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THE SOLIDARIST IDEOLOGY IN
TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY FRANCE

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THE SOLIDARIST IDEOLOGY IN TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY FRANCE:
IS IT AN ADEQUATE JUSTIFICATION OF THE MODERN WELFARE STATE?

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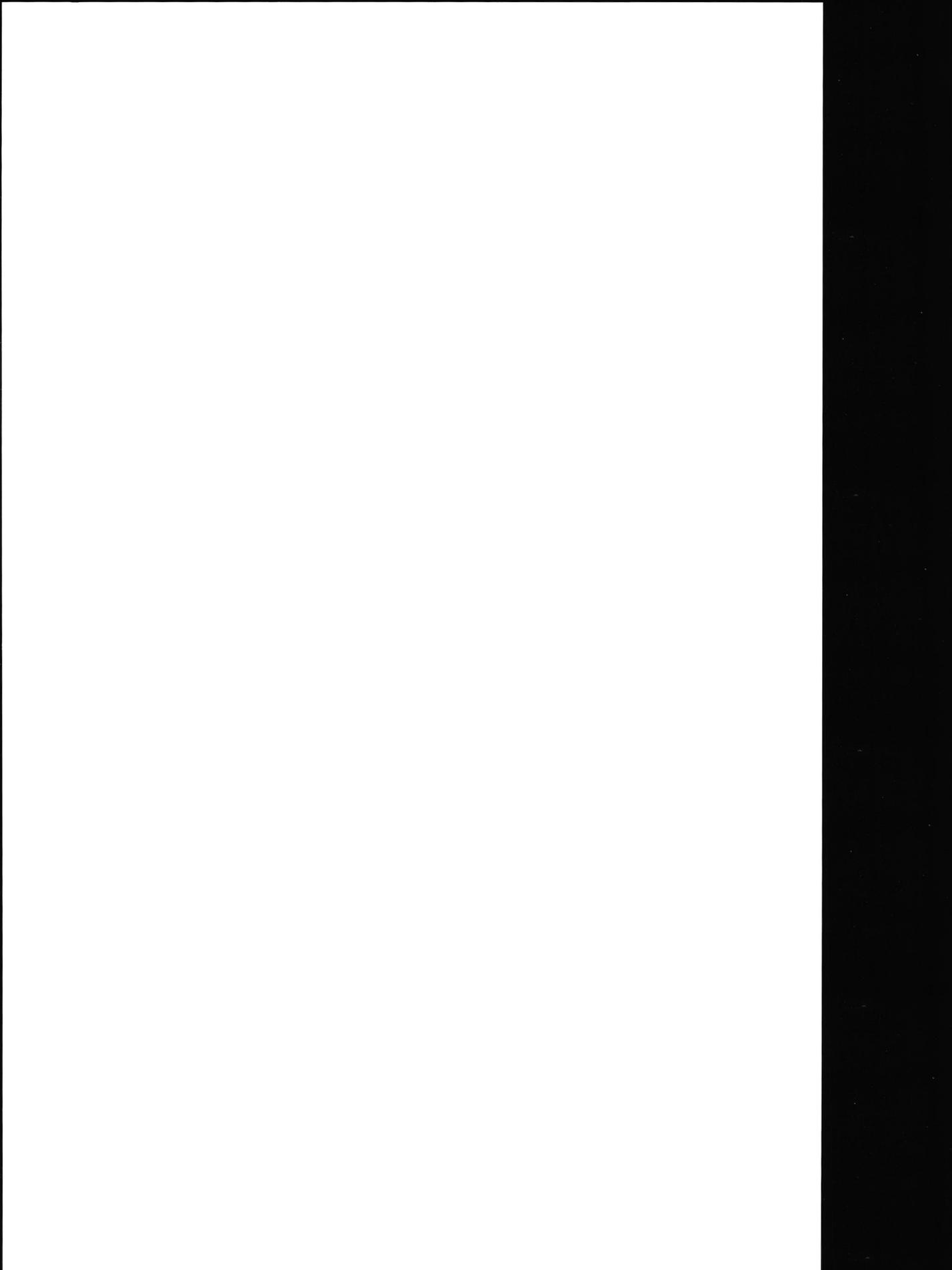
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THE SOLIDARIST IDEOLOGY IN TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY FRANCE:
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1. Should we take solidarism seriously in the post-industrial society?

