each author in this book means by Europe) is a matter of debate and contestation around particular sets of issues.

Such an understanding of Europe goes against realist, empiricist, legalistic and political constitutionalist views. It opens up a more creative debate for the range of social sciences that are presented in this text. It also paves the way for a discussion of social problems away from narrow economist terms and towards issues of social justice that dominate debates within the social sciences. In this way this text continues the perspective of our previous book on UK social problems and issues (Isaacs: 2015). The methodology of social construction that framed that text is still to be found here in the notion of Europe given above. However, the emphasis here is now much more on the problem-solving, policy dimension of social problems and the role of social science in analysing these (see below). Authors in this text diverge in terms of their explicit application of social construction as a over-riding theory or methodology, although it is consistent in relation to the notion of ‘Europe’ that is articulated in each chapter.

**1.3** **Social Problems**

The approach to Europe as an ‘imagined’ fluid construct that arises out of the acknowledged heterogeneity of European actors, institutions and structures can also be associated with the societal failure of Europe in the twentieth century. This failure provoked two world wars. As mentioned above, the subsequent desire to aspire to an ideal of a stable integrated Europe where mutual interests and enterprise would mitigate armed conflict led eventually to the EU. However, this new Europe became an ideological battle-ground itself between politicians, polities and parties. Many saw the new post-war Europe as more or less able to solve a range of social issues around inequality, social justice and citizenship. This increasingly became the hope of many social policy commentators (Ginsburg: 1997). However, just as the idea of a ‘social Europe’ was emerging so too was the influence, first, of the New Right and then neo-liberalism which began to dominate the agendas of many European countries from the 1980’s. As the contemporary European political and social debate grew on all ideological sides the discourse about social issues began to generate the problems it sought to fix. Issues of work, crime, poverty, health, immigration, education and so on were seen to have a core thread as common European experiences as European institutions, research and communications spread. Whatever the varied political views that play out in today’s European debates, sceptics and pro-Europeans and all those between, all argue on the same grounds with the assumption that there are European social problems. As Brexit has revealed, across Europe there are those that seek to mitigate these European social problems by completely withdrawing from intergrationalist agendas and rather seek to strengthen their own national laws and autonomy. And then there are other polities that seek to further European integration to remedy some of these issues. In all the countries of Europe, though, this polarised debate exists in multiple forms between parties and people and the national media, creating a perennial tension about how to resolve European social problems.

The theoretical approach that informs what has been maintained regarding Europe and European social problems also defines what we mean here as a general social problem A social problem in this text is taken by the authors as historically, culturally and contextually constructed. Social problems are not fixed or given and they change over time. Why we might choose to study or discuss one issue as a pressing problem is a matter for judgment and argument. Judgements tend to come from our ethical sensibilities. Arguments about social problems are, therefore, always politicised. Most often they are based upon our ideas about social justice. However, as social scientists we cannot make claims about the importance of a particular social problem without citing social research. This may be quantitative or qualitative but it is usually both. Quantitative evidence alone cannot justify the urgency of a social problem. We do not choose to focus on a particular social problem because of how many people it affects. If we did we would not look at issues that affect a minority of people but which we find needs discussion on the grounds of social justice. Social problems emerge for a variety of immediate reasons. But underlying the concern is usually the perception of a threat to our social structures. This perception may come from politicians, the media or on-going public debate. Many social problems have existed for a great deal of time. Even if they are not at a current, particular moment of public debate issues such as poverty, racism, organised crime, unemployment, old age, discrimination on grounds of disability, mental health and so on are latent conflicts within European societies. So while social problems come and go as public discussion shifts many of the core problems of modern capitalist societies have persisted for decades. In this way some agreement about social problems is not too difficult to identify. It is how to go about resolving social problems that causes much more varied, politicised and passionate debate.

The social problems chosen by the authors in this book, as well as the sub-topics within these, are a matter of knowledge and judgement. In the social sciences there will, of course, always be disagreements about which concerns are the greatest. In so far as each of these authors are specialists in their field, the issues chosen sum up the current state of debate regarding some of the most pressing social problems that face Europeans today. A brief summary of the chapters is given below.

