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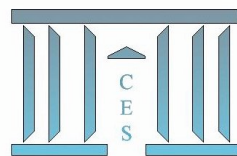
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**Flexicurity – an open method of coordination,  
at the *national level* ?**

Jean-Claude BARBIER, Fabrice COLOMB, Per Kongshøj MADSEN

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# **Flexicurity – an open method of coordination, at the *national level*?**

**Jean-Claude Barbier**

**Fabrice Colomb**

CNRS Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne  
Centre d'économie de la Sorbonne (CES)  
106/112 Bd de l'Hôpital  
75647 Paris Cedex 13, France

**Per Kongshøj Madsen**

Centre for Labour Market Research (CARMA)  
Aalborg University  
Fibigerstræde 1, DK-9220 Aalborg Ø., Denmark

## Résumé

La flexicurité (ou flexisécurité) est une notion qui s'est répandue depuis le début des années 2000, à la suite de l'usage du terme aux Pays-Bas et au Danemark. L'origine du mot est connue : inventée par un sociologue collaborateur du ministre hollandais du travail en 1990 ; c'est le Danemark qui, à partir de 2004-2005 devient l'emblème de la flexicurité. La comparaison des débats sociaux et publics au Danemark et en France, pendant les années 2000 montre que le même discours international superficiel de la flexicurité a été utilisé dans chaque pays pour des objectifs bien divers, au sein d'institutions elles aussi bien différentes. Au fond, les discours internationalisés ne sont pas des indicateurs d'une convergence des systèmes sociaux et des marchés du travail. Les idées communes exprimées en anglais sont plutôt des ressources qui, adaptées et retraduites dans les langues et les systèmes nationaux d'acteurs, servent à ces derniers dans la fabrication des compromis nationaux. De ce point de vue, l'eupéanisation se limite à une couche superficielle de discours politiques et à leur justification à un niveau d'abstraction très général.

Mots clés: flexicurité, flexisécurité, comparaison, France, Danemark, discours, eupéanisation

## Abstract

Flexicurity, as a notion, has spread since 2000, from its use in Netherlands and Denmark. The origin of the word is well known: invented by a sociologist who was an aide to the Dutch minister of labour in 1990. Denmark became emblematic of flexicurity in 2004-2005. We compare public and social debates in Denmark and in France during from 2000 to 2008: we show that the same superficial international discourse was used by both countries but with different goals and within different institutions. International discourses are not a signal of convergence of social systems and labour markets. We could rather say that common ideas expressed in English are adapted and translated in order to fit the national system so that they can be used as resources by actors in the elaboration of national compromises. From that point of view, "Europeanization" is confined to a superficial layer of political discourses and to their justification at a very abstract and general level.

Keywords: flexicurity, comparison, France, Denmark, discourses, Europeanization

JEL classification: J28 ; J88 ; Z13

**CARMA**  
**Centre for Labour Market Research**  
Aalborg University



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## Introduction

“Flexicurity” as it was imported directly in Danish from the start, or “*flexi-sécurité*” (or “*flexicurité*”) as it was named in French, should not only be studied as political slogans, or as forms of a “trade-off” as some economists have it, but also as significant pieces of political discourse with their own rationale and influences. This implies considering it more precisely than just studying the spread of an international buzzword. We will consider that readers are sufficiently familiar with the more or less precise group of meanings the term has gained internationally over the years<sup>1</sup>, and will concentrate upon the role the discourse about “flexicurity” has played, differently, in two countries, Denmark and France. In both countries, the empirical material gathered is drawn from a qualitative observation of the consistency and reforms of the labour market and social protection systems, and the public debate about them in the year 2000s. For this goal, we checked the usage of the term in the quality press in quantitative terms. Moreover, our interrogation was not only about the use of the term in both countries: we will also point to the mirroring situations of a Danish discourse about the “Danish model” (*Danske model*) and a French discourse, comparing the French model (*modèle français*) and the Danish model (*modèle danois*). Debates about “models” took place very differently in the two countries. It is contended here that Danes rather astonishingly discovered that theirs was a “model” in Europe and used this reference for a process of self-examination between social actors, whereas the French, having apparently discovered some miracle recipe in the *modèle danois* and its alleged *flexicurité*, eventually picked up the *flexicurité* debate to Frenchify it and to facilitate the painful discovery of a still unfinished negotiation of reforms.

The object of our study is a ‘trans-national’ one which, at the same time, has clear defining national characteristics<sup>2</sup>. The comparative case study shows that there is much more to the process of Europeanization than just the dissemination of ideas from ‘Brussels’ into the national arenas. To understand the formation of cognitive frameworks or discourses in the European Union (EU) one has to consider many levels of coordination and dissemination. From the empirical comparison conducted here, it is tempting to see “flexicurity” acting, at the end of the day, as a discourse of facilitation used among actors to contribute to a kind of ‘framing’ of the situation, at the national level. As this ‘framing’ of cognitive ideas has been, from the start, at the heart of the Open methods of coordination (Barbier, 2005a), one could see the ‘flexicurity’ discourse as a kind of OMC, *but at the national level*. Different processes, separated from one another happened at the same time, while borrowing from one another and also from the international policy discourse crafted at the EU level. In this respect, policy processes can be seen as having different tempos and different rationales while happening at the same time, because of the persistent separation of national debates, and their at least partial insularity from the ‘Brussels arena’. While from 2005, the flexicurity topic tended to be the only remaining substantial item of ‘social Europe’ after the years 1997-2004 (Barbier, 2008), its discourse was still actively mobilised among the two separate sets of actors in Denmark and France. In both Denmark and France, indeed the tune was called by national actors who gave the discourse and the debates a distinct national goal and substance. The timing of the use of the term will first be documented through a quantitative analysis of the broadsheet quality press, in both countries. After presenting a quantitative overview of the spread of the concept in the press, we will

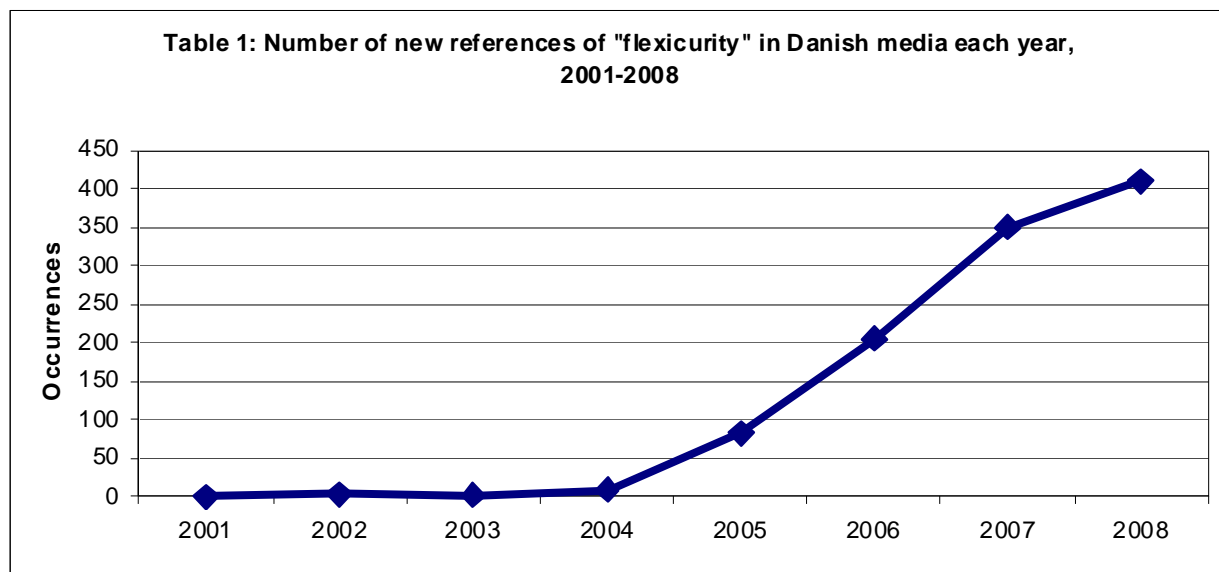
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<sup>1</sup> See reference list at the end of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> National societies in the EU constantly watch one another. Anecdotal testimony of this process is found in the interview by the Danish daily *Politiken* of one of the authors, Jean-Claude Barbier, under the headline “Den danske model er i høj kurs i Frankrig”, (*Sunday*, March, 18, 2006).

proceed in three steps. In a brief section 1, we present our approach to the role of cognitive frameworks and discourses in the analysis of reforms and debates about them. In section 2, we empirically account for the dissemination of the term, starting from its Dutch roots in the 90's, and its early travel to Denmark in the early 2000s, before it eventually called on the French shores, at the end of 2004, at a time when it was simultaneously captured by the EU Commission's DG Employment and Social Affairs for their own purpose. In section 3, we present the mirroring processes of the Danish and the French national debates and try to present their common functioning as a method of coordination within two very substantially different systems of industrial relations.

Table 1 documents the number of references to the term in Danish media and clearly shows a constant increase to 2008.



Source: [www.informedia.dk](http://www.informedia.dk), the count includes all printed and electronic media (national and regional).