Solidarism as a social theory was born in turn-of-the-century France. It clearly bears the marks of its time and place of birth. However, it has at least one distinctive feature which makes it interesting in the post-industrial society, where Welfare-State ideology threatens to be crashed between harsh economic realities and globalized capitalism, having no moral responsibility at all.

Solidarism is based on social ethics which is not liberal-individualist nor collectivist but communitarian. In our opinion, there is nowadays a gap between individual ethics and social ethics. As a striking example one could mention people's well-being today versus its probably harmful environmental consequences in the future. What we need is some kind of medium which could link together individual ethics and responsible social ethics. Solidarism as a truly communitarian social theory could offer a starting point for such a medium.²

At the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century there were other social doctrines that bore some resemblance to solidarism, for example British guild socialism and German *katheder*-socialism. French solidarism seems to be, however, philosophically the most elaborated doctrine aiming at general social welfare without revolutionizing existing and developing capitalist structures.

¹We wish to thank Dr. Seppo Ruotsalainen for his valuable comments to the manuscript. Thanks are also due to Eija Puttonen for checking our English.

²However, a difference between French solidarism and Anglo-Saxon communitarianism must be emphasized. Solidarism was opposed to both liberalism and conservatism, whereas the Anglo-Saxon communitarianism has its intellectual antecedents in a conservative tradition.

2. Social and philosophical origins of solidarism

The *fin-de-siècle* French solidarism can be characterized as a Gallic version of early social welfare ideology. It started as a philosophical, social and juridical speculation about secular morals which could replace the old Catholic ethics of charity. The need for new social ethics was most urgent among the middle classes (*les nouvelles couches sociales*) which gradually replaced the old political elite after the Franco-German war in 1870 and became the new ruling class of the Third Republic. The political representative of the liberal middle class was a rather loose parliamentary coalition of radicals who formed an equally loose Radical-Socialist Party in 1901 (Nordmann 1974, 123).

Radical-Socialists did not have a definite party program. Solidarism tried to fill this gap. It built its social demands on scientific grounds based on men's dependence on each other and on the work of earlier generations. The dependence was supposed to be of both social and biological character. Men were indebted to society for all cultural and material capital accumulated by earlier generations. At the same time they were biologically dependent on each other and on their environment through invisible ties of bacteria and viruses (Bourgeois 1896, 59-53).

The obligation of society to take care of its members who, for some reason or other, were not able to provide for themselves was interpreted as amortization of social debt based on a kind of quasi-social contract (Bourgeois 1896, 49-53).

Men's dependence on each other was considered as a scientifically established fact. As such it was morally neutral. It included both positive and negative elements. It was a necessary condition for the cultural and economic development of modern societies, but it was also a source of social risks, like infectious diseases and industrial accidents. Nobody was personally responsible for these misfortunes. They were, by their very nature, social risks caused by the fact that people were bound to live and work together.

The negative effects of solidarity could be controlled, for example, by better hygiene and working conditions, but they could not be eliminated. Instead, they could be relieved by mutual assistance and social insurance (Bourgeois 1910, VI; Ewald 1986 b, 360-361).

3. Intellectual history of the solidarist movement

The solidarist doctrine adopted its scientific elements from Émile Durkheim's ideas about social solidarity and from Louis Pasteur's discoveries in bacteriology. One can hardly overestimate Pasteur's influence on social theory at the end of the 19th century. His research had an equally important role in the formulation of public policy on health care and hygiene (Rosanvallon 1993, 130-131).

Émile Durkheim's 'The Division of Labour in Society' was published in 1893. Durkheim's basic idea was that traditional (mechanical) solidarity based on customary rules and sanctions was replaced in modern societies by organic solidarity based on the division of labour. So, organic solidarity also implied greater social differentiation. Men were tied together by their different occupations, which made them dependent on each other (Durkheim 1893, esp. 138-139).

On the other hand, Louis Pasteur made his scientific discoveries in bacteriology during the 1870's and 1880's. Pasteur's findings had profound influence on social theorists at the end of the 19th century. The classical liberalist conception of independent individuals (social monads) pursuing each their own happiness had to be reviewed. Men were dependent on each other on the very basis of their physical existence. This intellectual and moral turn has even been called the Pasteurian revolution.