**1.4 Chapter Summary**

In the UK a number of commentators observed that the referendum on European membership was fundamentally a vote about immigration. Immigration has, arguably, been the most dominant debate in Europe for nearly two decades and an ever-present social issue since the end of the Second World War. Given that immigration has been and continues to be such a dominant European social problem, ‘Part One’ of this text groups together a number of chapters that discuss this and the related issue of multiculturalism.

Following the introductory first chapter, Ginsburg begins chapter two by outlining the key features and controversies of immigration within Europe over recent years. In so doing he takes a case study and comparative approach looking at Germany, Sweden, Hungary, and then turns to the EU. In his analysis of European migration he points to both ’welcoming’ and ‘exclusionary’ constructions of refugees/migrants in these instances and the social issues of Islamophobia and racism. In the third chapter, Matt Scott looks at the way migrants have been socially constructed in Europe. He picks up on the themes set out by Ginsburg, most notably the way migration is organised around two foci: border issues, often referred to by the shorthand of ‘Fortress Europe’; and integration issues, including more permeable notions of the EU as ‘gatekeeper’. Scott argues that migrants have been constructed in various ways including as ‘proto-terrorists’ and as various ‘health threats’. The policy solutions that have emerged to then quell these ‘moral panics’ have perpetuated the development of insular and xenophobic discourses of crisis, constructing a sharp polarity between ‘us and them’, which has led to a much contested politics of immigration control. The controversy pertaining to immigration within Europe is concluded by a reflection on issues of multiculturalism and multi-faith societies. In chapter four, Haynes undertakes an investigation into how Islam in Europe has been reconstructed since the waves of Muslim migration in the 1970’s and 1980’s. After first considering Western Europe in general, the author undertakes particular studies of the UK and France. Haynes points to a remodelling and re-assumption of our understanding of the public roles of Islam and religion in Europe. And he examines this new dynamic relationship and looks at its impact on notions of European citizenship.

Overall the authors of these chapters argue that despite the divergent social contexts and policy directions discussed there is some convergence between previously differing societal responses to immigration that tends towards a greater degree of social tension and conflict.

The social issues that make up ‘Part Two’ of the book come under the broad heading of ‘inequalities’. Of course, almost all the social problems discussed here have some aspect of broad inequalities about them. However, the areas collected here all relate specifically to issues of wealth, income and class.

Chapter five opens by assessing the evidence that seems to indicate that inequalities are increasing in cities across Europe. Evidence from Stockholm to Paris, and London to Istanbul demonstrates the recent growth in socio-spatial inequalities and segregation. Lewis reviews debates concerning the growing social polarisation and the social class restructuring of European cities. A case study of growing poverty and inequality and the ‘residualisation’ of social housing in London is used to illustrate this. Debates concerning the ethnic segregation of cities are also examined.

This debate is continued in chapter six where McDonough maintains that over the past two decades Europe has seen a tumultuous period of insecure employment. The expansion of the EU, the financial collapse, and the emergence of new forms of information and communication technologies, have all made work ‘precarious’. European business has also changed, now able to operate across different countries giving prevalence to a new ‘shrinking’ and arguably much ‘smaller’ Europe. This chapter discusses the impact of these recent shifts and looks at how they are fundamentally affecting what we understand as paid employment. It explores the social impact and the new social problems arising out of the changing relationship between work, employment, unemployment and mediating technologies.

Inequalities are approached from a slightly different perspective by Newton in chapter seven. Here the author considers the four ‘d’s’ relating to health inequalities; diabetes, depression, dementia and death. In each case she points to the reason why these often individualised issues are, in fact, social problems. Moreover the argument continues that there is a sociological character to these health concerns largely correlated with social class. As such, it is not only the stigmatised individual that ought to be targeted by health agencies, but government policies aimed at us all.

