

Olga Cretu, Middlesex University Business School  
[O.Cretu@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:O.Cretu@mdx.ac.uk)

Dr Claudio Morrison, Middlesex University Business School  
[C.Morrison@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:C.Morrison@mdx.ac.uk)

## **Book Review**

*Social Failures of EU Enlargement: A Case of Workers Voting with their Feet*, by Guglielmo Meardi. Routledge, London, New York, 2012.

Between 2004 and 2007 most post-socialist European countries joined the European Union, while further plans for accession or partnership were laid out for what was left of former-Yugoslavia and the southwestern fringes of the former Soviet Union. For Western Europe this was the crowning of an expansion process that promised to bring peace and stability to the continent. For accession countries, it marked the end of a lengthy and painful process of social and economic restructuring, patiently undertaken with the expectation that market and democratic institutions would bring prosperity. Only a few years on and the picture was altogether different, the aftershocks of the 2008 economic crisis having exposed growing social and economic disparities between old and new Europe matched only by the political divide marked by CEE countries' populist, xenophobic and openly authoritarian tendencies. Published in the same year that the EU was awarded its Nobel Prize, the aptly named "Failures of EU Enlargement" by Guglielmo Meardi provided, with great foresight, a much less triumphalistic account of one aspect of post-socialist transition.

The book deals with employment and industrial relations institutions in post-accession CEE and intends to expose the effects of the enlargement on social standards in the expanded EU. Meardi asks whether the new EU member states represent a 'Trojan horse' for the Americanisation of social relations in Europe, meaning a regime based on minimal welfare, strong inequalities and uneven development. To stay with the metaphor, he seems to suggest that this is the case, to a large degree, because western institutions and employers played a considerable part in building and pulling in the horse. His main argument is that East and West, starting from indisputably different positions in social standards, have continued to diverge essentially because the EU has been unwilling and unable to maintain its 'implicit promise' to activate the transfer of social protection and welfare mechanisms to the East. Multinational companies have also disappointed by failing to transfer participation and employee representation practices to their eastern branches. Free from legal constraints, political pressure and strong industrial action they have taken full advantage of labour weakness. The outcome is workers' dissatisfaction that, interpreted through the prism of Hirschman's voice/exit dichotomy, has translated into various forms of exit including, primarily, large scale migration, misbehaviour at work and support for populist politics.

The book develops its argument in three sections. The first deals with the failure of transfer mechanisms, namely the 'hard' regulatory mechanism known as the social 'acquis communautaire', 'soft' tripartite dialogue (between state, unions and employers) and foreign direct investments by multinationals. The second part is devoted to various forms of exit expressing workers' dissatisfaction with conditions and opportunities in their home country. Meardi observes that mobility has taken the form of circular migration but, despite mobility rights, employers take full advantage of the weak position of CEE migrants in western labour markets to impose maximum flexibility and precarity. This notwithstanding, he recognises that mobility is no simple prerogative of capital but also reflects worker's resistance. Other forms of workers' agency such as turnover and organisational misbehaviour are considered in the following section. On the last, Meardi stretches beyond IR narrow disciplinary confines to look at political behaviour. He observes that without an organised Left to promote workers' demands they express discontent through populism or abstention. The latter, of course, has only a limited political impact, unlike the recent rise of populism in Hungary, Poland and elsewhere. The final chapter discusses the potential for union renewal, a possible return to voice, including engagement with migrants, attempts at cross-border collaborations and the operation of European Work Councils. Albeit promising and at times successful, none of these initiatives seems to gain momentum; the effectiveness of national divisions hampers transnational co-operation.

There is much to be recommended in Meardi's book. Methodologically, it relies on a successful stream of case study research.

Meardi's view on post-socialist Europe is a welcome change from triumphalistic celebrations of shock therapy and neoliberal models as well as from the constant focus on communist legacies routinely blamed for later socio-economic disasters. He recognises that labour degradation is a crucial problem with far-reaching consequences, that western 'betrayal' has much to do with it and consequently that CEE socio-economic problems are not a localised issue. In its wake, scholarship on the informal economy and migration has confirmed the argument, pointing to what some have referred to as the "seepage" of deteriorated employment conditions, as Eastern European labour migrants arrive in the West. Most importantly the book brings the social question and its missing subject, the worker, back to the centre of debates on EU politics, economic restructuring and transition.

Yet, this work is not been impermeable to criticism. Despite Meardi's appreciation for Burawoy's case study method and his 'view from below', much of his research is admittedly orthodox in its approach, testing sets of hypotheses rather than reconstructing social processes. In addition, questions have been raised about who should be blamed for enlargement's social failures; whether it is really appropriate to apply the western European social model -to eastern transition and if the latter ever existed as a formalised set of EU institutions. These remarks point to deeper problems. For all its attention to workers and its aspiration to a dynamic analysis, the book has more to do with institutional dynamics than social processes, institutions rather than social agency. Institutionalism applied to industrial relations tends to be silent about

conflict and the social structures that substantiate or constrain labour rights and its organisations. So it is not that the EU social model was too good for the East or simply poorly codified, rather that it had already been hollowed out, an institutional shell disconnected from the reality of workers' lives and practices of resistance. From this point of view, the greatest achievement of Meardi's book lies in the author's ability to stretch beyond the objective constraints of his discipline to capture key aspects of European post-socialist transformation.