Solidarism as a social theory was developed by an active politician and former radical prime minister Léon Bourgeois. He published his pamphlet 'Solidarité' in 1896. At the turn of the century, solidarism became the most influential social doctrine in the Radical-Socialist Party, whose party ideology had always been rather vague. It was even characterized as the official ideology of the Third Republic (Bouglé 1903, 481).

Many influential social scientists, lawyers, economists and radical intellectuals joined the solidarist movement. Célestin Bouglé, Émile Boutroux, Léon Duguit and Maurice Hauriou were all active in developing the solidarist philosophy. Émile Durkheim's attitude was sympathetic but somewhat distant (Nandan 1980, 501-505; Nicolet 1957, 38).

The ideological uncertainty of the French labour movement led even some Guesdist socialists to approach solidarism. They saw in solidarism a power capable of transforming liberal capitalism. This rather strange affinity can be explained by the ideological confusion and dispersion of the French labour movement after the Paris Commune (Gueslin 1992, 41).

4. The main principles of solidarism

Léon Bourgeois' philosophy started from the assumption that people were dependent on each other, but he enlarged the dependence to cover also former generations, the physical environment and finally the whole cosmic milieu.

The present generation had not made its fortune alone. It was indebted to former generations for all cultural and material capital accumulated through the history of mankind. According to Bourgeois this social debt, as he called it, made all people equal. They were equal on the grounds of a quasi-social contract, which meant a kind of deal men would have made with each other if they had had the opportunity. Equality was not an actual condition of society because, in practice, people had had no influence on the terms of the contract (Bourgeois 1896, 49-53).

It may be important to note that a quasi-social contract has nothing to do with a social contract in the Rousseauist sense. The latter would demand either natural rights or pre-existing legislation to make it valid. A quasi-social contract can be compared to agreements which parents can make for their minor children (Bourgeois 1902 a, 6; Macpherson 1979, 224-237).

Bourgeois was also aware of the two-faced character of people's mutual dependence. People were dependent on each other both in the positive and in the negative sense. Their mutual interdependence was vital to society's well-being, but it also involved a risk. Social risk (*mal social*) was something that did not depend on the fault or negligence of a certain individual but on the common fault and ignorance of all members of society. Good examples are infectious diseases or spread of fire in crowded and poorly planned cities. It was not possible to completely eliminate social risks. This would have required hermetical isolation of people from one another. That, in turn, was impossible because dependence was also a necessity for society (Bourgeois 1914, 42-43).

The traditional liberalist utopia was that society liberates itself from everything that makes a distance between society and nature. So, for example, liberals regarded social and political power as unnatural elements which ought to make themselves useless.

Solidarist utopia was exactly the opposite. In the opinion of the solidarists, society cannot be too social. Nature itself prevents society from realizing itself completely. For this reason, society must try to dominate nature to free itself from its powers. In other words, society must be constructed against nature (Ewald 1986 b, 360).

Nowadays, it may be difficult to understand why the leaders of the Third Republic were so eager to find some kind of ethics based on science. This was also the purpose of Émile Durkheim's science of morals. The main reason was that for centuries the Catholic Church had had a monopoly on ethics. Christian ethics was one of the corner stones of clerical influence on the French society. The new republican elite was deeply hostile to Catholic influence. Catholicism was usually connected with the old monarchist government and the hierarchic society (Schmid 1995, 35).

5. The solidarist movement and the State

Solidarism played a major part in rallying the protagonists of State intervention and voluntary associations. It united them in the task of building, by a series of piecemeal reforms inspired by a simple principle and multiple imperative needs, what has come to be known as the 'Welfare State' (Hayward 1961, 19)

Léon Bourgeois was not a socialist. According to him people had the right to their own property as a continuation of their personal liberty. But Bourgeois also emphasized that property involved some natural burden, in practice progressive taxation which could be used to alleviate social inequalities in the form of income redistribution and social security (Bourgeois 1902 b, 34-35).

So, Bourgeois' position favoured State intervention and a relatively strong State, which could regulate income distribution according to social justice (Baldwin 1990, 34-35).

On the other hand, Léon Bourgeois was also a spokesman of voluntary co-operation. For solidarists co-operatives and mutual aid associations were a kind of counterpart to Émile Durkheim's corporations as intermediary organisations between the State and private citizens (Charmont 1902, 516-517).