Part three of this text tackles education. This is not merely undertaken in terms of schooling but is associated with the broader social construction of childhood and learning through multiple agencies. The section begins with chapter eight which concerns a critical appraisal of the dynamic between early childhood and schooling by Blundell and Abegglen. They start from the findings of successive Unicef reports that presents some striking contrasts in children’s views on their well-being across the continent. The chapter critiques the assumption of a universal childhood as an ‘ideal form’ by examining the validity of the view that a single narrative for the condition of childhood can be sustained. Education and schooling provides a context for the examination of this encounter between ‘ideal forms’ and the diversity of childhood experiences. The chapter concludes by looking at the prospects for modern childhood under conditions of rapid technological and political change in Europe.

Chapter nine broadens out the debate by enquiring into the relationship between digital technologies and education. This study is undertaken in the context of seeking to understand the issues involved in a Europe where the neo-liberal discourse dominates. Morales argues that this gives rise to a ‘digital divide’, which cross-cuts various social groups within Europe creating ‘digital haves’ and ‘digital have nots’. Moreover, this divide is getting gradually more complex and differentiated. The author argues that only structured policy decisions, potentially led by the EU, can address some of these problems in European education.

The final chapter in this section focuses upon the role of formal education in relation to children and young peoples’ identities as citizens of Europe. Blundell and Cunnigham argue that educational policy formation at a European level, and its enactment within nations is premised on presumptions of ‘shared values’ and a democratic system that assumes pluralism and active participation in society. However, competing conceptions of Europe and what it means to be European give challenge to this education project. In light of this, the chapter explores multiple and nested identities, with concern for both majority and minority groups, and argues that education can promote the voice of the ‘Other’ through active citizenship. Nevertheless, the project is fragile as interpretations of what values are shared may lead to policy and practice that is both assimilationist and excluding.

The concluding ‘Part Four’ of *European Social Problems* groups together a number of pressing social controversies. These last three chapters all concern social problems not yet raised but which have received a significant degree of heated debate over the last few years. First, in chapter eleven, Fitzgibbon notes that Europe has seen a number of direct action protest movements taking to the streets in recent years. These have been over diverse issues such as environmental concerns, perceptions of injustice in criminal justice, education changes and moves to criminalise squatters and travellers, to name but a few. These actions involve criminal trespass and violation of property, and engage young people drawn from the 'precariat'; largely young people from deprived communities, either in and out of insecure, low wage, unskilled employment or facing the prospect of such a status when leaving secondary education. The author examines recent case examples across Europe to critically apply the concept of the ‘precariat’ to understand the social problems posed by these rioters engaged in protests.

Chapter twelve continues upon the general terrain of crime and deviance by exploring how the European drugs problem is changing. Silverstone and Morgan focus on the threats from synthetic drugs and the new availability via online sources. They map out the distinctive trends in consumption of older drugs such as cannabis and cocaine, then the chapter moves on to discuss how preferences for illegal drugs are shared across social economic and ethnic categories. Drug trafficking is looked at and whether or not organised crime groups are involved in this discussed. Responses to drug trafficking show opposing paradigms of drug regulation across Europe. A comparative study of the UK and the Netherlands is undertaken to illustrate this. The advantages and disadvantages of both approaches are outlined and indications of where policy might be heading is set out.

The final chapter of the text centres on the controversy arising out of homophobia in Europe. According to Lopez there is evidence of a social ambivalence in Europe regarding the issue of homosexuality. In spite of the fact that European states are in general tolerant towards homosexuality, to be homosexual in some places in Europe is still a social problem. The author argues that homophobia exists in Europe at different levels and causes a devastating impact on the lives of individuals. Interpersonal and cultural homophobia manifests itself in physical and verbal aggression and is especially dramatic in some East European countries where sexual discrimination is not penalized (i.e. Russia, Belarus and Ukraine). Furthermore, homophobia in Europe is often a social norm and behaviour codes that enhance sexual discrimination are developed by governments, as well as education or religious institutions. This indicates the importance of the role of social and political institutions for bringing about change.