In the French case, things are trickier because of the linguistic aspect of the case. Unlike the Danish and Dutch languages, French tends to Frenchify foreign words, and the construction of the functional equivalents in this country has varied: 'flexicurity' was transposed into different expressions [*'flexicurité'* *'flexi-sécurité'*, etc.. see figure 3]<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, 'flexicurity' in France has come to be understood as an relative equivalent of "*sécurisation des parcours professionnels*", the expression used in particular by CFDT (see later). Typically, as figure 5 shows, there was a link between the use of '*modèle danois*' and of '*flexicurité*'.

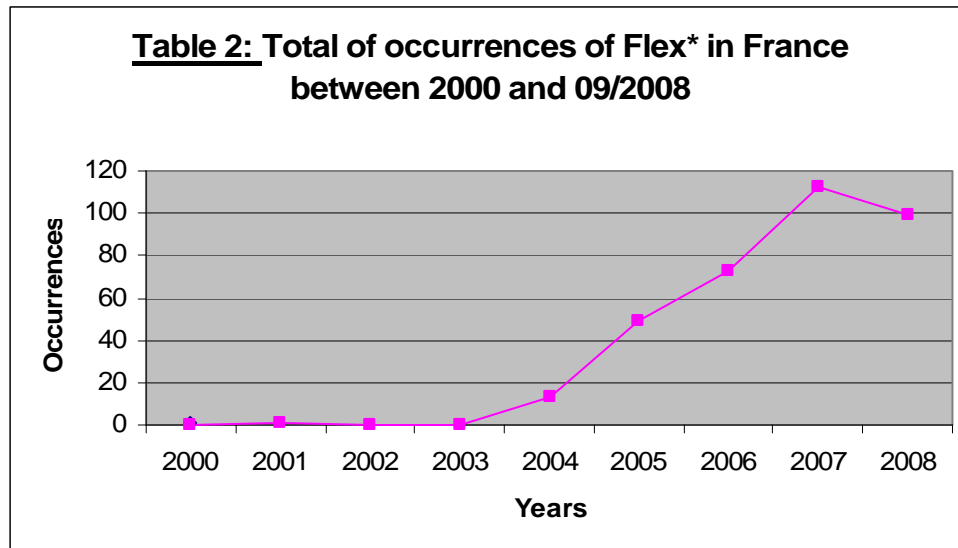
All in all, '*flexisécurité*' spread quickly in France during the last decade and was eventually introduced into the dictionary<sup>4</sup>. However, as the press analysis demonstrates, the institutionalization of the term appears less stable that one would expect. Methodologically, we

<sup>3</sup> Five expressions mix '*flexibilité*' and '*sécurité*' in the press: "*flexisécurité*", "*flexicurité*", "*flexsécurité*", "*Flex-sécurité*" and "*Flexi-sécurité*". If one totals mentions yearly, a peak appears in 2007 with 112 mentions (see figure 2). With no surprise, between 2000 and 2004 "*Flexicurité*" and its variants were barely used at all.

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionnaire Larousse*, 2009.



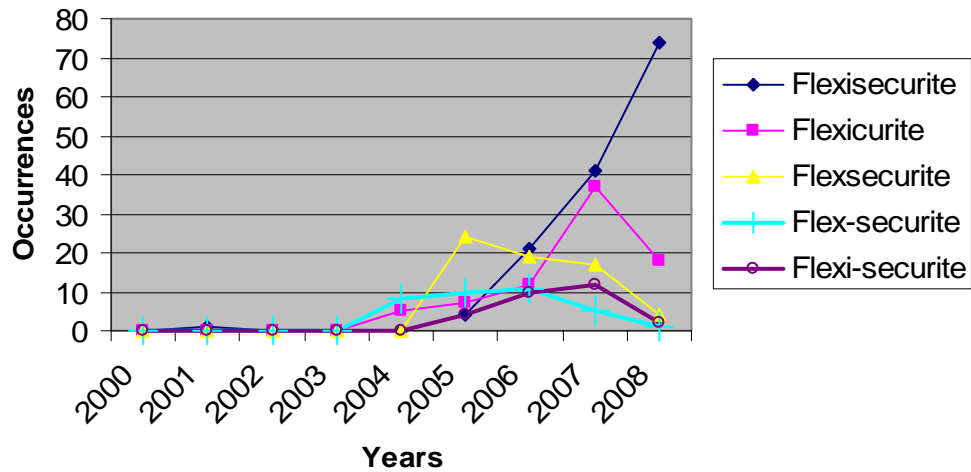
focus on the use of the expression in three quality newspapers (*Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *Libération*) between 2000 and October 2008<sup>5</sup>.



The number of mentions tend to increase gradually, particularly after 2004, at the time when D. Villepin, prime minister, and J-L Borloo, minister of labour, made '*flexicurité*' a leitmotiv of employment policies with the so called 'Borloo plan'.

<sup>5</sup> The analysis was conducted via the website 'global.factiva.com'. It does not account for the use of the word in French in general. Further analysis could be conducted especially in the specialized press of trade unions, business organisations, political parties, as well as academic literature. Illustrating the dissemination of the term in the overall public debate, the present analysis can only capture a trend. It provides a relevant and significant signal of the success of the term. Secondly, as samples and methods are not strictly comparable (sources and periods) between France and Denmark, the comparison should be taken carefully.

**Table 3: Evolution of different terms for "flexicurity" between 2000 and 09/2008**



As figure 3 shows, from 2004 to 2006, expressions used were heterogenous and unstable. If ‘flexsécurité’ prevailed in 2005, its utilisation in 2008 became rare. Obviously, one expression finally prevailed: ‘*flexisécurité*’, an expression which can be seen as stressing the “security” element of the notion more than “flexibility”. This very term was chosen by editors of the dictionary. The expression became popular thanks to the CPE (*contrat première embauche*)<sup>6</sup> (a new contract for the young in 2006 – see later sections) and enjoyed renewed favour after the 2007 presidential election. ‘*Flexicurité*’ can be considered as a slogan which created some consensus between government, trade unions and employer organizations about the subject of negotiations. In 2008, it also served as a justification for the introduction of new labour contracts. The ambition was presented as trying to build a “*flexicurité à la française*”<sup>7</sup>. The latter expression appeared in newspapers in 2007 and 2008 after negotiations started concerning “labour market modernization”. Hence, the expression helped justifying different kinds of projects: the merging of UNEDIC (unemployment insurance fund) with ANPE (public employment service)<sup>8</sup> and the introduction of new employment contracts<sup>9</sup>. It was closely related to “*sécurisation des parcours professionnels*”<sup>10</sup> (figure 4).

<sup>6</sup> *Le Figaro*, 11/04/08.

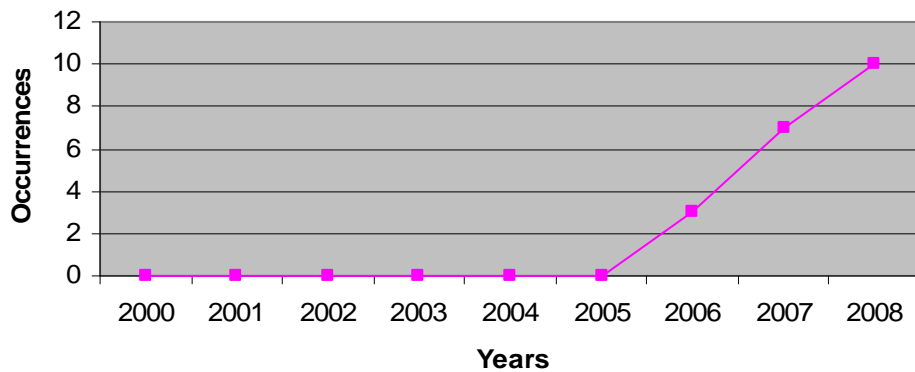
<sup>7</sup> *Le Monde*, 13/01/08.

<sup>8</sup> *Le Figaro*, 24/02/07.

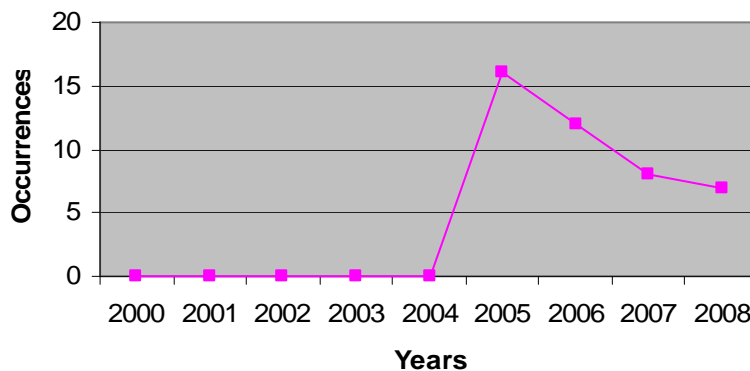
<sup>9</sup> *Id.*, 19/06/07.

<sup>10</sup> See for example *Le Monde*, 25/01/08.

**Table 4: "Flexisécurité" and "Securisation des parcours professionnels"**



**Table 5: Flex\* and "modèle danois between 2000 and 09/2008**



"À la française" stresses the difference from the Danish model. In France, "le modèle danois" was often associated with the very idea of 'flexicurity' especially in the early years (figure 5). while "modèle danois" was generally seen as a 'model' to be imitated if not emulated. As *Le Figaro* wrote in 2005<sup>11</sup>, the number of French ministers' trips to Copenhagen increased significantly. It should be noted that a correlation exists between the term and the amount of lobbying for the 'Danish model' at the EU-level (see later sections). Later on, as critics stressed that it was not possible to "copy" or "import"<sup>12</sup> the "Danish model" in France, the fame of the expression faded away (figure 5). Subsequently, "*flexisécurité à la française*" became more

<sup>11</sup> *Le Figaro économie*, 28/12/05

<sup>12</sup> *Le Monde*, 24/09/08

popular, and « sécurisation des parcours professionnels » as well. This collective linguistic use can be seen as pointing to a sort of « domestication » of the debate. At the same time, whilst two years ago 'flexisécurité' was often used as a panacea<sup>13</sup> or a miracle, today newspapers are more sceptical.