Léon Duguit was the most eager proponent of voluntary associations. In his opinion, people's dependence on each other was the core of solidarism. It did not need any speculation of quasi contracts, no more than any other kind of speculative contracts. Even in the area of social security Duguit wanted to limit State power. In his associationism he almost approached anarchism (Donzelot 1984, 86-103).

In fact, not even Duguit meant that the State should be abolished. His intention was rather to approach the State and civil society by making the State more equal with other kinds of associations and by diminishing its universally powerful character (Wagner 1992, 272).

Here we can see one crucial difference between Mediterranean and North-European attitudes. The French, especially, have always made a clear distinction between the civil society and the State. In Germany and the Scandinavian countries there has been a propensity to identify the State and society. This is why Mediterranean anarcho-syndicalism has never attracted the labour movement in Northern Europe. Labour parties have had close relations with syndicates, but they have always relied on the State and tried to conquer State power in order to make social reforms (see e.g. Camus 1971, 124-125).

6. Solidarist conception of social security

The starting point of the solidarist conception of social security was the solidarists' idea of social risk. Social security was conceived as the socialization of risk that threatened an individual, group, or the whole society without them being guilty of any negligence. In the ideal case, this should be done by mutual aid associations. Compensation would then be a creation of people's own recognition of their social responsibility.

Seen from today's viewpoint, solidarists' ideas about social security were rather idealistic, to say the least. They relied on man's moral growth to social consciousness. Social security could not be built on laws alone. It had to start from people's own activity.

This is why solidarists - and radicals in general - put special emphasis on education, especially on social and moral education. This, in turn, was one reason for the great success of Durkheimian sociology in the French educational system.

Mutual aid associations were for solidarists the core of social security. They represented people who were a kind of forerunners of social consciousness and an example for the nation (Bourgeois 1914, 201). State intervention was regarded only as a guarantee in the last resort.

Léon Bourgeois expressed this principle in following words: “*Il faut enfin organiser cette prévoyance par le mutuel concours des initiatives volontaires et libres, là où elles sont suffisantes, mais par le mutuel concours de toutes les forces de la nation là où celles-ci seulement sont assez puissantes pour prévenir le mal ou le réparer.*” (Bourgeois 1914, 203).³

It is difficult to find any more detailed description of the technique of social security in solidarist writings. They relied on mutual aid but they did not give much thought to whether social security should be organized through capitalization or the pay-as-you-go system. Neither did they specify the standard of benefits nor make any calculations about the necessary amount of contributions.

Mutual aid associations themselves were rather jealous of their independence. They were against obligatory membership. Strange enough, they also opposed ‘actuarial takeover’ because they thought that the application of actuarial techniques would link them together with insurance companies acting on commercial basis (Gibaud 1994, 183-186). This is obviously one reason for the failure of mutual insurance in the first decades of the 20th century.

A certain ambiguity concerning the State’s role in social security can indirectly also be a consequence of the example Bismarck gave of social legislation. French politicians were, of course, familiar with Bismarck’s laws but after the defeat of 1870 they were rather reluctant to follow the German example.

We can shed more light on this by comparing solidarism with its German counterpart, *katheder* socialism. Their principles and aims did not differ so much from each other on practical level. Both solidarism and *katheder* socialism wanted

³“We must, whenever it is possible, substitute assistance for insurance. This kind of insurance must be built against all risks which threaten men’s security, health, existence and their material and moral life. The insurance must be organized through mutual aid based on free and voluntary initiatives whenever they are sufficient. But there are cases which demand all the forces of the nation to prevent evil or repair its consequences” (our translation).

to ameliorate working class conditions and both understood that it was a task incumbent to the nation as a whole. Both also had great trust in people's ability to raise their social consciousness. The most striking difference seems to be that solidarists wanted the new sociality to grow from the activity of the masses themselves. *Katheder* socialists placed greater confidence in the State as a kind of impartial force above the social classes (Ruotsalainen 1996, 77).

Perhaps we can also say that the argumentation of the solidarists was more philosophically and sociologically oriented. *Katheder* socialists relied more on political economy. This is also natural because the historical school of political economy was much more developed in Germany than in France.

Another social movement which came rather close to solidarism was British guild socialism. Its leading figure was A. J. Penty, who obviously adopted some of his ideas from Bourgeois and Durkheim. Penty's protest was directed against the collectivism of the Fabian Society. He wanted to restore the guild system just like Émile Durkheim. He also stressed the importance of moral questions, which threatened to become buried under economic efficiency. However, