

**Research on ‘Open methods of coordination’ and national social policies: what  
sociological theories and methods?**

Paper for the RC 19 international conference,  
Paris, 2-4 September, 2004

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## 1. Introduction

The EES (European Employment Strategy) and other Open methods of coordination (OMCs) are a new brand of policies which are difficult to grasp from a sociological point of view; they lack many characteristics of traditional policies. Empirical material amply demonstrates the lack of consistence of the assumption that they would be futile. However, research about the EES and OMCs is in general full of traps and pitfalls. Some of them pertain to the fact that they are strange objects. Others are related to the difficult question of the empirical articulation existing and evolving between social and economic policies, in the context of the dominant mainstream economic discourse and of the role played by monetary policy under European Central Bank's control. In the published literature, assumptions made are seldom tested empirically, like for instance those according to which OMCs have substantively altered national social policies. Very often, normative approaches and analysis are not clearly distinguished. Potential effects are privileged as against actual, evidence-based effects. Yet after almost ten years of the construction of such policy instruments at EU-level, it is necessary to reflect about methods and theories of change. We will concentrate here on policies, leaving aside most of the relationships the OMCs have with politics and polities.

## 2. OMCs as strange objects

Since its first introduction seven years ago (1997), the EES has been consistently implemented and it was significantly reformed in 2003, for the period till 2006. Other OMCs (pensions, inclusion) have emerged since but the EES has remained the most elaborate and conspicuous. True, the very label 'OMC' was introduced later, in 2000, at the Lisbon summit. It should also be noted that before the OMC was canonically defined<sup>1</sup>, it had precedents: the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines – BEPG, that the Treaty (former article 103-2) organised, can be considered as another OMC<sup>2</sup>.

A growing body of sociological and political science literature has been trying to capture the ways and means by which national systems are, or are not, affected by these new supra-national processes. It has been relatively common to stress the innovative characteristics of such coordinations, when compared with older methods (the so-called 'Community method') (Zeitlin and Trubek 2003). Although undoubtedly participating into a renewed 'system of governance', they do not represent 'binding policies' that this emerging system could be endowed with the authority to enforce across Europe (Olsen 2001: 8). Yet the question of their binding character is but one of the problems raised.

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<sup>1</sup> "This method, which is designed to help Member States to progressively develop their own policies, involves: (1) fixing guidelines for the Union combined with specific timetables for achieving the goals which they set in the short, medium and long terms; (2) establishing, where appropriate, quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks against the best in the world and tailored to the needs of different Member States and sectors as a means of comparing best practice; (3) translating these European guidelines into national and regional policies by setting specific targets and adopting measures, taking into account national and regional differences; (4) periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review organised as mutual learning processes". (point 37 of the Lisbon summit conclusions).

<sup>2</sup> Similar coordination procedures have existed, but certainly less structured than some OMCs; it is the case of the 1994 OECD Job Strategy.

*Traditional policy analysis and OMCs*

A traditional policy analysis framework (Mény and Thoenig 1989: 130 ssq) defined a ‘policy’ as comprising five interrelated dimensions: (1) substance (i.e., resources used for goals); (2) a programme (a sustainable set of actions); (3) a normative orientation; (4) an element of coercion (including the legitimate monopoly of physical force); and (5) a jurisdiction or public affected by the policy. It is difficult to match this grid with the OMCs: although elements 2 and 3 can be considered, the adequacy of the other three elements is dubious. This classical policy analysis framework has been transformed by the focus put on the cognitive aspects of policies (Muller 2000; Sabatier and Schlager 2000). As will be shown later when analysing the features of the EES as a *possible* ideal-type for all OMCs, taking into account the cognitive aspects of policies makes OMCs more comparable to ‘traditional’ national policies, but certainly not similar. For instance, none of the OMCs involves any significant independent funding, and the very category of ‘implementation’ has, from their start, been problematic in all of them (Barbier 1998). No policy can be captured by identifying only its cognitive or normative dimensions: as Muller and Surel (1998: 15 – 32) convincingly argue, these dimensions, however prominent, are associated with concrete measures, substance, resources and systems of actors. The coercive factor remains a key aspect of policies, a factor which has no homologous equivalent at EU level. Eventually, all OMCs are based on national policies which are legitimated within national polities, with national states still in charge of the use of coercion.

Because OMCs are political discourses, analysing them in terms of the dissemination of norms and cognitive frameworks is quite cogent and fitting. With other EU policies, they share a characteristic, stressed by many researchers (Muller and Surel 1998: 100; Muller 2000: 204-205): they seem to more and more contribute to the *de-coupling*<sup>3</sup> of the sphere of policies and the sphere of the construction of social compromises social systems are based upon. In this respect, as we will see, OMCs can be – although of course falsely – easily seen as ‘technical’ or ‘a-political’. Yet they are, to a certain extent, *de-politicized*. In the French case, we have shown that the procedural success of the EES, among its very small group of elite actors, was linked to the fact that they adopted a *common de-politicized discourse* (Barbier and Sylla 2002; Barbier 2004a). Here we concur with Radaelli’s (2003) point, when, in opposition to those who contend that because the mainstream political discourse of the EU, a ‘liberal’ homogenisation of Europe is at work, he observes that “open coordination is embedded in the master discourse of competitiveness”, but at the same time that “one should not see the constrained nature of the OMC in purely negative terms. The constraints provide a culture of macro-economic stability within which social protection and employment policies are still feasible” (ibid.: 7). Hence, a tension is present at the very core of the OMCs, because whilst “there is no attempt to forge a European vision of capitalism” (ibid.: 20), it is all the more necessary to “avoid politicisation” (ibid.: 21).

A very common and quite natural bias in the general public tends to credit the EU-level with all sorts of wishful and fantastic objectives, possibilities and imputations. It is more surprising that, implicitly, this attitude is also present in the research literature when no

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<sup>3</sup> De-coupling is a general feature of the entire EU level system, as Mény (2004) notes “Dans la pratique, le découplage entre débats, programmes électoraux et politique européenne est presque total, à la fois en raison de la faiblesse – de l’inexistence diraient certains – d’une opinion publique européenne, de la faiblesse du Parlement et de sa médiocre influence sur une partie de l’exécutif européen, de l’absence de lien entre l’organe conseil des ministres et l’électorat ».

precise mechanisms and theories are proposed as to the impact or the transformations introduced by the OMC's innovation. Yet, attention to empirical facts and to mechanisms at work should be a minimal requirement.

A particularly difficult area where too little attention has been devoted to empirical questions has been the analysis of the interaction between economic and social policies (for the contrary, see Boyer and Dehove 2003). It is often postulated that, because of the well documented preponderance of economics, mainstream economic thought, economic interests and economic and financial actors, tentative elements of European social policies are deterministically bound either for demise or for mechanistic subordination to the market forces. Such an assumption is presented in many ways, from the idea of the installation of 'workfare states' instead of 'welfare states', where the rationale is "to subordinate social policy to the needs of labour market flexibility and/or the constraints of international competition" (Jessop 1996: 176), to the forecasting of an increased inclination of the present EU institutions towards what is often termed in the French debate as 'neo-liberalism' (Eymard Duvernay and al. 2003; Salais 2004).

*EES essentials: arguing, fighting and deciding about words and definitions of the world in arenas*

The cognitive dimension of the EES, here seen as the ideal-typical OMC, is obvious. This is probably why it is so easy to misunderstand it as 'symbolic' policy in Edelman's (1964) sense: whilst there certainly is a distinct symbolic dimension to it, the EES cannot be seen as mainly symbolic. Three aspects are important to stress here. The EES first gives birth to an extensive array of administrative and political activities: some of them at EU level, some at the national level. Secondly the EES appears as a political discourse (a highly jargonised<sup>4</sup> mix of sociological, political and economic statements) about the ways and means to devise and manage the developments of labour markets. But the EES would remain a pure fiction (a pure symbol, in a way) were it not explicitly grafted onto national policies, which are embedded in their existing systems of social protection.

