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The New Social Question

The New Social Question

The sense that the welfare state is in crisis has been with us since the 1970s. Yet the meaning and form of this crisis have changed considerably over recent decades. It has undergone three stages, and each of them has weakened the welfare state. The first two were financial and ideological, while the last may be termed philosophical. The financial crisis was triggered in the 1970s by the slowdown in economic growth, which automatically set off a serious rise in compulsory contributions to compensate for the deficits of public finances. The 1980s was a decade of ideological crisis, fueled by the suspicion that the state could not effectively manage social problems and a dissatisfaction with an increasingly opaque and bureaucratic approach that blurred goals and led to a crisis of legitimacy.

These last two dimensions of the crisis are still with us. Control of health costs and various social benefits still constitute a fundamental preoccupation. Demographic factors (longer life-expectancy) and technical ones (medical progress) helped fuel a permanent increase in expenses, on both sides of the Atlantic. While Medicare in the United States involves only 37 million elderly or handicapped persons, it is this population whose medical costs increase most rapidly. In 1970, those costs were only \$6 billion a year, while today they amount to an annual sum of \$200 billion. Projections for the year 2030 indicate that Medicare might absorb 7.5 percent of the GDP, as opposed to 2.6 percent currently. The total sum of health expenses has also reached a very high level in France, currently absorbing 7 percent of the GDP. This development is cause for concern: in both countries, it has led to a silent revolution in the structure of public expenses. If medical consumption continues to advance, it is gradually going to devour available resources for other essential functions like education or research. The American case is quite striking: although health spending is only partially public, its development has had important undesired and unconsidered repercussions on other expenses. The portion of national wealth devoted to health care in the United States has grown from 4.6 percent to 13 percent since 1960, while the share devoted to education has stagnated at 3.5 percent. If the explosion of obligatory forms of contribution has finally been curbed since the mid-1980s, it is at the price of reducing certain

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benefits or precarious reforms, often decided in haste, on an impromptu

Study of the efficiency and organization of the welfare state is essential. The reform of social policy management is on the agenda everywhere, though the acuteness of the problem varies according to national idiosyncrasies. For example, the financial regulations of a centralized government health service as in England, or of a system tightly supervised by contractual regulation as in Germany, seem more efficient than the French method, which demands universality without constraint. Administrative styles of offering assistance also vary considerably from one country to another. But these differences should not mask the most important new dimension of the crisis: a third weakening of the welfare-state, the philosophical one.

We are not yet fully aware of this philosophical crisis, nor how it is related to the new social question. This book intends to explore some of its aspects in order to help chart the new social landscape being created. Two major problems appear in the wake of the crisis: the disintegration of the traditional principles of social solidarity, and the inadequacy of "social rights" as a framework in which to resolve problems of social exclusion and fully legitimate assistance programs.

The old mechanisms that once produced social solidarity are clearly disintegrating. Solidarity used to be based on the increasing "mutualization" or sharing of social risks, so that the welfare state was conceived as a kind of insurance society under the "veil of ignorance," to use John Rawls's famous expression. The system, which had the advantage of producing solidarity through methods of redistribution opaque to the actors, has begun to crumble. This is particularly obvious in a country like France, where it is increasingly difficult to grasp the new social problems (like exclusion) in terms of concepts of risk. The development of social knowledge, and the greater visibility of the "gains" and "losses" resulting from that knowledge, has involved a lifting of the veil of ignorance. In other words, it has become much more problematic to consider the whole nation as a single class facing identical risks. At the same time, the pressure to develop more restrictive forms of sharing (that is, reduction of the size of risk-classes to coincide with the principle of actuarial neutrality) is also very strong. Other factors—including demographic developments, growing dissociation between groups of contributors and beneficiaries, increased knowledge of differences between individuals and groups—are combining to deteriorate further the insurance model of social solidarity.

The traditional conception of social rights, on the other hand, is also proving to be ineffective in dealing with major problems like exclusion. The traditional, or "compensatory," welfare state is based on the princi-

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pled dissociation of economic and social factors. But in a context of mass unemployment and increasing exclusion, this vision of social rights as compensation for a temporary problem (illness, short-term unemployment, etc.) becomes inappropriate, giving rise to the pernicious effects of what I call the *passive welfare state*. Economically, it destroys solidarity by increasing the indirect costs of labor (taxes, contributions), eventually reducing employment. Socially, it then justifies the break between individual indemnification and social inclusion.

The problems posed in the United States by AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children; and by the Temporary Aid for Needy Families, TANF, after 1996) and in France by the RMI (Minimum Income of Inclusion) are very similar in this respect. AFDC was the center of heated controversies in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, which led to the establishment of TANF in 1996, marking an historic change in the welfare principles established in the 1930s. In France, the institution of a Minimum Income of Inclusion in 1988 led to a genuine revolution in the social system, establishing a guaranteed minimum income, beyond the normal system of unemployment compensation. More than one million individuals currently receive the RMI in France, about 3 percent of the adult population. Under these conditions, the links between assistance and work tend to be close. In both France and the U.S., then, marginal programs of social assistance have been transformed into ones that play a central role in social regulation. When AFDC was established in the United States, the affected population were widows or those in temporary difficulties. But by the early 1990s, more than two-thirds of those on the welfare rolls had been there for nine years or more. Similarly in France, the RMI, which was originally designed to constitute a short-term benefit of re-inclusion, has become a permanent source of revenue for a considerable population. Discussions of the nature and bases of the new social rights, and studies of the ultimately "pernicious effects" of the new assistance policies, are also similar in the two countries.

In both Europe and the United States, this is how the terms of the new social question are defined today. If the nature of assistance programs, the styles of management, and forms of collective foresight are different in the two continents, the collapse of the insurance society and the weakening of the traditional concept of social rights have led to the same challenges. In both cases, the philosophical crisis of the welfare state indicates a decisive change in the perception of society that has prevailed for more than a century. Beyond financial and management difficulties, it corresponds to a new period of modernity.

The philosophical crisis has led first to a radical reconsideration of the concept of rights as formulated by seventeenth-century liberal individual-

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ism, leading beyond the old oppositions between formal rights and real rights, social rights and political rights. Thus far, social rights have been conceived in the same terms as civil rights, a simple extension of the idea of freedom and autonomy, but this will no longer do.

Today, social rights are considered unconditional "rights." As long as the cost of these rights remained relatively small, affecting only populations in a constant state of turnover for short periods, it was possible practically to reason in these terms. But it is now evident that, far from being unconditional, these social rights are linked to a given state of the economy. Social rights must therefore be considered like political rights, that is, as rights that produce a certain kind of social bond and consequently are tied to certain activities. The current problems of the welfare state show the pernicious consequences of ignoring this social dimension in our individualistic societies, and the naive faith in the possibility (and by the same token, the right) of everyone living autonomously as he has chosen. For two centuries, the welfare state has constantly worked to make individuals more independent by freeing them from the obligation to rely on others. The new crisis of the welfare state, the philosophical one, forces us to end this wishful thinking and reconcile those obligations.

On the other hand, with the decline of the insurance society the very foundations of social solidarity must be redefined. Lifting the veil of ignorance has meant that the problem of social justice must now be posed in direct terms of *redistribution*. This is much more difficult because taxation and the forms of social life must also be relegitimated. This is why the issue of the *nation* becomes central today and cannot be separated from that of the welfare state. And this is also why we can no longer be satisfied with a purely procedural view of democracy. What was possible when the veil of ignorance existed is no longer possible when that veil is torn.

Clearly, discussions of law, the transformations of democracy, and the modes of financing social expenses are closely connected. It would be an illusion to believe that the financial aspects of the welfare state can be considered autonomously. In this respect, liberals and conservatives in both countries will be forced to reformulate the very terms of their philosophies of the civic and social bond. Wherever we look today, we see that the issue of the welfare state has become inseparable from that of work. In the United States, as in France, the problem is not simply knowing how to finance increasing social expenses in a period of budgetary restriction but, rather, the economic re-inclusion of populations who have been excluded from the world of work. In the United States, the issue of non-work is directly linked to the situation of the African-American population, while it presents diffuse and more complex aspects in France. But the current disjunction between political citizenship and social inclusion is spurring identical studies of the problem in both countries.

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Although *The New Social Question* places the transformations of the welfare state in France in a broad philosophical perspective, it is not confined strictly to the French situation. It is intended to contribute more broadly to an analysis and resolution of problems that are becoming increasingly common to all modern societies.

PART ONE

Reorganizing Solidarity

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