After this first quantitative insight in the use of words in the press, we will examine how the precise term 'flexicurity' came to be used in Denmark and – with its local variants - in France, after its birth in the Netherlands.

## 1. Framing reforms and debates via the flexicurity discourse

Since our main hypothesis is to consider that the use of "flexicurity" facilitated and framed the bargaining process between actors in both countries, it is important to explain the way we use the concept of "discourse". From a general perspective, our approach subscribes to the fact that ideas<sup>14</sup> play a major role within the transformations of public policies. Under the guise of values, norms, culture, paradigms or beliefs, the "intellectual" (or cognitive) dimension is a key variable for analyzing government's action (Hall, 2000). More precisely, ideas should be empirically identified in empirical survey: discourses are the main material (Radaelli, 1999; Campbell, 2004). Through interviews, literature survey or the interpretation of political debates, scientists pay particular attention to expressions and terms which, once situated in their context of production and formulation, give meaning to public policy. In addition, discourses not only act as intermediaries between ideas and actors. Discourses are particularly relevant for the analysis of politicians' motives. In a way, discourses make policies possible. In the context of the circulation of international ideas, this dimension is essential. From the European level to the national level, ideas –and discourses– are adapted, translated and reinterpreted to fit in the societal and institutional constraints of the particular country. Hence, discourses may be studied for themselves: to what extent discourses help the implementation of new policies, how actors use them...? We understand discourses both as the "carriers" of ideas, of signification (meaning), and at the same time as resources for actors.

Beside normative and cognitive dimensions, V. Schmidt (2002) analyses the communicative and coordinative functions of discourse. The latter is especially cogent for the question addressed in this paper: *"As part of its coordinative function, it serves to provide policy actors with a common language and ideational framework through which they can together construct a policy programme, debate its merit, refine it, and come to an agreement on its implementation"* (ibid. : 230). This kind of discourse takes place mainly between policy actors: from government actors to labor and employer unions. A coordinative discourse can also be seen as a resource for transforming the process of discussion and the implementation of programmes (Barbier, 2005). Contrary to substantive change which deals with the change of systems of actors or of policy programmes, procedural discourse aims at transforming the agenda and the frame of reforms.

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<sup>13</sup> *Le Monde*, 25/02/2005 ; *Libération*, 21/03/2006.

<sup>14</sup> "Ideas" are understood in a broad sense: cognitive and normative elements which frame the intellectual dimension of public policies.

Hence, the function of coordinative or procedural discourses is to generate some form of “consensus” between actors. The stake is less a precise content of the discourse than the capacity of actors to include their own point of view within the process of exchange. In this respect, discourses contribute to the reduction of disagreements, particularly when their contents are blurred and ambiguous. At the same time, they allow actors to redefine the limits of the debate, so that different demands can be accommodated. As we will see below, ‘flexicurity’ discourses have taken on these characteristics, both in Denmark and France, but very differently. They facilitated the coordination of actors while giving new frames to the discussion.

## 2. The dissemination of the ‘flexicurity’ concept

Undeniably, ‘flexicurity’, a word which has come to be used without translation<sup>15</sup> in the everyday press in the Netherlands, was invented there. In other countries, gradually from 2005, the term was adopted under different guises, sometimes translated, sometimes not. We focus on the dissemination of the word in Denmark and France and at the EU level.

### *The Dutch roots of flexicurity<sup>16</sup>: where the term was really invented*

Many have tried to take the credit for inventing the flexicurity concept. However it is an indisputable fact that it originated in the Netherlands. Until the mid-1990s, the Netherlands had a rather restrictive system for dismissing standard employees in open-ended contracts. Employers had to ask either the local Centres for Work and Income or the local courts for permission to terminate individual employment contracts. To increase numerical flexibility Dutch employers felt compelled to turn to fixed term contracts, part-time and temporary agency workers (Wilthagen 1998, Wilthagen & Tros 2004).

In the 90’s, a new approach to labour market flexibility and (in)-security appeared on the Dutch political agenda. In a memorandum entitled *Flexibility and Security*, Ad Melkert, the then Minister of Social Affairs and Employment (of the Labour Party), deliberately defined this combination as the ultimate goal. The intention was to modify employment protection for employees working on standard contracts and improve it for temp agency workers. It was not until 1999, however, that this intention was laid down in legislation. The *flex-wet* legislation aimed at rectifying the imbalance between the inflexible labour market for core employees and the insecure labour market situation of temp agency workers. Job security for ordinary employees was modified, the permit system for operating temp agencies was abolished, and employment protection of atypical workers was improved. Thereby, the underlying foundation of labour legislation shifted from job security towards employment security, especially through a

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<sup>15</sup> The person who coined the term ‘flexicurity’ was a sociologist, who was at the time an adviser to the minister Ad Melkert, Hans Adriaansens. The gist of this discussion appeared in a document produced by the WRR (the Dutch Scientific Advisory Council for the Government). The report *Een werkend perspectief, arbeidsparticipatie in de jaren ‘90* (Towards a Working Perspective) was produced for the Dutch government in 1990 (rapporten aan de Regering, n° 38). H. Adriaansens combined the two words flexibility and security into the new term, *flexicurity* which was then used directly in the Dutch language. Hans Adriaansens is currently dean of the Roosevelt Academy in Middelburg. [we would like to thank Trudie Knijn of the University of Utrecht for this information].

<sup>16</sup> This and the following two subsections are based on Bredgaard et al. (2009).

more active labour market policy (for a more detailed account, cf. Wilthagen 1998; Wilthagen and Tros 2004).

The roots of academic research on flexicurity can also be traced to the Netherlands, in the mid-90s. Especially Ton Wilthagen and his colleagues have systematically investigated the Dutch policy origins in order to define and identify some general characteristics of flexicurity strategies. Later on, T. Wilthagen was to become the chair of a group of six experts the Commission (DG Employment and Social Affairs) established in 2006, which published its final report in 2007. For the sake of the history of the concept<sup>17</sup>, let us stress that, stemming from both academic research and from expert groups in many countries, the ideas the political expression was to gradually encompass were discussed in many scientific forums in the 1990s, under various labels. One of the most influential and early cognitive framework in this respect was introduced by Günther Schmid, i. e. as *Übergänge* and *Übergangsarbeitsmärkte* in German, and later translated in international English as “transitions” and “transitional labour markets” (Schmid, 1993; Schmid and Gazier, 2002). One of the side-effects of ‘flexicurity’, as a political (and public policy) expression more and more employed internationally, was to capture the whole gamut of ideas in the semantic area (Barbier, 2007).

### *Flexicurity travels to Denmark*

In Denmark the flexicurity concept really took off in the beginning of the new millennium. The concept was initially introduced as an apt description of some fundamental characteristics of the Danish labour market, and subsequently developed into a “text-book example” of how flexicurity can help create a well-functioning labour market and a competitive economy. In the following we are going to take a closer look at how flexicurity entered and took centre stage in Danish politics and research.

The first explicit reference to a distinctive “Danish model” (*Danske model*) characterised by a special balance between flexibility and security can be found in a publication from the Danish Ministry of Labour from 1999. It describes the so-called “golden triangle” (*gyldne trekant*) of a flexible labour market, a generous unemployment benefit system and an active labour market policy (Danish Ministry of Labour 1999). But the term flexicurity was not applied explicitly. The same year, Per Kongshøj Madsen, wrote a publication for the International Labour Organization (ILO) *Flexibility, security and labour market success* (Madsen 1999). In a number of later publications, Kongshøj Madsen explicitly used the term flexicurity, as a general abbreviation describing the Danish labour market model (Madsen 2002, 2003).

But it is still not until around 2004 that flexicurity becomes part of the political and general, public vocabulary in Denmark. This is illustrated in figure 1.

There are a number of explanations, why it is precisely in 2004 that references to flexicurity skyrocket (figure 1). Internationally, the Danish combination of a flexible labour market and a high level of social security gradually came to represent a kind of benchmark for best flexicurity practice (cf. OECD 2004: chapter 2). This was picked up eventually in the Danish debate as well. And there can be no doubt that awareness of the concept was given an extra boost when the Danish prime minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen at his Liberal party’s annual conference in

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<sup>17</sup> We have argued that flexicurity cannot be a sociological ‘concept’ (the term ‘concept’ in English is larger than ‘concept’ in French, which only applies to scientific categories, as opposed to ‘notions’, Barbier, 2005b: 59).

November 2004 praised the combination of liberal hire-and-fire policies with generous social security schemes:

*We had a EU summit the other day. There I had a chance to tell the others a bit about it. Obviously the meeting was in English. So I combined the two words and said that we had "flexibility" and "security", and then I called the Danish model for a "flexicurity" model. That is a good word because it works in French too - "flexicurité" (own translation)*

Even if the prime minister may not strictly speaking deserve the copyright for coining the term flexicurity<sup>18</sup>, there can be no doubt that the frequent references to flexicurity of the government and especially the Minister of Employment do indeed deserve part of the credit for the massive attention the concept has attracted in Denmark. In a rather short time, flexicurity has acquired a status as a word that is innately positive, a word to be defended, even promoted, at any given opportunity. And this is true of parties to the left as well as the right of the political spectrum.

