



JAN DOBBERNACK

'I like the way you move'. Exploring Social Cohesion as Social Activation

Over the last two decades, European social policy objectives have converged to a remarkable extent around different notions of social cohesion. The newly prominent concern is usually seen to require the active contribution of citizens who are called upon to evince responsibility for social unity. Cohesion agendas have been developed with the intention to instil this responsibility and usually entail variegated measures of social activation. The political and argumentative proximity between cohesion and social activity, however, has rarely been explored. While in policy circles the interdependence of both elements tends to be seen as a given, this paper seeks to show how

the two orientations have been conjoined in changing conceptualizations of society in political debate.

In a selective review of debates and agenda-setting moments, the paper examines the development of cohesion agendas in France, Germany and the United Kingdom. *Cohésion sociale* was introduced in the context of ambiguous definitions of social exclusion that had emerged in French political discourse during the early 1980s. It was developed as a political objective that would respond to Jacques Chirac's diagnosis of a *fracture sociale*. *Bürgergesellschaft* in Germany was defined against the background of anxiety about collective immobility, social sclerosis and political apathy. In the early 2000s, it worked as a vehicle for a turn towards activation in wel-

fare state reform. In Britain, *community cohesion* was coined in response to a spate of unrest in the English North. In its most prominent conceptualisations, it responded to the diagnosis that these and other social problems resulted from ethnic segregation, which in turn was caused by misguided multicultural policies and behavioural deficiencies among minority populations.

The paper treats the formation of these agendas, their social evaluations and political prescriptions, as a challenge that requires analysis and critique. It suggests that where cohesion is said to be lacking, populations are often selectively targeted and ethnic minority groups, welfare recipients, or the unemployed are being subjected to new demands: the new concern with social unity tends to lead to the adoption of requirements that are placed on the doorstep of those less able to comply. Drawing on the work of Luc Boltanski, the paper seeks to engage with the literature on social capital, integration, unity and cohesion that has been surprisingly reluctant to reflect upon the increasingly common prescrip-

tion to 'activate' problematic populations.