*1 - Let's first envisage the empirical administrative and political activities.* All of them are based on the legal provisions of the Treaty, which bind all Member states (Title VIII). Under co-ordination from the relevant services in the Commission's DGs, EU-level and national activities have been gradually transformed into routine practices (entailing the production of reports, the writing of objectives, the design of indicators, the drafting and negotiation of recommendations, the management of interactions with other EU policies, etc.). Activities involve not only the relevant Commission administrative units, but also the Union's various bodies and institutions (the Council – in its various compositions; the Employment Committee, the Economic Policy Committee, but also the relevant social partners' or regional representations, the European Parliament, etc.). Introducing the EES has not entailed any significant altering in funding<sup>5</sup>. The EU budget concerned has come from mainstream Commission resources, a part of which being out-contracted to external experts and consultants (writing of reports, organisation of seminars, especially 'peer-review' meetings for exchanging 'good practice'). Because representatives of national administrations have been constantly involved in these activities, Member states have had to adjust their traditional work and functioning accordingly. Other actors – like for instance social partners' organisations – also have had to devote new resources to be able to participate in these

<sup>4</sup> Formulated in Eurospeak English, the EES discourse provides excellent examples of political cant.

<sup>5</sup> Although the subsequent introduction of a co-ordination with the European social fund (objective 3) has formally entailed an explicit streamlining of both policy objectives.

activities. Hence, the introduction of the EES first entails the creation of new interactive activities and procedures, and the transformation of certain actors' existing activities, at national level.

2 - *Secondly, the EES should be seen as a political discourse.* Its real substance should first be understood. Further, it is interesting to distinguish between the various types of social actors, how they interact and their roles with respect to the discourse (production, dissemination, etc.), and in what sort of settings they interact. The EES discourse is a description of policy goals in matters of employment and of the functioning of the labour markets (and related areas): it is perhaps important to stress that, because of the crucial importance economic assumptions and algorithms (or, to use Chen's categories (1990), normative theories of action), play within the discourse, its nature is often ambiguous; enunciating an economic strategy for the European labour markets may indeed pass at the same time as an apparently *technical* economic statement, and as a normative policy declaration.

### The political discourse's basic substance

Basically, the substance of the EES is organised into a 'cognitive framework'. This framework may change as time passes, according to political priorities. However, its main core elements have not moved much for the last ten years. When a first draft of an European strategy was conceived at the 1994 Essen summit, it displayed five priorities. The subsequent four pillars adopted in 1997 (employability; adaptability, entrepreneurship and equal opportunities) at the Luxembourg summit, were in fact a re-wording of the Essen priorities (Barbier 1998; Goetschy 1999). Later on, in 2003, the 'new' EES discourse was reorganised along three 'overarching objectives' (full employment; quality and productivity; social cohesion and inclusion). In 2003 as well as in 1997, so-called 'guidelines' have been associated with the pillars or the objectives: they have provided for a list of more detailed objectives, tailored to particular problems (for instance, fighting illegal work). Whilst there have been variations in the guidelines, and the introduction (or subtraction) of policy goals, the overall rationale has remained the same.

The standard political discourse runs as follows. In a context of presumed financial crisis of the systems of social protection – because of important demographic developments, external competition pressures, as well as the emergence of the knowledge society – European Member states should in priority address labour supply matters. Three main policy objectives should be pursued consistently: (i) increasing the employment rates, especially for certain categories – like women and the older employees; (ii) whilst social protection systems (and 'tax and benefit systems') constitute obstacles to an adequate flexible functioning of the labour market, measures should be taken in order to 'activate' people (as opposed to keeping them 'passive', hence the *welfare to work* rationale) and to 'make work pay', i.e. provide incentives for people to take jobs; an adequate environment should be looked for, which allows a combination of flexibility and the quality of jobs, and some sort of 'flexicurity' trade-off. Social policies hence have to be targeted on some groups, in particular the poorer sections of the working age population. (iii) the working age population should invest in their human capital. This discourse about employment and labour market issues is very appropriately consistent with what has come to be the mainstream policy-mix in Europe, but not in the USA (Fitoussi and Saraceno 2004). True, the European version of the discourse has its counterpart in the USA : however, there has been a clear difference between both: in the

European ‘consensus’<sup>6</sup>, a separation has been maintained between the macro economic strategy and the labour market and social policies. This feature explains that, in the European *discourse* – which obviously does not translate, as we will explore, automatically in practice – it has been required from the EES that it be, if not explicitly subordinated to – at least *consistent with* the BEPG (articles 128 and 99 of the Treaty).

In the current globalization process the search for labour market flexibility and welfare reform is obviously led by global competition and the role played by wages and related labour costs is prominent in all Member states (Barbier and Nadel 2000). Yet, to take only one example, the conception of ‘activation’ (Barbier 2002a; 2004b) and active policies have taken many meanings and they differ as to their design, outcomes, and actual implementation. The policy discourse which we have here sketched is all but neutral, all but technical and it conveys a specific normative choice among possible other policies, including with regard to the macro economic policies. However, as the EES discourse exemplifies a consensus which has been shared by all governments since the ‘paradigm’ change in economic policy (Hall 1993; Jobert 1994), it has been possible to use it as a relatively *de-politicized discourse*, irrespective of the partisan colours of the national governments in place.

### Arenas in Brussels

The discourse emerges as the product of a complex web of networks, forums and arenas. Following Jobert’s distinction (1998) about the different functions of forums (a place or a sphere where ideas are exchanged and discussed) and arenas (a place or a sphere where decisions are negotiated and eventually taken), we will concentrate here on a *particular arena* where – whatever the complex stream of influences coming from many sources, a limited number of actors decide over the formulation of the EES.

True, ideas, practical solutions, blueprints for possible guidelines, normative theories of action of policies and programmes, etc., come from a very diverse array of forums; for instance, inputs may take the form of reports, which are commissioned by such and such a particular actor (see for instance the 2003 so-called ‘Sapir report’ commissioned by Romano Prodi, about the issue of “making the economic system deliver”); the academic community – especially economists – also constantly produces inputs for the forums. These are but two examples of a proliferating process. Yet, because the EES discourse has to be eventually printed in decisions, communications and recommendations by the formal bodies of the EU system (mostly, the DGs in the Commission, the Committees and the Council), it can be expected that its *precise wording* would be the object of intense interaction, negotiations, horse-trading, compromises. Our empirical research<sup>7</sup> confirms this assumption extensively.

We can identify more precisely *the main arena where decisions about the wording of the EES discourse are ultimately taken*, as including, as first-order actors, the Committees (Employment Committee, Economic Policy Committee, the secret Economic and Financial

<sup>6</sup> See Barbier (1998), Fitoussi (1999) and Fitoussi and Saraceno (2004).

<sup>7</sup> The essential material involved in our research stems from our long-term programme of comparative studies of systems of social protection and employment policies (Barbier and Gautié 1998; Barbier and Théret 2003). Apart from documentary analysis, our approach to the EES and the other OMCs has entailed a programme of interviews stretching over the years 2001 to 2004. Officials were first met in France and a handful at DG Employment in 2001 (Barbier and Sylla 2002). A more comprehensive programme of interviews was conducted in 2002-2003. It has involved meeting 53 persons (24 in France; 12 in the Commission; 9 persons participating in the Employment Committee; representatives of UNICE and ETUC). Participative observation was also sometimes possible in meetings. Among the 53 persons met, 10 nationalities were represented (29 French, 6 Germans, 4 Britons, 4 Belgians, 2 Italians, 3 Swedes, 1 Finn, 1 Dane, 1 from Spain and 1 from Rumania).