In the present Danish context, flexicurity is thus understood as a combination of 1) a flexible labour market with high job mobility; 2) extensive social security in the form of unemployment benefits and social assistance, and 3) active labour market and educational policies (cf. Madsen 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006; Bredgaard et al. 2005, 2006). In international comparison, the Danish model is a hybrid (OECD 2004: 97). Danish flexicurity combines the dynamics of a free market system with the social security system of the Scandinavian welfare states (Madsen 1999, 2003, 2005, 2006). Some authors have characterised this "hybrid" between a Scandinavian welfare state and a liberal labour market as unstable, bound to eventually develop into one or the other direction (Hall and Soskice 2001). All the same, the Danish mix of flexibility and security does in fact seem stable, and it dates back a long time.

The flexible labour market can be traced back to the so-called September Compromise (*Septemberforliget*) of 1899, which marked the end of a long industrial conflict. This agreement between the social partners, with a few minor changes, has been the "constitution" of the Danish labour market ever since, granting ordinary employees only limited employment protection. Income security was gradually built up with the state's recognition of the unemployment insurance funds, which led to the development of public unemployment insurance and an unemployment benefit system, which celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2007 (Arbejdsdirektoratet 2007). Expansion of the social security system in reality took off in the late 1960s with improvements in the generosity, duration and degree of income compensation of the unemployment benefit system. Similarly, social assistance was firmly established as the last social safety net by the Social Assistance Act from 1976. The last corner of the golden triangle, the active labour market policy, was significantly extended with a large labour market reform in 1993 (Bredgaard et al. 2006).

The main axis of flexibility and security has its roots in strong social and historical compromises that have been balanced and re-balanced over time. The flexicurity concept is well suited to capture and systematise these historical-institutional characteristics of the Danish labour market. As should also be evident, the Danish combination of numerical flexibility, social security and employment security is not the product of a careful and deliberate strategy, but rather the

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<sup>18</sup> Note that the previous Prime minister, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, at about the same time, claimed that his government was responsible for the invention of the method, if not the term.

outcome of a long historical-institutional development and social compromises in a number of different policy areas. Given these historical preconditions, Danish flexicurity is difficult to copy or export (Larsen 2005).

### *Flexicurity on the European scene*

In the last couple of years flexicurity has furthermore become a political celebrity in the European discourse about social and economic policies (Jørgensen & Madsen 2007). Yet, the goal to combine flexibility and security is not new in the European discussion. The spirit of this discussion has informed most documents since the publication of the “White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment”, adopted under the presidency of Jacques Delors in 1993<sup>19</sup>. The term was also surfacing in the EU Commission’s Green Paper from 1997, *Partnership for a New Organisation of Work*, stating that: «*The key issue for employees, management, the social partners and policy makers alike is to strike the right balance between flexibility and security*”. In the same vein, one should also not forget an important report directed by Alain Supiot, a French law professor: the report was commissioned by the DG Employment in July 1996 and eventually published in 1999 in French (*Au-delà de l’emploi*) and in English (*Beyond Employment*)<sup>20</sup>. At that time, while the terms ‘flexicurity’ or ‘flexicurité’ were indeed not yet used, the core substance of the report leaves no doubt about the purpose the ten law professors were aiming at. In one key section of the report, the authors stated: “To be effective, flexibility should be based on the security of individuals<sup>21</sup>”. Accordingly, the Supiot report explicitly mentions the Dutch debate about the Bill which was later to be called *Flexibiliteit en Zekerheid*<sup>22</sup> (see previous section). At the same time, Allan Larsson, the former Swedish Finance minister, then General Director of DG Employment and Social Affairs, along with other colleagues and Jacques Delors, was actively involved in the preparation of the European Employment Strategy (Barbier, 2008). In 1999, Larsson made many presentations about the advantages of the Danish mode of organisation for social protection, public services and labour market matters (Larsson, 1999). Finally, it should also not be forgotten that the OECD played a role in the spreading of the supposed good news about flexicurity. Its *Employment outlook* praised the so-called « golden triangle » in Denmark (2004, p.108-109), whereas noting at that time that the triangle, for all its benefits, also involved high public employment expenditure.

Importantly, the ambition of striking a better balance between flexibility and security has been repeated at a series of EU summits, not least in connection with the Lisbon strategy from 2000, and in the European Employment Strategy (Wilthagen and Tros 2004). Thus the European Employment Strategy (EES) Guideline No 21 (applicable for the period 2005-2008), was urging member states to «*promote flexibility combined with employment security and reduce labour market segmentation*” (European Commission 2006a: 75-76).

In the late 2000’s, ‘flexicurity’ moved centre stage as an overarching concept to integrate various well-known EU priorities in employment policies and social affairs. In the first half of

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<sup>19</sup> Sections in the White Paper in chapters 7 and 8 deal with training, flexibility and job creation, and clearly point to the negotiation of a “balance of social protection between part-time and full-time workers so as to avoid major discontinuities” (quoted from the Commission’s website version; page 153 of the French edited version).

<sup>20</sup> Present edition available in English, 2001. Among others, Barbier and Nadel (2000) discussed both the Supiot report and G. Schmid’s transitional markets (p. 95-100).

<sup>21</sup> In the section “from passive protection to active security” (quoted from the French version, 1999, p. 269).

<sup>22</sup> Page 44 of the French version. Professor Van der Heijden (Amsterdam University) was one of the ten members of the Supiot expert group.



2006, the Austrian presidency of the EU made strategies to combine flexibility and security one of the main themes, and repeatedly referred to the Danish example of flexicurity. Later the same year (November 2006), the Commission published a Green Paper on the modernisation of labour law, encouraging a discussion about whether and how labour market rules and regulations could help further flexicurity, and thus support the objectives of the Lisbon strategy (European Commission 2006b). The hearing sparked heated debate about flexicurity and the need to relax employment protection legislation, and, among other things, clearly demonstrated the sceptical attitude of the European Trade Unions towards flexicurity (Keune & Jepsen 2007). Subsequently the Commission took initiative to organise a tripartite social summit on flexicurity to give input to establish common principles of flexicurity that could guide national employment policies.

While European politicians and social partners were trying to build consensus on the definition, principles and implications of flexicurity, DG employment and social affairs published its annual report on *Employment in Europe* in which two chapters were devoted to a detailed discussion about flexicurity (European Commission 2006a). The report stated what later became the four main components of flexicurity: (1) flexible and reliable contractual arrangements; (2) comprehensive lifelong learning strategies; (3) effective active labour market policies, and (4) modern social security systems. These components were later reiterated in the Commission's Communication on flexicurity in June 2007. These four components of flexicurity restate the main policy areas, which have been prioritised by the EU Commission at least since the Lisbon Strategy in 2000. They are all quite broad and abstract, thus allowing for continued national interpretation and implementation. It is, however, remarkable how similar this understanding of 'European flexicurity' and its four components are to the traditional understanding of Danish flexicurity (cf. later). At the risk of oversimplifying, it seems that the goals of the European employment policy were to imitate the Danish version of flexicurity.

During the political process of bridging conflicting interests of diverse European actors, it became clear that the original intention of devising common principles of flexicurity could not gather sufficient political support and might conflict with the principle of subsidiarity. Instead the EU Commission reassured that flexicurity did not entail "one-size-fit-all" solutions, and begun developing different "pathways" to flexicurity. With Ton Wilthagen as rapporteur, The Commission established an expert group on flexicurity, which released two reports in June 2007 (Expert group on flexicurity 2007). At the same time the Commission released its Communication on common principles on flexicurity. Given the political controversy aroused by flexicurity, the concept was not surprisingly defined rather vaguely as an integrated strategy to enhance at the same time flexibility and security in the labour market (European Commission 2007: 4).

The main message of the Communication and Expert reports was that there were many roads (pathways) to flexicurity. Without mentioning specific countries or clusters, four different pathways to a balance of flexibility and security were described: (1) Tackling contractual segmentation, (2) developing flexicurity within the enterprise and offering transition security, (3) tackling skills and opportunity gaps among the workforce, and (4) improving opportunities for benefit recipients and informally employed workers. Without being a straightjacket these pathways were supposed to inspire member states to launch integrated reform packages in cooperation with concerned stakeholders (especially the social partners). Member states were required to report explicitly on their flexicurity strategies in the national reform programs. In the meantime DG Employment was developing common indicators to monitor progress in the

member states. In December 2007, the European Council adopted the common principles of flexicurity in a slightly modified compared to the June 2007 communication.

In political terms, it is not difficult to see why ideas about flexicurity became so popular among European decision-makers. Giving enterprises more freedom to adjust employment while at the same time providing social security and satisfied workers sounded like the very recipe for guaranteed improvement of competitiveness, high approval ratings – and re-election! Flexicurity was claimed to create new “win-win” relations between former adversaries. As the definition of the concept was open to virtually any interpretation, it was ideal for rallying support without the risk of arousing conflict. Moreover, following the establishment of a new Commission under president Barroso, while the European Employment Strategy was marginalised (Barbier, 2008), and when Directorate General Employment and Social Affairs was in a weaker position vis-à-vis its Economic and Financial counterparts, the flexicurity debate provided an opportunity to invest in by the ‘social actors’ within the Commission.