Committee); the Council; and two Commission's DGs (the Economic and Financial affairs DG and the Employment and social affairs DG). The Permanent representatives of the Member states also play a role in the final decisions as well as the semester's Presidency. The Commission's Presidency is involved in the decision, especially inasmuch as arbitration has to occur between the diverging discourses both the DGs fight for<sup>8</sup>. The arena functions as a place where actors try to influence the final version of the discourse in such a way they feel will suit their interests best for the various uses they can make of it.

Actors are of course not equal in the arena. Empirical research shows that 'economic' and 'financial' actors dominate the game: one very clear vindication of this structural situation – which matches most national situations today – can be found in the *form the discourse on social policy takes at EU level*<sup>9</sup>. Officials interviewed unanimously state that, to be credible, social policy formulations should be coined in economic language; this is widely confirmed by an analysis of the various EES policy documents from its start (Barbier 2002c). Additionally, some actors are only consulted (for instance, social partners) whereas others are part to the actual decision (for details see Barbier 2004b).

The Commission (and/or any of the DGs) will look for increasing its power resources: for instance, in defending a long list of indicators in a proposal put to the Employment Committee, at the beginning of 2003<sup>10</sup>. For instance DG Economics and Finance pushed the topic of reforming 'tax and benefits systems' on the agenda, although DG Employment resisted the move before yielding. The representatives of a Member state will try to impose on/negotiate with others a particular definition of objectives or of indicators which suit their particular view of employment policy (for instance the French government in 1998 wanted to be able to insert its reduction of working time programme into one of the guidelines); alliances will occur as well as compromises (for instance, in 2002-2003 Denmark and the UK were weary of including too detailed provisions for 'quality', for different reasons: the former because the topic was seen as pertaining to social partners' competence<sup>11</sup>, the latter for substantive reasons of flexibility of the labour market). Our empirical research shows that Members states' representatives endeavour to achieve a wording (or a definition of indicators) that allows them the best use of the final EES discourse on their national scene.

We have empirically documented various types of uses of the EES discourse, especially in the French case (Barbier and Sylla 2002; Barbier 2004a). When used in national politics, the relatively de-politicized discourse will be readily re-politicized: this was done by the French minister of employment Fillon in 2003, when he argued that the Wim Kok taskforce report was contrary to the previous Socialist government policy<sup>12</sup>. The EES may

<sup>8</sup> It is widely known that the structural opposition between the national ministries of finance and social ministries has its counterpart at EU level, with the opposition between both DGs.

<sup>9</sup> Among many other instances is the fact that, in the 'new EES' one of the three 'overarching objectives' could not be 'quality in work' *per se*, but that it eventually was kept with a different terming: 'quality and productivity'.

<sup>10</sup> Balances of power are changing over time: during the 2002-2003 reform of the EES, the Commission's position was challenged in the Employment Committee (Jobelius 2003). It was also in a way 'by-passed' by the UK, Germany and France's initiative to resort to the special task force chaired by Wim Kok.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, one British official in 2003 argued that questions of wages in Britain pertained to the domain of social partners' negotiations, a rather unusual standpoint indeed in the British context.

<sup>12</sup> Typically, during a CDSEI meeting with social partners (CDSEI is the permanent working group's French name), the minister declared: « J'observe, et c'est pour moi une leçon essentielle, qu'il ne s'agit pas de savoir si on est libéral ou social-démocrate, si on est de gauche de droite ou du centre. Il s'agit de savoir si telle ou telle mesure est efficace pour augmenter le taux d'activité et réduire le chômage » (January, 22nd, 2004 – see the site [www.travail.gouv.fr](http://www.travail.gouv.fr)). A little earlier the British Chancellor Gordon Brown also tried to 'capture' the Wim Kok

also be used as a *lever* to achieve a particular arbitration of conflicts within government: this was for instance the case of the French minister Aubry achieving victory over the Budget minister who was led to accept significant additional funding of the French employment service in 1998. The French department for gender equality was accordingly able to use the formulation of the EES to make this normative orientation much more prominent. Basically, governments pursue the goal of writing an EES which supports their own national choices: for instance, the UK government – particularly favoured by the fact that UK policies are directly worded in English – was instrumental in setting the ‘make work pay’ rationale as a key objective on the EES agenda. Basically, because employment and labour market policies are part of the core national legitimizing processes, the minimum requirement for Member states’ representatives is that the discourse eventually adopted by the Employment committee and decided over by the Employment and social affairs Council will allow them to format and insert their national policies into the framework. Although more marginally, other actors – we have mainly empirically documented the case of the French trade unions – are also able to use the discourse as a resource to further their national goals<sup>13</sup>.

All in all, observing the process (indirectly, by way of interviews, or, exceptionally by participating in the proceedings of one of the Committees as an observer, for instance<sup>14</sup>) is akin to analysing how a representation of the state of the world will be fought for and finally agreed upon.

#### Setting the world in order

The EES production process is not without echoing a very ancient function of government, which was first clearly enunciated by Confucius, who contended, in his “Analects” that once denominations were rightly devised, the actual world itself would also be in order<sup>15</sup>.

Although with some caution, it has been argued by researchers that OMCs were perhaps participating in the construction of new forms of ‘knowledge exchange’ (Noaksson and Jacobsson 2003; Jacobsson and Vifell 2003). Empirical material might be supporting this thesis in some countries. However, our survey, conducted in France and through interviews of Employment committee representatives, rather showed that there are numerous conflicts about the ‘denominations’ and wording of the EES, which do not demonstrate a particular willingness from participants in the arena to learn from others or to exchange ‘neutral’ knowledge. It is necessary here to stress the fact that the documents used and written by the Commission and Member states’ administrations are of a *thoroughly political nature*. Conflicts can be better interpreted in terms of inter-governmental processes, where national interests are defended, irrespective of the particular ‘scientific’ or ‘communicative’ discourse involved.

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report, stating that the main UK policy instruments for labour market flexibility was endorsed by the report (see his speech at the Wall Street Journal conference in November 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Trade union representatives interviewed sometimes declare that the existence of new forums linked to the EES consultation at national level, are able to influence, although on a limited scale, the way national debates are conducted and their agenda’s formulation.

<sup>14</sup> This is the case of Jobelius (2003).

<sup>15</sup> Etienne has noted that in China, the cohesion of the human group is based on language reform. Confucius advocates the rectification of denominations (zheng ming). « L’homme de bien n’use des Noms que s’ils impliquent un discours cohérent et ne tient de discours que s’il débouche sur la pratique. Voilà pourquoi l’homme de bien est si prudent dans ce qu’il dit » (*Entretiens de Confucius*, translation by Anne Cheng, Seuil, Points, Paris, 1981, p. 102-103).

Our empirical material confirms other conclusions (Jobelius 2003). Numerous instances show that, as a key player in the decision over the EES, the Employment Committee emerges as particularly prone to power games. Indeed, over the period of our interviews, we have listed a considerable number of cases of conflicts between Member states representatives in the Employment Committee (2001-2003). Among these conflicts about indicators and words, it is possible to note the most significant.

A first one arose about the ‘working poor’ category. French representatives were in favour of introducing an indicator about their proportion in the labour force and its evolution over time. UK representatives resisted the move. The eventual compromise struck was influenced by the fact that some Member states were opposed to involving income and wage questions in the EES framework, because this topic was a matter for negotiation between social partners in their countries<sup>16</sup>. Eventually, an indicator was introduced, ahead of the Laeken 2001 Council, which tried to capture the position of employees in categories of income over time (‘transitions by pay levels’). In the current list, one ‘working poor’ indicator has nevertheless been added, but with relation to ‘make work pay’ programmes<sup>17</sup>.

A second key conflict occurred over ‘quality-in-work’. We have analysed the emergence of the notion in the EES context (Barbier 2004a). Our interviews show sharp and consistently documented differences among Member states, as well as among the DGs. Placing quality as one of the three ‘overarching’ objectives – albeit in a couple with productivity – was not the DG Economy and Finance’s plan. It was not either the UK’s position: interviewees viewed the introduction and increased position of the quality topic in a double perspective: first, as testimony to the DG Employment’s intention to use the item to increase its strategic position; second, as a way to confuse the necessary hierarchy of policy goals, because “any job was better than no job” and to accept some Member states’ erroneous orientations, which, to our interviewees, could be analysed as “quality is about protecting insiders”<sup>18</sup>. Eventually a compromise over words was struck and the world of the labour markets was, for some time at least, ‘set in order’, under the ‘quality and productivity’ motto.

It would be cumbersome to detail here the many other sources of conflicts: over the ‘curative’ treatment of the unemployed as against the ‘preventative’ one; over the very feasibility and acceptability of a large number of quantitative targets (see also Jobelius (2003) on this particular aspect); over the very definition of what is a ‘gender pay gap’ between men and women, over the taking into account of the employees’ subjective expectations with regard to the quality of their jobs, and so on. Analogous observations can be made in the case of the ‘OMC inclusion’, where, in the particular French case, indicators have played a very prominent role. A conflict occurred for instance in the indicators’ group of this OMC, again over the question of the ‘working poor’ and the jobless; this time it was about the measurement method and its taking into account of the household and not only the individual<sup>19</sup>. In the OMC inclusion, another conflict was sparked off about poverty thresholds: eventually two thresholds (60% and 50% of the median income) were accepted, because the French statisticians have commonly used the 50% threshold<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> For similar reasons, wages are also absent of the successive versions of the annual DG Employment report (*Employment in Europe*).

<sup>17</sup> See the Employment Committee document on the indicators’ group report in 2003 (indicator n° 34 p. 9). The 2004 Joint Employment report mentions (p. 32) that the situation is “a matter of concern for some Member states (Luxembourg, Spain, Italy and Portugal)”.

<sup>18</sup> Interviews in April 2003 of members of the Employment Committee (see Barbier 2004a).

<sup>19</sup> See the statistical annex of the Commission’s document (Com 2003 (773) final). The definition of the ‘working poor’ is here different from the indicator used in the EES indicator mentioned earlier.

<sup>20</sup> Interviews of French officials, January 2004.

All the above instances of conflicts provide convincing signs of the fact that the formulations and indicators of the OMCs are the object of horse-trading, negotiations, compromises that originate in the Member states' interests and in different national approaches and political agendas. Their positions' rationale is explained both by their objectives of (i) keeping the national autonomy of decision they deem adequate, and (ii) negotiating a substance of texts which is usable at home. Member states' representatives spontaneously describe the procedures they are involved in in terms of strategic moves and balances. Moreover, converging elements in our interviews' material point to the fact that, within the Employment Committee, stable coalitions have been constructed over time, the logic of which certainly had little relation to a 'deliberation' rationale, but more prosaically pertained to inter-governmental explanations: a steady rivalry has existed between France and the UK; Member states identified as traditional opponents of increased federalism have tended to associate with one another, irrespective of their policies' substantive orientation (Barbier 2004a). Indeed the consistent recurrence of conflicts over time also supports the assumption as to the absence of substantial convergence of national policies under the influence of the EES. Whilst the general employment policy discourse can certainly be seen as 'Europeanized', this may well be 'surface' Europeanization<sup>21</sup>, as we have shown in the particular case of activation policies (Barbier 2002a; 2004b). Confronting the surface Europeanization of discourses and the substantive changes attributable to the EES and other OMCs is precisely one of the key points of its analysis, as we will see later.

*3 – Thirdly, one essential feature of the EES lies in the fact that its existence crucially depends on national policies.*

Would actual programmes and policies not exist in Member states, the two first elements of the EES (organising new activities at EU level and transforming domestic activities; deciding about the discourse) would be completely artificial, and deprived of any regulative or legitimising potential power. Without the latter, there would be little sense to fight for a particular construction of reality.

Not only on legal terms (the competencies conferred by the Treaty to the EU level), but also on political terms (the political legitimising of policies within national polities), national programmes and policies, however cognitively and normatively coordinated, have remained and will remain a determining variable. When the first version of the EES was launched in 1997, this prosaic aspect did not escape the German press, for instance<sup>22</sup>. The way national employment programmes are conceived, designed and separated from policies in other areas remains idiosyncratic<sup>23</sup>. It is in the national arenas that these policies are debated, criticized, evaluated, after being passed by Parliament Acts. They often constitute key issues in electoral campaigns – as was obvious for instance for the introduction of the 'New Deals' in Britain or the '*emplois-jeunes*' in France (Barbier 2002c). Programmes' participants, when they are dissatisfied, like for instance in Southern Italy in the late 90s, sometimes take to the streets, but not in Brussels against the EU executive: they rather do it at home.

Hence, analysing the EES would remain a completely artificial exercise if the transformations possibly attributable to it were not seen in the context of a detailed investigation and comprehension of national programmes. From the perspective of national

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<sup>21</sup> Büchs and Friedrich (2003) use a similar image for describing the OMC impact on German policies.

<sup>22</sup> On the day after the Luxembourg's summit, the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (22.11.1997), displayed the headline « *Kampf gegen Arbeitslosigkeit Sache der Mitgliedsländer* ».

<sup>23</sup> For instance, many UK programmes, at least at the early stages of the EES invention, were seen as pertaining to 'welfare reform'. Presently, the very notion of an 'employment policy' in the domestic British debate has a weak meaning (see Barbier and Gauthié 1998).

policies – with their politics, their national funding, their beneficiaries, OMCs do appear as really strange objects; this remark is certainly not made to dismiss them as irrelevant, but to stress that there is little scientific issue in focussing analyses *only on the 'Brussels' arenas*. The latter potentially provide national governments with additional resources for legitimating their policy decisions at home and consolidating them<sup>24</sup>: this explains why, despite reluctance from many Member states to accepting increased roles for the Commission, the EES has continued to function rather successfully, in terms of the states' expectations, and also why they have kept struggling about the 'best' construction of the discourse. It is certain that they expect additional resources at EU level to support policies and politics at home<sup>25</sup>.

Before going more precisely into the issue of the relationships between national and EU-level policies, it is possible to briefly contrast the EES with two other OMCs, the BEPG and the 'OMC inclusion'.

#### *'OMC inclusion' and the BEPG*

All OMCs are based on coordinating activities, both national and European, on a discourse coined in texts endorsed by the relevant institutions and on corresponding domestic programmes. Yet, among OMCs, the importance of the cognitive dimension appears even clearer in certain cases; moreover, the ways the discourse is decided may vary. The EES has certainly been the most 'fully-fledged' and analysing other OMCs along a common ideal-type certainly does not imply that from their present limited existence, they could emulate the EES for the future. Here again, analysis needs empirical material<sup>26</sup>.

In France, the OMC inclusion has especially been restricted to its cognitive aspect, with little articulation with identified policies, because, in this country, no coherent and identifiable set of programmes has really fitted under the label 'inclusion policy'<sup>27</sup>. Actually the first national plan for inclusion was labelled '*Plan national d'action français contre l'exclusion sociale*'<sup>28</sup>. It did not mention 'inclusion' as a guiding issue, but focussed on the integration of the most fragile part of the population (*insertion sociale et professionnelle des plus démunis* was the term used). It was mainly an adaptation of the Socialist government's Act 'against exclusions' (July 29<sup>th</sup> 1998 Act), as is subtly acknowledged by the expert who wrote an assessment report for the Commission<sup>29</sup>. The expert noted that there was little "political involvement" in the plan by French relevant authorities (including the local authorities) and that the plan did not have "a great social visibility", an interesting understatement in this context: indeed, it was hardly possible to spot actual activities which could be seen as 'implementing' the plan. Contrary to the EES case, there seem to have been few expectations either from the government or the local authorities to draw additional legitimisation resources from the process. This situation has not seemed to change much with

<sup>24</sup> Take for instance the UK Chancellor G. Brown's political communication at home (Speech at the Wall Street Journal conference, 2003): "Instead of viewing flexibility as the enemy of full employment, we should recognise that the right kind of flexibility in European as well as British labour markets is essential for jobs (...). Take the British tax credit which combines the flexibility of a labour market working smoothly with minimum standards of fairness for every employee returning to work" (Her Majesty's Treasury website).

<sup>25</sup> This common interest, however, is not even across parties and countries, as the recent European Parliament elections have demonstrated. Only some parties did use the 'European Social Model' motto, for instance.

<sup>26</sup> See previous note on the methods. Only five actors of the OMC inclusion process in France have been interviewed. For the BEPG, we have been able to only interview the Economic Policy Committee's president and two officials at DG for Economic and Financial Affairs.

<sup>27</sup> This assumption could be tested in other Member states.

<sup>28</sup> See [http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/news/2001/jun/napincl2001fr\\_fr.pdf](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/news/2001/jun/napincl2001fr_fr.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> see [http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/soc-prot/studies/studies\\_fr.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/soc-prot/studies/studies_fr.htm)

the second plan (2003). Despite the marginalized position of the plan, as we have already seen, fighting about the correct indicators between the Member states' representatives has nevertheless been going on.

The BEPG also illustrate an important aspect of the OMCs, but they are very particular. First, contrary to what was supposed at their origin, their impact has not been very easy to document<sup>30</sup>. The fact that, from the start, the EES had to be consistent with the BEPG has probably been largely overstated<sup>31</sup>. Indeed, as the French case clearly has demonstrated, for any Member state, just as in the case of the EES, it is possible not to comply with the recommendations included in the BEPG. Taking for instance the French case (from 2000 to 2002<sup>32</sup>), the successive BEPG were all significantly bypassed by the French government: the 2002 version stated that France should reach an 1.9% budget deficit in 2003, when it reached more than 3 %; the 2001 version demanded that France reformed its 'employment protection', which was certainly not explicitly made. As has been also clearer from the November 2003 Council, it is even possible not to comply with harder law. Hence, the very distinction between so-called 'soft-law' and 'hard-law' instruments is problematic. Whilst the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) provisions were supposed to be really binding and associated with tough sanctions, experience has shown that, in the recent years, this has not been the case for the larger Member states, as again the French example clearly demonstrates<sup>33</sup>. If measured in terms of compliance, the relative impact of the BEPG, has been limited: Linsenmann (2003: 17) has noted that fiscal policies can hardly be seen as 'Europeanized', despite being bound by the SGP. However, preliminary interviews allow us to formulate an assumption about the BEPG considered as an OMC. Actors outside the BEPG process and those who are involved in it concur to consider that conflicts and controversies about the wording of the BEPG are less significant than in the EES process. Both types of interviewees attribute this to the fact that economic and financial actors share a high degree of similar knowledge and beliefs which are marked by the current economic orthodoxy. This situation should be explored more in detail; however, it is not possible to conclude that power games would be absent even in an arena where socialisation and beliefs are highly homogenous<sup>34</sup>.

### **3. Answering question of effects, convergence, and Europeanization: What theories and methods for OMCs?**

In the previous section we have explored the main dimensions of the EES and briefly compared it to two other OMCs. We have also mentioned empirically documented transformations that have been brought to light. In this section we would like to propose a

<sup>30</sup> Apart from the three mentioned, we have not conducted interviews with members of the Economic Policy Committee.

<sup>31</sup> We participated in this exaggeration (Barbier 1998).

<sup>32</sup> Council Recommendations on the broad economic policy guidelines of the Member States and the Community of 19 June 2000; 15 June 2001; 21 June 2002.

<sup>33</sup> The Council has adopted an opinion in February 2004 (Official Journal of the European Union, 19.2.2004) which acknowledged that France was still not complying with the Stability and Growth Pact, after the Commission's recommendations (requesting France to bring this situation to an end before the end of 2004) were rejected by the Council in November 2003. The Council's opinion states that "under plausible macroeconomic and budgetary assumptions, the adjustment path in the [French] programme seems to be insufficient to eliminate the excessive deficit in 2005", while the French government has said the deficit would be minus 2.9%.

<sup>34</sup> A former president of the Economic Policy Committee has remarked that it was extremely difficult to convince the German representatives in the Committee that their growth trend was creating too few jobs and that there was a problem with the German demand side (interview in 2001). The same interviewee noted that 'peer pressure' was useless until the German representatives had made their mind on a *national* basis.

preliminary framework for interpreting these transformations more systematically and present reflections about the sociological methods used. Before this, we will briefly survey some of the main characteristics of the current literature in this respect.

### *The literature*

There is a growing body of literature about the OMCs, about Europeanisation and possible associated convergence in Europe. Some of it addresses comprehensive questions raised by the European level processes in general. Some is more focussed on the OMCs themselves. The main part of the research comes from political science. In the limits of this paper, it is certainly not within our reach to achieve a comprehensive survey: we will rather select significant analyses (and particularly those present in the French debate). We will discuss some of their important characteristics.

*A first group of research explicitly deals with the OMCs and mainly about the EES.* It is remarkable that only a small minority of their authors have considered the various OMCs as ‘symbolic’ or ‘futile’ (Chalmers and Lodge 2003). These contend that the coordination of social policies is only superficial; they insist on the fact that no sanctions are attached to the following-up to recommendations; according to this view, the EES has little reason to have any influence at all<sup>35</sup>, once there is no (or so little) EU money attached to it and given that the treaty of Amsterdam has reaffirmed that competence in matters of social and employment policy is national.

Differently, the majority of research considered here has tended to confront two camps who nevertheless agree on two counts: (i) to the EES they ascribe an actual (or, sometimes potential) capacity to *modify national systems substantively* of social and employment policies; (ii) they tend to adopt a more or less *normative standpoint* in favour or against the EES and propose more or less explicit recommendations for its ‘better’ efficacy.

On one side are those who contend that, being strictly dependent on economic policy coordination (especially the Growth and Stability Pact and the BEPG), OMCs essentially play an instrumental (functional) role in a process that will eventually lead to downgrading national social protection systems in the direction of a more ‘liberal’ type. Here, the EES emerges as a Trojan horse introduced in national policies; the evidence of the Trojan horse lies in the substance of the guidelines and recommendations, which all very closely fit in with the mainstream ‘neo-liberal’ policy mix, or even in the indicators selected. On the other side are those who contend that the various OMCs *at least potentially* constitute a privileged tool in the hands of governments and other social actors to fight for a specific ‘European social model’, a model which precisely is deemed to resist ‘liberalisation’ and ‘residualization’ tendencies. Here, the normative stance is less apparent and interrogation and caution subsist as to the realism of hopes vested in the ‘European social model’.

The former group of authors share in the conception that the EES is a functional device which plays into an overarching economic process pervasively impregnated by ‘neo-liberalism’ or, sometimes, ‘monetarism’. Such conceptions echo Jessop’s approach mentioned earlier: social policy is functionally subordinated to economic policy. For Palier (2003), coordinations of social policies at EU-level tend to look like belts transmitting motion, when he states that their “meaning is to render national social policies more compatible with the economic policies”, which he equates to the single market and the currency policies (ibid.: 2),

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<sup>35</sup> Except maybe to distract attention from the former ‘Community method’ (Chalmers and Lodge 2003).

underestimating the fact that an important part of economic policies are still national (ibid.: 17). For their part, explicit adversaries of ‘neo-liberalism’ understandably see the EES and OMCs as neo-liberal by nature or by inevitable tendency (Eymard Duvernay and al. 2003); for Salais (2004), the indicators chosen for ‘benchmarking’ the EES seem to possess the capacity of transforming the national systems by their sheer biased substance; hence the EES will feed the most probable scenario of an overall subordination of the social agenda to market forces and rules (ibid.: 23).

Indeed, the question of the empirical relationships and articulation existing between four types of policies is crucial here (Barbier 2004a: 36-42): (i) EU-level economic and monetary policies; (ii) national economic policies; (iii) EU-level social policies, and (iv) national social policies. The characterisation of EU-level policies as ‘neo-liberal’ or ‘monetarist’ does not help much understanding what actual mechanisms are at stake.

What was shown by Hall’s (1993: 284) influential paper was that ‘monetarism’ replaced ‘Keynesianism’ as a fundamental “conception of how the economy itself worked”. In a converging manner, Jobert (1994: 16-23) has convincingly argued that ‘pragmatic neo-liberalism’ (*le néo-libéralisme gestionnaire*), which he opposed to ‘doctrinal neo-liberalism’ (*le néo-libéralisme doctrinaire*)<sup>36</sup> had become the mainstream ideational reference of the European elites. It is not a daring thought to assume that this common cognitive and normative framework is very consensually shared in the Brussels arenas, by the ‘social’ actors as well as the ‘economic’ actors and we have precisely shown earlier that the general substantive content of the EES was consistent with mainstream economic views. Indeed, all interviews we conducted supported the assumption. Yet, this gives only a very general picture because (i) the cognitive and normative framework does not magically translate into actual policies (social and economic) and (ii) within the cognitive boundaries of the EES discourse, as we have shown, actors fight against each other, DG against DG, Member state against Member state, actors against other actors in one country. As extensive empirical documentation shows - we have particularly stressed the case of Sweden (Barbier 2004a: 51-82) in this respect - sharing in the same EES discourse is certainly not incompatible with an extreme variety of domestic economic and social policies, which can be globally correlated to very different social ‘outcomes’, in terms of redistribution, well-being and inequality, even in a context where monetary norms are prominent in the global international economy (Barbier and Nadel 2000).

As for the second group of analyses, more open to envisaging other causal effects of the EES and various OMCs, they seldom document precise causal mechanisms and the empirical material they are based upon remains often limited. Some authors extensively rely on the official texts produced by the EES, which they take as essential documents and sometimes downplay their political and contingent nature. Goetschy (1999: 134) for instance seems to take for granted that “the EU employment guidelines will induce a gradual Europeanization of certain elements in national employment policies”. She seems to envisage the “strengths and weaknesses of the EES” only from the normative perspective of improving them (Goetschy 2003 : 70 ssq.). Trubek and Mosher (2003), for their part, privilege presumed positive effects of the EES (“the impact of the EES on Member state policy”) rather than envisaging more open possibilities of transformations. When judging the first years of the EES, they mainly draw upon evaluation reports, which are very marked by their political nature. Jakobsson (2004) is more cautious about the OMCs’ uses in the domestic arenas in

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<sup>36</sup> Fitoussi and Saraceno (2004: 2) define the ‘neo-liberal doctrine’ as fixing two main tasks for policy: reducing the distortionary presence of government and using the freed resources to increase competition by means of structural reforms.

Sweden and Denmark. However she also accepts the view that the EES ideology is “indeed a ‘third way’ compromise between neo-liberal economics and Social Democratic labour market policy” (Jakobsson 2003: 30).

All in all, when it comes to demonstrating and documenting possible or actual transformations, a significant part of the literature about the OMCs displays two limits: precise mechanisms of how causal transformations happen are often not mapped out, and empirical material is scarce. Indeed, the documentation of policies and programmes changes represents a huge task across the 25 Member states. The documentation of changes in conception is also tricky although demanding methods have been proposed (see Radaelli 2000a). An approach by scenarios, less normative and more open is also possible (Barbier and Théret, for the French case, 2004) but it simply eschews the very demanding challenge of causality which is also relevant in ‘Europeanization’ research in general (Olsen 2001: 16). More ambitious, but at the same time more de-contextualised and general political science frameworks propose a systematic theorization of mechanisms. Theorists of ‘Europeanization’ have proposed very interesting insights (Olsen 2001; Radaelli 2000b). They are nevertheless accompanied by empirical examples to only varying degrees.

#### *Interpreting and documenting transformations*

Experience gained from our research leads to some important observations: (i) contrary to the introduction of European law into national law systems (Falkner 2003), OMCs should not be seen simply in the context of one-way effects from the European to the national level: cross-influences should be considered; (ii) interacting with national policy systems, OMCs should be envisaged as embedded into much larger transformations of the social protection systems; (iii) effective transformations should be separated from potential ones and documented, some being more ‘procedural’ than ‘substantive’<sup>37</sup>; (iv) last but not least, objectifying and measuring transformations – of which only a part may presumably be seen as ‘effects of the OMCs’ should rely on *contestable* methods. This is why we propose here a framework for interpretation, before turning to some remarks about methods.

Research results about OMCs today seem to converge to establish rather firmly that the new administrative and political activities have modified national systems, also creating new rules and institutions at EU level; that a common discourse has been invented and that previous systems of actors have been modified from various perspectives. Although it may exist at other levels, the dissemination of ideas has only been extensively documented at the level of the small elites who are direct actors of the EES and particularly in the ‘Brussels’ arena identified above. Concerning administrative management techniques, some empirical data point to substantive changes. Concerning the very substance and distinctive features (and outcomes) of policies and programmes in the social areas, the literature has, so far, not produced convincing elements; consequences reaching farther have even less been documented. Apart from the creation and transformation of activities and their formal institutionalisation, three main mechanisms seem to be at stake: the socialisation of actors (with learning processes and competition between conceptions); the creation and transformation of resources for actors in power games at EU-level and at national levels; the introduction of new actors in policy processes. Additionally, even if they have not been documented by precise methods, it is also important to envisage potential transformations by

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<sup>37</sup> For a complementary distinction see Börzel and Risse (2000) who distinguish between convergence of rules and convergence of outcomes.

means of other mechanisms (imitation and adaptation of programmes for instance). Table 1 describes a proposed framework for analysis.

An exploratory typology for possible and actual transformations in policies<sup>38</sup>

Rather than effects or impacts we rather use the term ‘transformation’, in the sense that observed transformations are less explicitly meant to be causally linked to a particular OMC.

In the first section, we have focussed on activities at the EU-level and the construction of the common discourse. As for transformations observable at national levels, we suggest to separate ‘procedural’ and ‘substantive’ ones<sup>39</sup> and separate them hierarchically into three types<sup>40</sup>. Methodologically, transformations of type [1], concerning the discourse are particularly difficult to document (see Radaelli 2000a ; Hassenteufel and Smith 2002). Their identification entails that discourses are analysed in an historical perspective. We are dealing here with the political language of small elites. The formal introduction of new terms, indicators (for instance the employment rate), general conceptions (for instance the notion that ‘work should pay’) may mean a superficial adaptation of the discourse, which might have little substantive consequences. Fully understanding substantive change entails that a link be made to type [3] transformations. A common discourse may go along with no substantive change of policies (Barbier 2002c; Barbier and Sylla 2002). Socialisation which produces the sharing in the same discourse may allow for multiple identities of actors (Trondal 2002): for instance when union representatives share in and use the common discourse, they nevertheless can retain their own normative preferences at the same time. Whereas type [1] transformations are limited to the discourse, both other categories entail more significant change. Type [2] groups transformations of policy methods, administrative organisations and principles, as well as modifications in the systems of actors involved in national policy and their internal relationships and balance of powers. When it comes to type [3], we deal with more radical modifications, implying the changing of rules, features of programmes, values and theories of action; a step further would involve the possibility of observing convergence in outcomes; further again, even more radical change could entail that the overall systems are significantly altered to eventually converge towards a unified common ‘European model’.

The necessary methods for objectifying the different types of transformations vary. Although interviews of representatives of the national and Commission elites are adequate for analysing the EES discourse at EU level, they nevertheless confront the researcher to very tricky situations: we will quote such examples later. Placing the discourse into a historical perspective, tracing its multiple sources – at least identifying its main sources – is absolutely necessary for the researcher not to be captured by an endless stream of political cant. For types [2] and [3], field work in various countries is indispensable. Consistent interpretation should deal with all types at the same time, although of course the research programme implied by such a methodological posture would be impossible to actually implement fully.

It is rather easy to identify type [1] transformations (for instance all elite actors now use the employment rate indicator; the notion of ‘tax and benefit system’ which was not used in certain countries has been now generalized in the EES discourse, etc.). It is also not hard to observe the transformations of systems of actors involved in national policy (for instance, the social partners organisations are now consulted in the process of writing the National action plans, government departments in charge of gender equality benefit from increased legitimacy

<sup>38</sup> As was said in the introduction, politics and polities are not analysed here.

<sup>39</sup> The distinction is exploratory so far.

<sup>40</sup> The three categories can be also seen in the light of P. Hall’s three different order changes (1993).

in the system, etc.). The case of the unions has been well documented (de la Porte and Pochet 2002; 2003). We have also documented it in the French case (Barbier and Sylla 2002). However, type [3] transformations do remain empirically undocumented. Superficial face-value imitation cases may be very mendacious: they are bound to appear because programmes are described and discussed in English. In France, transfers of programmes linked to the implementation of the EES have not been documented, whereas in recent history, some transfers were clearly identified<sup>41</sup>.

Moreover, specialised research on the OMCs should be situated against more comprehensive analyses encompassing the transformation of the entire welfare systems. Palier's observation (2003: 2-3) as to the importance of what happens at EU-level is certainly vindicated. Yet a complementary observation is that analysis of EU-level processes has little sense when it is not situated explicitly in the wider context, which has been explored in the recent literature (Scharpf et Schmidt 2001; Pierson 2001; Daniel et Palier 2001; Barbier 2002a; Barbier et Théret 2003; 2004).

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<sup>41</sup> See for instance the importation of Swedish ideas and programmes in France, as documented in the case of the '*contrats emploi solidarité*'. Numerous cases of transfers have been also documented in Britain, coming from the US and Australia. But none of these are linked to the EES.

**Table 1 : A Typology of transformations (policies) in the context of the EES<sup>42</sup>**

<b>Transformations</b>	<b>Types</b>	<b>Mechanisms</b>	<b>Methods</b>
<i>EU-level</i> Activities	New agenda and activities Deciding about the discourse	Coordination of activities Socialisation of actors through cross-national interactions (elites) Power games (inter-governmentalism)	Interviews, observations, analysis of discourse (comparative, multilingual in historical perspective) Identification of common substantive features of the discourse
<i>National</i> Procedural	Transformation of procedures and agenda New procedures New actors participate	Coordination of activities	Observation of activities (comparative)
<i>National</i> Substantive Type [1]	Formatting the national discourse to fit the European discourse ; deciding about the discourse	Socialisation (ideas, <i>référentiels</i> <sup>43</sup> ) : (mainly national elites) Learning from abroad, imitation Power games (national)	Interviews Analysis of national discourse in historical perspective
<i>National</i> Substantive Type [2]	Systems of actors (political/administrative) are transformed (actors and their respective powers) Organisation and principles are transformed	Socialisation Capturing new legitimacy resources (actors of various levels) Learning from abroad, imitation Adaptation (new solutions) Cross-national learning/competition	Interviews, observations, identification of actors Observation of methods/organisations
<i>National</i> Substantive Type [3]	Single programmes/policies are substantively altered (rules, values, theories of action) Programmes/policies converge (outcomes) Systems are altered (rules, values, theories of action) Systems converge (outcomes) European Social model is unified	Socialisation (actors of various levels) Learning from abroad, imitation Adaptation (implementation of new solutions) Cross-national learning/competition	Documentation/observation of programmes substance/outcomes Dynamic analysis of systems Identification of common features

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<sup>42</sup> The typology has not been tested against other OMCs.

<sup>43</sup> Jobert and Muller's notion in French.

### *Methodological considerations*

Methodological indications are sketched in table 1. We would like to present some remarks to stress the (at least partial) specificity of sociological methods in research dealing with the OMCs: our examples are drawn from research about the EES, at EU level and in France, but we assume they might have a wider domain of application. Three methods will be touched upon here: interviews, field work about programmes and documentation.

Hassenteufel and Smith (2002: 58-62) have very rightly pointed out the methodological limits of interviews with respect to cognitive analysis of policies. Radaelli (2000a) has proposed an interesting method for analysing narratives. Our empirical experience leads us to point additional problems.

The first one relates to *language*. Understandably, as no single researcher can master all EU official languages, the working language will be English. However, if practised solely, this inevitable use of international (or Eurospeak) English leads to damaging consequences. For instance, certain terms or words are completely untranslatable (Barbier 2002b)<sup>44</sup>. This leads to the fact that discourses articulated by non-native speakers of English will be translated into English by using easy and economical terms<sup>45</sup>, which can be very misleading as to the substantive features of programmes. For instance, when one Italian interviewee speaks about ‘workfare’ programmes in Italy, the researcher should be conscious that the programmes concerned are marginal in the Italian context and have practically no common features with Anglo-Saxon practice. When Scandinavian interviewees speak about ‘rehabilitation’ schemes, the problem is different: such programmes which target people ‘marginalized’ in the Scandinavian perspective, have practically no direct equivalent in the other Member states. When one seeks to go beyond the surface of universalistic and half-baked notions, this leads to affirming the methodological necessity of using a *third language*<sup>46</sup>, where interlocutors in English achieve an in-depth explanation of the programmes existing in their respective countries and of their specific insertion into a particular societal coherence.

Secondly, interviews with representatives of the EES or other OMCs elite people take place in strategic contexts: when accepting to be interviewed, these interviewees, as has been established for a long time in sociology, are often using the interview as a political instrument to further their views and goals. Which first means that, as in any sociological research, we have to cross-check declarations: it is rather easy to interview, for instance, key members of the Employment Committee in a balanced manner according to countries and to check that the declarations of one or the other concur on the identification of conflicts. Similarly, interviews conducted about the EES in DG Employment will give information about how the people interviewed, as a representative group, see their counterparts in DG Economic and Financial Affairs. But getting a better picture also entails to conduct interviews in the latter DG.

Thirdly, one very common dimension of the interviews is the resort to political mumbo-jumbo, Eurospeak, perfunctory language, and, more than often, political cant. Interviews conducted with officials of such and such a country may appear as completely

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<sup>44</sup> The notion of *salariat* in French, which has counterparts in German, Italian and Spanish for instance, doesn't have any in English; one central social policy notion in the Latin countries (Barbier 2004c), i.e. *precariousness* (*precaridad, precarietà*), has no easy equivalent in English.

<sup>45</sup> See for instance the notion of ‘workfare’ (Barbier 2004b; Torfing 1999).

<sup>46</sup> Charles Taylor has theorised the notion as a “*a language of perspicuous contrast*” (Taylor 1997).

cumbersome, deprived of any significant information<sup>47</sup>. Taking them at face value obviously leads to ventriloquial repetition of the official discourse. Diplomatic understatement is very often used in this context. On the contrary, an overstatement of the interviewer's personal role, or of their espousal of the national discourse of the moment also appears frequently. The interviewer might have to resort to (mild) provocation in order to spark off some more authentic expression, or to indirect questioning. For instance, interviewing an Employment Committee member in 2003, we were told that no significant conflicts had ever emerged within the Committee, and that divergences were resolved in a "family atmosphere" because people had known each other for a long time and had trusted one another very closely. By contrast, other cross-checked interviews led to identifying the conflicts we have detailed in the first section. One difficult question was whether coalitions existed within the Employment Committee: diplomatic language was often formally served to us about this question. In one occasion, at the beginning of the interview, one interviewee declared that French and British representatives were the best of friends and that no problems had ever arisen between their official mandates. But as, later, we wanted to know whether the 2002 change of French government had, by chance, changed anything, the interviewee suddenly said: "Oh, yes" before quickly returning to a more diplomatic tone. That France and Britain have constantly been defending diverging views was also confirmed by most of the other interviews.

Language may be used perfunctorily as a code where substantive signification is understated: this often happens in the context of such interviews. This leads to stressing another methodological imperative: when dealing with the national impact of any OMC, no substance of a particular interview should be considered significant if it is not possible to check it against field information about the actual policy. As it is not possible for a single researcher to conduct field work in all Member states, documenting such points may be replaced by close and long-term cooperation of researchers, who gain intimate knowledge of their counterparts' research. True, there is a place for the analysis of the discourse, but this place should be resituated in the context of other empirical material.

A second type of remarks concerns the difficulty of collecting and interpreting field-data about programmes and their change over time. Here, it is obviously inconsistent to address the question of the changes brought by the invention of the EES when one has no detailed research knowledge about comparative employment and social policies in a sufficient number of countries. Added to the tricky distortions brought by the translation of programmes' names into English (and to their opportunistic formatting into the EES guidelines), this might precipitate researchers into many traps. For instance, relying on transformations described by Member states' official government documentation or declarations of officials interviewed yields little if any serious information. On the contrary, when one is able to match the substance of interviews with conclusions taken from research literature, in a particular Member state, one is on firmer ground. We have particularly analysed many of these pitfalls in the domain of activation policies (Barbier 2002a; Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer 2004). For a researcher, the best protection against the danger of being assigned the role of a pure commentator of perfunctory discourses certainly remains the insights and scientific debates he or she is able to conduct with his/her colleagues, under precise comparative methodologies<sup>48</sup>. An interesting example has been the introduction of a new tax credit in France in 2001, i.e. the '*prime pour l'emploi*'; in the European Commission's documents, this introduction has been considered as an instance of France

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<sup>47</sup> One had rather not make the trip to Brussels or to a foreign country, and read the official documents from the website instead.

<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, very often, comparison does scarcely happen in 'comparative studies' which only put national cases next to each other (Barbier 2002b).

complying with EES imperatives and guidelines. Actually, this was never the case. Introducing the tax credit was prompted by an unexpected Constitutional court ruling, which had purely domestic reasons, although understandably it was strategically used by the French government to demonstrate that France certainly was a good EES pupil. For various reasons, including basic structural characteristics of the French system (Barbier et Théret 2004), the *prime pour l'emploi* is bound to remain a marginal programme. Whereas in official terms, it is seen as demonstrating French compliance along the 'make work pay' rationale, it has been demonstrated that its incentive effects are very limited.

A third type of methodological caveats concerns documents and evaluation information. Concerning OMCs, a veritable sea of documents is constantly flowing from the Commission's very effective website. The political nature of these documents is often underestimated. When they stem from international organisations, whether the OECD<sup>49</sup>, the European Commission or the ILO for instance, analyses should always be taken with utmost caution. True, documents issued by the Commission's various units are *unequally politicised*. Some may be softly politicised, some much more strongly. For instance, the 'Joint Employment Report' is a thoroughly political document, which brings oriented information corresponding to a particular compromise which the Commission was able to struck with the Member states' representatives. Albeit much less markedly, the yearly *Employment in Europe* is also political stuff although some of its chapters have resulted from in-depth economic and scientifically contestable research. Similar precautions apply to what is called 'evaluation' material.

It is indeed striking that there has been so far a relative consensus among researchers about the fact that the EES has been evaluated. Most authors recall the famous Lisbon definition of the OMC, which, in its fourth canonical dimension, is supposed to entail "periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review organised as mutual learning processes" (see note 1). But the real empirical situation is very different: *no consistent state-of-the-art evaluation has ever been implemented for the EES*; additionally, evaluation documents, even when abiding by the international standards of quality for evaluation studies, nevertheless remain ambiguous documents, inasmuch as they are written to fit into political processes (Weiss 1973). It is thus striking that many authors take at face value the diverse and proliferating array of documents that the Commission and Member states label 'evaluation studies'. Additionally, programme evaluation methods, which are classically used in national contexts, are inadequate at EU level, because neither the EES or anyone of the OMCs can be considered as a group of actual 'programmes' in the classical sense. Even The European Commission's communication on the assessment of the first five years of the EES (European Commission 2002) has actually acknowledged an overall lack of evaluation findings of policy outcomes *effectively linked to the EES as a cause*. This absence is all the more understandable as measurement problems are immense. Should particular developments in 'outcomes' be established as 'fitting' in with the explicit objectives and recommendations of the coordination, they would be, at best, speculations of possible links<sup>50</sup>. But the reverse is also true.

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<sup>49</sup> It has been argued that because they are 'scientific' OECD documents are less political than the EU Commission's (Noaksson and Jacobsson 2003). This assertion seems to ignore not only the strategic role the USA play in the OECD and the particular orientations the organisation has privileged over the last twenty years.

<sup>50</sup> 'Evaluation' reports handed by member states to the Commission vindicate the futility of efforts to objectifying the EES as a causal mechanism in such a framework (Barbier 2004a).

### 3. Conclusion

A large amount of empirical studies are now available to confirm that the introduction of innovative coordination methods at EU levels, eventually termed OMCs, have brought forward new types of activities, both political and administrative. At EU-level, these are completely determined by the process of constructing a political discourse which mingles – in sometimes intolerably repetitive jargon – political, economic and sociological statements and injunctions for Member States to orient their employment and social policies in a common general normative direction. It is more tricky to understand how these activities have affected the domain, design and substance of national policies and national systems of social protection.

A line of research is possible, which – in a non purely causal perspective – sees the main transformations in the area of the dissemination of a political discourse. Immediately the discourse translates into possible resources of legitimacy for a variable set of actors using the EES and – to a lesser extent, other OMCs as channels to further their particular objectives and interests. A striking recurrence of conflicts over the definition and adoption of the discourse has been observed, which echoes traditional structural tensions existing in all Member states between economic and social policies, as well as within the Commission. However the very discourse is but one of the elements which feeds into the much more encompassing processes of constantly evolving systems of social protection.

Empirical documentation of the transformations is essential and should be based on identification of *actual change*. It is all the more necessary to understand whether, in the future, a picture of substantive convergence of systems and of certain policies will emerge. So far, cognitive coordination has settled in an increasing number of policy areas: yet this process can be seen as accompanying, rather than profoundly modifying the basic structures and substance of both national social and employment policies, which remain indeed very diversified in terms of their outcomes (forms of redistribution, inequalities, labour market performance, and so on) and of the systems of values they are based upon. Elite actors are socialised to new procedures and identities, while retaining their former ones, systems of actors are transformed by the introduction of new resources but policies seem to doggedly stay on their national tracks.

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