The resulting EU-level approach to flexicurity makes it possible to read many different interests and considerations into the concept. Despite their scepticism, the European trade union movement and the political left also perceived ‘flexicurity’ as a chance to revitalise the Lisbon strategy and give social security, lifelong learning and active labour market policies a more prominent position on the European agenda. The political right as well as European employers’ and business’ organisations, on the other hand, perceived ‘flexicurity’ as an opportunity to introduce less stringent hiring and firing rules, perhaps compensated by various forms of employment security. What was witnessed was thus a power struggle about how to define and interpret the concept of flexicurity. At the European level, this became clearer and clearer when the European Parliament was consulted over the flexicurity framework: various political groupings in the Parliament published different views about the question<sup>23</sup>. Just as the economic and financial crisis extended, and the Commission was wrong-footed politically, the fate of flexicurity at the EU level appeared very much jeopardized and a late and modest report was posted on the Commission’s website discreetly after a special mission had visited five countries<sup>24</sup>.

*Flexicurity in France in the political debate (“La flexicurité/flexi-sécurité”/ “le modèle danois”)*

In France, the explicit use of the term *flexicurité* (and *flexisécurité*, *flexi-sécurité*) is documented around 2003, as figure 2, and 3 show. After that, the use kept increasing.

For the purpose of the present comparative paper, it is of little importance to note that the eventual choice of the very word to introduce into the French language has still not been fully stabilised at the time of writing. Unlike the Danish and Dutch languages, French has always been reluctant to accept English words automatically. What is more important, however, is to note that, in the press, in parliament and in the media in general, the public debate has involved a

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<sup>23</sup> For instance the Party of European socialists vigorously criticized the Commission’s view (as expressed by Commissioner Vladimir Špidla) in a paper discussed in 2007, but many other groups intervened in the debate (Barbier, 2007, p. 182-183)

<sup>24</sup> Report by the Council Secretariat, December, 12, 2008, available on the Commission’s website.

parallel and often combined mix of two expressions: ‘*modèle danois*’ (Danish model) and ‘*flexicurité*’ or its variants (see figure 5).

Additionally, other expressions have been usually employed by groups of actors, with the intent of addressing the same substantive question of reconciling security and flexibility. However, the precise choice of these expressions was certainly never insignificant. To take but one example, two different terms have been used extensively by the two bigger unions, CFDT and CGT since the early 2000s. CGT has preferred to promote a new “social security system for workers/employees” (*sécurité sociale professionnelle*)<sup>25</sup>, while CFDT has stuck to defending “*la sécurisation des parcours professionnels*” – which literally means the “securing” of “employment trajectories or careers”. However, for the French case, we eventually concentrate on the notion of *flexicurité* (and its allied variations – see chart) for comparative purposes. Moreover, while the French debate about the relationship between flexibility and security has been going on for a long time (Barbier and Nadel 2000), the assumption of this paper is that the introduction in 2003-2005 of *le modèle danois* and *la flexi-sécurité* signal an important turn in the French way of debating and framing policies, in a word, the emergence of a turn in the cognitive frameworks (more precisely, the *référentiels* (Jobert, 2003). This assumption as to the gradual emergence and coalescence of a new set of ideas about employment policy, labour law and social protection, which we tested in 2007 (Barbier 2007: 177-183) has eventually proven right in the light of recent developments in 2007-2009 (see later), once the cognitive framework was in a way “domesticated” or “Frenchified” into “*la flexisécurité à la française*”.

Whereas in 2003, the use of the word started timidly in France, 2004 saw a real increase as the fad of the *modèle danois* really took hold of the media, politicians and many academics. With hindsight, the ‘apex’ of the spread of the buzzword *modèle danois* appears to be 2005 (see chart 5). The enthusiasm spreading among élites was such that a considerable number of visits to Denmark, and Copenhagen in particular, was organised in 2005-2006. Late joiners arrived only at the end of 2006, but by 2007, while the fad was really over, fresh negotiations were organized and well under way (see next section).

In September 2004, Jean-Louis Borloo, then minister for employment, explicitly positioned his « *Plan de cohésion sociale* » under the reference of « La ‘flex-sécurité’ danoise », which to him was « une source d’inspiration privilégiée pour mettre en place des solutions novatrices » (a preferential source of inspiration for innovating)<sup>26</sup>. In October the same year, another French minister (*délégué aux relations du travail*) Gérard Larcher, was invited in Copenhagen by LO and DA, the Danish social partners’ organisations<sup>27</sup>. During the parliamentary debate in 2005, repeated mention was made to the Danish type of ‘flexicurity’ by M. Larcher<sup>28</sup>. Also in 2004, an

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<sup>25</sup> We are aware that translating “*sécurité sociale*” into the English “social security” is largely inadequate (Barbier, 2008, p. 33-35). The closest synonym of *sécurité sociale* is the English “welfare state”.

<sup>26</sup> Ministère de l’emploi, du travail et de la cohésion sociale, « Plan de cohésion sociale », p. 9, chapitre 1, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> G. Larcher later emerged as closely working together with the Danish liberal minister Klaus Hjort Frederiksen, especially in the mission for flexicurity established by the EU Commission.

<sup>28</sup> Before the Senate (November, 2, 2004), minister Larcher, indirectly mentioning the ‘September compromise’ (*September forliget*) took 1899 for 1896. « Au Danemark, depuis 1896, les partenaires sociaux dialoguent sans s’invectiver mutuellement. Le dialogue social est aussi la priorité que notre gouvernement veut mettre en œuvre. Il n’est pas question d’opposer les uns et les autres dans une forme de lutte des classes permanente, il s’agit de travailler au service d’une conception équilibrée de la société ». « Nous évoquons tout à l’heure l’exemple du Danemark : dans ce pays, le parcours de retour vers l’emploi de 60 % des hommes et des femmes les plus éloignés de l’emploi s’effectue directement dans des entreprises du secteur marchand. » (idem).

official report commissioned by the government considered that the Danish reforms were to be emulated in France<sup>29</sup>, while a parliamentary delegation made the trip to Copenhagen in the second semester<sup>30</sup>. Among many other reports commissioned by the French government at that time, one should also stress the importance of the one written by Pierre Cahuc, a university professor of economics, and Francis Kramarz, a top civil servant in the ministry of finance.

Published in december 2004, the report was precisely titled *De la précarité à la mobilité, vers une sécurité sociale professionnelle* and it is important to tell more about this title, from a comparative point of view. We already mentioned above that “*sécurité sociale professionnelle*” has been the expression favoured only by CGT. That the report’s authors used it was a rhetorical device, as in the text no direct mention exists about what such a “*sécurité sociale professionnelle*” would be. The reference to “*précarité*” is also most interesting. I have shown elsewhere the specificity of the use of the French expression and its impossible translation into other languages (Barbier, 2005c). In its first chapters, the report argues that one of the characteristics of the French labour market is its rigidity (because of ‘employment protection’) and that outsiders are unable to have access to jobs, especially the young. Hence the widely held view among employees in France that they are insecure. While the term ‘flexicurity’ was not used explicitly in the text, positive reference was made to the Danish situation at numerous moments of the argument<sup>31</sup> concerning employment contracts, the public employment service, etc.. Eventually, the report advocated the gradual creation of a single employment contract for all and the enhancement of public employment services, along with the reform of hire and fire legislation. Only some of its conclusions were taken into account by the government but the report still features today, nearly five years after its publication, as a key document in the debate about the balance to establish between security (what the report named “employment protection”) and flexibility (what the report tended to label “mobility”). The report also stressed the need to secure “*trajectoires*” (careers)<sup>32</sup>, a term as we have said which features high in the present debate. Political parties in the opposition were also involved in the debate directly. In 2005, for instance, the Jean Jaurès foundation (Socialist Party) published a long report by Elisabeth Guigou, a senior member and former minister, titled *Crise de l’emploi, malaise au travail* (employment crisis and work dissatisfaction), which praised the “Danish model”<sup>33</sup>.

What is however interesting to note is that, at the end of the day, the explicit references made to flexicurity and – almost interchangeably to the “*modèle danois*” – eventually led to the political defeat of the de Villepin’s government. To understand this unhappy outcome of one use of *flexicurité*, one has to recall that France is characterised by a high level of union fragmentation

<sup>29</sup> « D’autres l’ont fait », (p. 43-48, Rapport Camdessus, « Le sursaut, vers une nouvelle croissance pour la France », 2004).

<sup>30</sup> « Rapport d’information sur le marché de l’emploi au Danemark », N° 1913, Assemblée nationale, 9-11-2004.

<sup>31</sup> « Il faut trouver une voie permettant de concilier un impératif d’équité, donnant les meilleures conditions possibles pour les plus démunis, avec un impératif d’efficacité qui est la seule manière d’assurer la viabilité financière de tout système assurantiel. Ce sont de tels impératifs qui ont guidé les réformes des systèmes d’indemnisation du chômage et des services publics de l’emploi menées depuis une décennie dans plusieurs pays de l’OCDE, et notamment aux Pays Bas, au Danemark, au Royaume-Uni en Australie et en Allemagne » (ch. 2, p. 40, rapport, 2.12.2004, P. Cahuc et F. Kramarz).

<sup>32</sup> Report by P. Cahuc and F. Kramarz, 2004, p. 33 and p. 46 in particular.

<sup>33</sup> In its foreword, the report wrote : « Le modèle danois est là pour nous montrer qu’on peut à la fois, privilégier la sortie du chômage et la sortie de la pauvreté, mais à un certain nombre de conditions souvent passées sous silence : un dialogue social intense, des syndicats forts, ainsi que des politiques publiques axées sur la formation continue et le suivi personnalisé des demandeurs d’emploi et dotées de moyens considérables, impliquant un taux de prélèvement obligatoire beaucoup plus élevé qu’en France » (note n° 45, p. 9).

and a low union density, where a relatively high level of social conflict accompanies the implementation of reforms, with great uncertainty about eventual outcomes. In this country, labour law overwhelmingly prevails over collective agreements. Often, as was the case again in 2005-2006, with prime minister de Villepin, the government tries and passes Bills in Parliament to reform either social protection or labour law, without really consulting with social partners or unions. This often leads to reforms being controversial and provides motives for conspicuous street demonstrations<sup>34</sup>. In 2005-2006, the government experienced a short-lived success when introducing a new employment contract (*contrat nouvelle embauche*, August 2005) with shorter notice periods, for firms with less than 20 staff, and it thought the introduction of an additional one of a similar type for the young was going to be easy in early 2006. The de Villepin government always claimed that this was a policy initiative due to its learning from Denmark (Barbier 2007). But the reform for the new contract for the young was eventually defeated in the streets. Hence, it is not surprising that, when he presented a 'social testament' before the *Conseil économique et social*, the defeated prime minister strongly stressed that one of the main tasks of the government he was leaving was to create "*une flexicurité à la française*"<sup>35</sup>. To give an important element of comparison with the Danish labour market, it should be noted that, when the French prime minister was talking, only 50% of the unemployed registered regularly were eligible to unemployment insurance. Special contracts and arrangements were tested at the time to ease transitions between jobs, but they were always piecemeal and extremely selective or remained experimental<sup>36</sup>. One year on, after his utter defeat, the prime minister acknowledged that reforms for flexicurity as he saw it were still projects for the future. At that time, this empirical situation, coupled with empirical data stemming from our surveys in other countries, inclined us to think that the umbrella concept of 'flexicurity' was now so diverse in its scope that it could mean practically any institutional arrangement (Barbier 2007). Both the government and the Cahuc and Kramarz reports have, each with their own policy prescriptions or actual reforms claimed that they had the solution to end "employment precariousness", but French public opinion never really accepted the message. With hindsight, it is important, finally to see the

<sup>34</sup> During the 90s, apart from a period of intense demonstrations triggered by Prime minister Balladur in 1994 over a government proposal to create a special contract with a lower minimum wage for the young, two main significant social movements took place. The first one (winter 1995) was organised over pensions in the public sector and the healthcare insurance reform; the second (winter 1997-98), over the situation of the unemployed, was organised by the unemployed's NGOs. A fourth moment was the reform of the unemployment insurance. Although it did not spark off demonstrations in any way comparable to the 1994, 1995 and 1997 waves, it did indeed provoke very active and fierce debate. On a smaller scale, recurrent debate and strikes supported by the unions have also accompanied the series of the most significant (and media reported) waves of redundancies.

<sup>35</sup> « Pour ma part, je vois trois chantiers majeurs à engager pour instaurer une véritable flexisécurité à la française. Le premier, c'est celui du droit du travail et du contrat de travail. C'est une évolution qui devra se faire par la négociation et la concertation, avec le souci permanent de développer l'emploi et en veillant à ne pas fragiliser la situation des salariés. Avec le contrat "nouvelles embauches", nous avons montré qu'une telle évolution était possible (...). Le deuxième, c'est la réforme de la formation professionnelle. Aujourd'hui, les parcours professionnels sont moins linéaires. Quelqu'un qui rentre sur le marché du travail sait qu'il devra changer de poste et d'entreprise plusieurs fois dans sa vie. Si nous voulons permettre à chacun de réussir son parcours et de progresser dans sa carrière, nous devons profondément remanier notre système de formation professionnelle. Ensemble, nous devons avoir la même ambition que celle de Jacques Delors avec les partenaires sociaux au début des années 1970. (...) Un système qui coûte près de 30 milliards d'euros aux Français doit être d'une efficacité irréprochable. Le troisième chantier, c'est la réforme du service public de l'emploi. Elle passe par une fusion de l'ANPE et de l'Unedic, comme l'a proposé le Président de la République ». (Prime Minister's speech at the *Conseil économique et Social*, February, 26, 2007 where he told there were three main axes for this future "*flexicurité à la française*": reforming labour law; reforming vocational training, and reforming the Public employment service.

<sup>36</sup> See for instance, the Introduction of a new contract: "*contrat de transition professionnelle*" for a very small group of employees and its experimentation in six regions since summer 2006

period 2003-2007 as one where – however distorted and difficult – French society was coming to grips with the necessity of systematic and systemic reforms. However, it is only in the more recent period that significant changes have occurred, in the wake of the presidential election of 2007.

### 3. The *modèle danois* / the *danske model*: mirror cases and singular social usage embedded in two different polities/political cultures

It is now important to understand how the notion of ‘model’, whether *modèle danois* or *Danske model*, has been a tool in both countries for actors to discuss and debate about their system of social protection, each for their own sake in a period of active reforms. In this respect, one can consider that ‘flexicurity’ – with its indispensable link to the Danish version both in France and Denmark – has acted as a ‘method of coordination’ for social actors, despite the very contrasted industrial relations systems (a conflictual and consensual corporatist system in Denmark, with genuine and legitimate competence for the social partners, and a system of divided unions and of employers’ organisations system, with a prominent role for the state in France).

Of course, both countries were never in a symmetric position with regard to a ‘model’. In a nutshell, Danes ‘discovered’ that theirs was a model of ‘flexicurity’ within which they had been living for quite a long time – maybe since the *September forliget* (1899) – and they gradually became accustomed to being pace-setters in Europe, a situation they relished. On the other hand, as a counterpart, France – which had been experiencing a period of profound interrogation and self-depreciation since the early 1990’s, ‘discovered’ the Danish system and its actualisation of ‘flexicurity’ as a sort of “miracle”<sup>37</sup>. With hindsight –however superficial it was – this discovery can be explained not only in terms of the government’s and politicians’ ability to seize upon new concepts opportunistically. As the developments in 2007-2009 demonstrated, social actors seized the flexicurity slogan in order to discuss reform seriously. Despite its different characteristics as an ‘EU- level’ method, this social use may be seen as analogous to an open method of coordination for actors, but at the national level.

*France: a protracted reflection in society that eventually made a step, with a little help from flexicurity (1982-2009)*

Whereas in the previous section we documented the explicit use of the term flexicurity and its vagaries in the period 2003-2006, in close relation in France with *le modèle danois*, it is now pertinent to distance oneself from the empirical expression, and to replace the role it can be finally seen to have assumed as a method, a tool which allowed better coordination between the social actors involved. Yet, to do this, we must also stress a paradox. Well before the introduction of the explicit word and the reference to Denmark, a considerable amount of public debate about the labour market and social protection took place in France, via official reports and academic publications. From a French point of view, without using the term, this literature had precisely been addressing the very substance of ‘flexicurity’. It was only in a second period, after this protracted discussion, but also after numerous social movements (which we have noted in the above sections), that, the situation appeared to change significantly, *with a little help from ‘flexicurity’*. Indeed, the origins of what was eventually to become the French debate about

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<sup>37</sup> In the quality paper *Le Monde*, many articles were published at the time. See for instance A. Lefebvre and D. Meda (2005); J.-C. Barbier (2005d).

*flexicurité* encompass many influences which we will not be able to document here comprehensively.

F. Gaudu has remarked that a dynamic approach to the labour market emerged in the 1980's, with the debate over "*trajectoires professionnelles*" – i. e. a vision of the succession of various employment relationships for individuals (Gaudu 2007). At the time, the expression "*trajectoires professionnelles*" came to be commonly used<sup>38</sup>. This meant that a vision in terms of a necessary (unavoidable) succession of jobs was starting to challenge the dominant reality of employment contracts that were previously open-ended, and often in one single firm with some sort of "life-tenure". Two official reports had an important impact on French debates in expert circles (Gautié 2006), the *Rapport Boissonnat* (1995), and the *Rapport Supiot* (1999, already mentioned earlier). Both reports concurred on the analysis that the standard employment contract was now unable to provide employees with adequate security for their lifetime. Both also proposed to frame the debate differently, "enlarging the scope" of a "status" which was deemed to be able to encompass a variety of legal situations and a variety of employment situations across employees' careers. The discussion was also actively going on within the main confederations of unions, CFDT and CGT. As we have already seen CGT adopted an exploratory directive at its congress in 1999, contending that time was now ripe for the invention of "*une sécurité sociale professionnelle*". One of the essential aspects of this text was the assumption that social rights should now be organised in order to be fully transferable from one firm to the other, when the employee moved from one to the other employment relationship<sup>39</sup>.

To say it too briefly, with hindsight, the period 1989-2005 can be seen as one of gradual construction and inconsistent gestation of reforms, by trials and errors: reforms were imagined in many areas that have since been seen as pertaining to the scope of 'flexicurity': unemployment insurance, labour market policies and the public employment service (PES), but also minimum income benefits which have been exceptionally numerous and diverse in the French case, and finally, the employment contract<sup>40</sup>. This period saw the adoption and the abandonment of many reforms, whilst a sort of flexibilization "by stealth" was implemented at the same time (Barbier and Fargion, 2004). In the last leg of the period to 2005, the pace of reforms accelerated: reform of the unemployment insurance in 2001-2002; reform of the assistance benefit for the unemployed with former insurance rights (2002) later cancelled; tentative reform of the PES and job search rules (2005); partial and failed reform of the mainstream minimum assistance benefit (*revenu minimum d'insertion*) in 2003-2004; introduction of additional employment contracts in 2005-2006, that were later to be scrapped.

Over the last decade or so, the proportion of non standard contracts (a key indicator in the debate in France which has little relevance in the Danish one) has remained rather stable, around 20% for central state administration, 33% for local and regional authorities and 5% for public hospitals, and 10 to 12% in the private sector. The public sector has certainly been the place where flexibilisation has happened through the introduction of a spate of 'special contracts', i.e. in a great part, subsidized contracts (*contrats aidés*), of which the *Contrat emploi solidarité* (CES) renamed many times, was typical (Barbier and Fargion, 2004). As a result, while

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<sup>38</sup> See for instance, Méda and Minault (2005).

<sup>39</sup> In the context of a cooperative cross-national project funded by FP5 Framework funds, see: J.-C. Barbier *et al.*, 2002.

<sup>40</sup> It is true that, within policy communities, the reference to 'activation policies' and/or "activating the unemployed" were also increasingly used in this context.



measures taken to integrate atypical public sector employees into the civil service have resulted in the stabilisation of their proportion, a supplementary source of flexible manpower was added from the 90's on, via the implementation of special contracts. Fixed-term contracts in the public sector enjoyed higher duration limits than in the private sector. The ultimate failed reform of the period was attempted by the government in 2005-2006 in two stages in order to foster 'flexibility': first, a special contract (*contrat nouvelle embauche* – CNE) with a trial period of 2 years was implemented for small firms and it encountered temporary success. However, when in 2006 the government decided to extend it to the young, with the *contrat première embauche* (CPE), this measure sparked off a large social movement (with the unanimous support of trade unions) and the prime minister was obliged to abandon the project. CNE was later censured by the ILO, to be finally scrapped from the Labour code definitely in 2008.

### *A fresh step under the label of 'flexicurité/flexisécurité à la française'?*

It is only after this long period of debate and uncertain negotiation among social actors that, with the help of its framing in terms of 'flexicurity', a new step was accomplished when a new window of opportunity opened with the election of a new president in 2007. The presidency took to the strategy of starting a considerable number of reforms across policy sectors at the same time. The president, who – unlike many in the political class – had conspicuously refrained from using explicit references to the Danish model, was active in promoting, along with key aides, a fresh approach to the role of social partners – at least for reasons of political communication. References to *le modèle danois* gradually faded away from the public debate and from the broadsheet press from 2006, whilst, at the same time, *flexicurité* and *flexisécurité* enjoyed constantly increasing fame and use (see figure 2 and 3).

In the unemployment insurance system, after the failed 2002-2004 reform, a new agreement was passed between social partners in January 2006 and approved by the government. At the time of writing, the fresh 2009 agreement (*'convention de l'assurance chômage'*) has just been approved. The main changes agreed in 2006 by the majority (except CGT) of trade unions and employers' organisations were related to traditional adjustments of employers and employees' contributions to the fund in order to balance its budget. The duration of entitlement was also adjusted again in the still provisional agreement in 2009; despite CGT again declining to sign the new pact for unemployment insurance, rules will improve eligibility for young unemployed people. The adoption of the new '*convention*' has also to be seen in the context of the new rules which were adopted in 2007-2008, with both agreements from CGT and CFDT as to the representativeness (*représentativité*) of national federations. Precisely, the adoption of these new rules are seen in France by many as a direction towards better social negotiation in firms and at the national level, which, for the matter involved here, can be seen as having been facilitated by the 'flexicurity' framing of debates between social partners (Bevort and Jobert, 2008, p. 248 ssq.). In this respect, the January 2008 Agreement was by no surprise dubbed "*flexisécurité à la française*" in the quality press, while the label of the agreement was more subdued: "*modernisation du marché du travail*" (*labour market modernisation*). Interestingly, this latter national agreement was eventually not explicitly signed by CGT. Despite its active involvement in the negotiation, CGT eventually declared that the agreement was unbalanced, while CFDT argued that it was a way to promote better labour market regulation and negotiation. To wit, although the January 2008 has certainly not be fully implemented, it can be seen with the

hindsight of more than one year as having facilitated social negotiations in France, and from the perspective adopted here, ‘flexi-sécurité’ was a cognitive frame that helped this outcome<sup>41</sup>.

### *The Danes: Waking up in the Baron’s bed*

In a famous Danish play by Ludvig Holberg written in 1722, a poor peasant called Jeppe is being placed in the Baron’s bed on the castle, while he is still asleep after having been found drunk in a nearby dunghill. As a kind of social experiment, the Baron wants to see, how an underprivileged individual reacts to the sudden chance. When Jeppe wakes up and sees his silk pyjamas and the elegant bedroom, he exclaims: “Am I dreaming - or am I awake?”. The term “to wake up in the Baron’s bed” has since been a traditional Danish saying, when somebody suddenly realises a dramatic and encouraging change.

For the Danes, the introduction of flexicurity from 2004 and onwards was like “waking up in the Baron’s bed”. This was not in the sense that the Danish labour market model itself had suddenly changed overnight. As described above, the main elements of the Danish model had been in place since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, although one could say that the present profile was created in the late 1960ties (the benefit system) and the early 1990ties (the active labour market policy).

What happened in 2004 was therefore first of all a *discursive* shift. Suddenly the Danes realised that their labour market model was something special and valuable. This shift did not come by itself, but was initiated and supported by different national political actors, who saw a clear interest in promoting this new vision of the Danish model.

One important actor was the Ministry of Employment, where it was rapidly realised that the new story-line about the Danish unique Danish model could be used to promote Denmark on the European political scene. In the spring of 2005 the Ministry sponsored a publication and a conference, where researchers presented different perspectives on Danish flexicurity (Beskæftigelsesministeriet, 2005). At the same time a special section on the Ministry’s website was created, which in Danish and English presented the Danish flexicurity model. In the following years, the issue of flexicurity played an important role in many of the speeches that were given by the Minister of Employment and Danish civil servants in international conferences and meetings.

Not only the Government, but also the parties in the opposition including the Social Democrats and the Socialist Peoples Party took a positive attitude to the new perspective on the Danish labour market. The main reason was here that the model could be promoted as a tribute to main

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<sup>41</sup> In their agreement last January, social partners stated that the ‘serious cause’ was a mainstream provision, which was inserted in the June 2008 Act. Four main points drawn from their agreement were translated into legal provisions: (1) a mainstream trial period was decided at between 4 months (workers) and managers (8 months maximum); (2) an individual possibility was introduced to negotiate an exceptional ‘agreed break-up’ (*rupture conventionnelle*); (3) a new CDD was added (*contrat à objet défini* – defined purpose contract) for engineers and managers, which can last up to 3 years. All these provisions have increased the legal flexibility of employment relations; yet, it remains to be seen how they will be used in the future. Interestingly provisions that the social partners included in their January agreement, as for instance increased rights to benefits for the young unemployed, or new rights portable from firm to firm for employees, have not been dealt with in the June Act. Hence, the translation from the social partners’ agreement into law should be seen as unbalanced, at least for the moment.

pillars of the Danish welfare state like the unemployment insurance system and active labour market policy. Also the Social Democrats could take credit for the more ambitious regime of labour market policy that had been established during the Governments from 1993 to 2001, which had been led by the Social Democratic prime minister Nyrup Rasmussen. The present Danish flexicurity model was thus partly seen as their own creation.

### *The social partners and flexicurity*

The Danish social partners rapidly embraced the concept of flexicurity. Since their reactions to and conceptualisation of the Danish flexicurity model throws light on some interesting driving forces behind the political popularity of the notion of flexicurity, this issue will be dealt with in some detail.

By including the issue of flexibility as a separate dimension, the flexicurity-perspective explicitly addresses the demand side – the employer’s side – of the labour market. One has of course to remember that flexibility can also be in the interest of the employees, and security may be in the interest of the employers. But still the flexicurity-perspective opens itself directly to the traditional analysis of different ways in which a firm will adapt its workforce to changes in demand for its product (Atkinson, 1984).

Furthermore, most of the examples about combining flexibility and security are cast in the frame of an adaptable workforce being provided with some form of security in return. The prominence of the Danish “golden triangle” on the list of real life examples of successful flexicurity arrangements is the prime case in point.

By explicit addressing the interests of the employers in the shaping of different policies, the flexicurity perspective thus opens itself directly to detailed dialogue and negotiations on policy issues over a broad range of subject between the social partners – and promises results in the form of mutually beneficial compromises between the different social actors, which will also lead to valuable outcomes from a “societal point of view”

If one takes a closer look at the actual reactions of employers and their organisations towards flexicurity, one immediately notes these differences.

Thus the Danish employer’s association (DA) enthusiastically embraced flexicurity both as a concept and as a strategy. The website of the DA devoted a special sub-section of the concept, and the organisation has also been active in involving other European employer’s organisations in joint activities to promote the flexicurity as a political strategy. In a recent publication from the DA, the emphasis on the flexibility aspect comes out wholeheartedly:

*Globalisation has markedly increased the need for flexibility in businesses. The ability to reconvert production quickly gives a major competitive advantage, especially when a firm’s wage bill and other employee costs are markedly higher than elsewhere on the world market. At the same time, Danish workers entertain high expectations with regard to economic guarantees and job security as they watch traditional job functions disappear. The Danish way is a proposal for meeting both these needs, and what has aroused the most international attention is that the Flexicurity-formula enables companies to be flexible without conflicting*

*with the wishes of working people for security at the social level.* (Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening, 2007, p. 2)

Furthermore, DA joined forces with the Danish National Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) and arranged events, where the two organisations together could present flexicurity and – not surprisingly with a strong flavour taken from the Danish case. As a side-remark one may note that this has had the unfortunate effect of creating some confusion between the Danish version of flexicurity and the overall flexicurity agenda. A typical example can be taken from a joint article by the chairman of the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) and the director of the DA. The text describes the high level of job-to-job-mobility on the Danish labour market and then continues:

*This dynamic pattern stems from a system dating back more than 100 years. It is based on three pillars; namely, a combination of flexible regulations based on agreements between the social partners; a well-developed social security system for the unemployed; and an active labour-market policy aiming at training those out of work and giving them new qualifications. This combination is referred to as “flexicurity”. (Jensen & Larsen, 2005, p. 4)*

The text then goes on to describe the division of labour between the social partners and the Government in the Danish case:

*There is a clear division of responsibility between the government and the social partners in relation to labour-market policy. Working conditions are primarily regulated through collective agreements concluded by the two sides of industry, at industry or branch level. ... The flexible agreements concluded by the social partners are supported by a public system, which combines a relatively-high level of unemployment benefits with an active labour-market policy. (Jensen & Larsen, 2005, p. 6-7)*

When describing the motives for their strong enthusiasm for the concept, which originated in a totally different national context, the DA puts forward two main reasons, apart from the simple point that the focus on the Danish model caused by the prominence of the flexicurity discourse is simply excellent publicity and portrays Denmark as a good place for business (Bang-Petersen, 2008).

Firstly, DA understand flexicurity in the national context as a safeguard towards further political intervention in the Danish labour market model, which is to a large degree based on collective agreements between the social partners. By stressing the successful balance between security and flexibility, which has been developed over decades through negotiations and compromises between employer's organisations and trade unions, the need for political interference is limited.

Secondly, on a European scale, flexicurity is conceived as pointing towards a “third way” in the EU, which draws heavily on the involvement of the social partners and thus paves the way for more emphasis on collective agreements also at the European level.

This is probably why the DA has been very active in promoting the joint report from Business Europe and ETUC, which was published in October 2007. Here the European social partners included the notion of flexicurity, however not in a very prominent manner.

*European Social Partners recognise that in today's labour market it is necessary to improve policy measures, which address both the flexibility **and** security dimensions for workers and employers alike. Applied in the right way, the flexicurity approach can create a win-win situation and be equally beneficial for employers and employees. (Business Europe et al., 2007: 53)*

They furthermore pointed to the need to decide the right balance between flexibility and security “at the right level” and underline the need for “**A social dialogue** contributing to a negotiated balance between flexibility and security, improving the smooth functioning of the labour market and the adaptability of enterprises and workers.”

The Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) has also published its own statements on the trade union view on flexicurity (LO, 2008). Here the starting point is as well the emphasis on the role of the social partners in developing flexicurity:

*Flexicurity requires a trustful dialogue between the public authorities but, first and foremost, a good cooperation between the social partners. Everyone has a responsibility for making it work. Flexicurity also preconditions the development of the social dialogue at all levels. The Member States and the EU should support and promote the social dialogue while fully respecting the autonomy of the social partners. At the European level, the social partners should take on the task of developing the quality of the social dialogue both in general and across sectors. (LO, 2008: 7)*

Furthermore the LO also stresses the flexibility of the workforce, but here interpreted as an advantage for the employees:

*The employers have a flexible workforce to draw on. They are able to adjust the workforce to changes in production without incurring great costs. The employees have the opportunity to quit their jobs with a relatively short notice. A large group of skilled and un-skilled Danish employees have eight days' notice when they've found themselves a better job. In the European flexicurity debate, the employers' right to hire and fire is constantly underlined. The employees have the same degree of freedom and flexibility and on most of the Danish labour market, this is considered as an advantage to the employee. (LO, 2008: 5)*

Danish trade unions are well aware of the fact that this reasoning runs contrary to the conventional wisdom of many of their European fellow organisations. In a detailed exposition of the Danish labour market model published by the Confederation of Manufacturing Workers (CO-Industri) it is stressed how the organisation:

*...feels it necessary to present a wider and more thorough introduction to flexicurity in Denmark as seen from the trade union perspective, and provide a tool*

*for colleagues in other countries who find themselves in a political debate when confronted with “The Danish Example.” (CO-Industri, 2008: 2)*

The conclusion of the presentation is well in line with the previous statements from LO:

*The Danish flexicurity model is based on more than public policy. The social partners play a decisive role in the creation of employment. This is a task to be carried by trade unions – and employers’ organisations -- in the future as well. High employment in the long run requires active national and regional participation in employment policies. It is also the responsibility for the social partners to maintain effective and viable collective agreements. Danish collective agreements provide a vital element of the flexicurity. The balance required by this relies on the existence of strong organisations on both sides. (CO-Industri 2008: 30)*

Finally, in this overview of some reactions of the social partners to the flexicurity discourse one can mention that the European Trade Unions have reacted positively, but also cautiously to the rising debate on the European arena. Thus ETUC this presents a number of preconditions for accepting flexicurity as a European strategy and again puts the highest emphasis on:

*The most essential part of flexicurity is the involvement of the social partners. They define the balance between flexibility and security, and in doing so legitimise and set the rules of the labour market. They need instruments that will allow them to anticipate change and to control the respect and implementation of both collective rights and individual pathways. (ETUC, 2007:4)*

The main impression from this overview of the response of the social partners to the concepts of flexicurity is thus a remarkable similarity in their reaction. In the Danish case the concept of flexicurity has received acceptance by both employers’ organisations and trade unions. The same situation can be found at the European level, although one may note that especially the trade unions have here been somewhat more sceptical than their Danish counterparts at the national level.

However, an important observation from this analysis of the attitudes of the social partners towards flexicurity is that the Janus character of flexicurity is an important key to its success with respect to policy formation at the national and the European level.<sup>42</sup> Taking the attitudes of the Danish and the European social partners as an example it can be argued that the relative popularity of flexicurity on the political arena is due to two main elements.

Firstly, employer’s organisations can more directly identify with the concept of flexicurity, because of the explicit emphasis on flexibility, which is embedded herein.

Secondly, both employer’s organisations and trade unions can subscribe to the concept of flexicurity due to the explicit role assigned to the social partners as actors in the negotiations over the balancing between flexibility and security. Thus support to flexicurity is also a way of

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<sup>42</sup> This political success of double-sided concepts is of course not exclusive to “flexicurity”, but – with the field of employment policy – has been ascribed to other concepts such as “activation” or “job rotation” (Torfing, 2004; Compston & Madsen, 2001).

promoting the self-interest of the social partners as political and social actors. The harmony of the social partners at both national and European level with respect to the flexicurity discourse is a noticeable empirical illustration hereof.

#### ***4. The dissemination of ideas in European social policy: Europeanization and its limits***

The fact that a common internationalized term is used across many countries and promoted through the coordination mechanisms and activities at the EU level does not mean that its social use is homogenous across the given countries. In this respect Europeanization seems to remain at a surface level, while national compromises, national systems of industrial relations tend to remain essential and diverse.

The term flexicurity which has had many different translations in the EU's member states is a clear example of the compatibility that exists between the dissemination of common and general ideas across borders, and the specific and diverse substance of policies, programmes and institutions at the national level.

A now increasingly Europeanized debate is articulated variously with national debates that, for each of them, retain their specificity, and singular characteristics within the borders of language, national politics and national or regional industrial relation systems.

But, as political cultures which are never strictly insulated from one another, industrial relations systems and political systems heavily draw on their "outside", for various reasons: it might be for inspiration, for the sake of finding new resources to use within national arenas and forums, but also for the collective promotion of national interest.

Empirical Europeanization has never been a top-down mechanism where 'Brussels' feeds into the national debates and could be seen as unilaterally influencing them. As our mirror case studies of Denmark and France amply demonstrate, what happens is rather the reverse: elites in the Commission are keen on emulating and using what happens at national level. There is a role of facilitating the circulation of ideas, generally framed in a vague tone, and aimed at promoting an apparently de-politicized discourse.

This actual coordinative discourse demonstrates its effects in social and employment policy, at the national level, where the ultimate interests and power battles take place. In the case of Denmark, suddenly seen as the champion of flexicurity, social partners and political actors used a situation they were involuntarily put in, to reflect about their long-term social compact and apparently to consolidate it, at least for some years. In the case of France, a protracted debate and struggle was partially helped by the use by social partners of the resource provided by the cognitive coordination promoted by the EU Commission. In both cases, the discourse had an impact which echoes and resembles the effects of the open methods of coordination implemented between member states. But in this case, the open coordination happened at the national level.

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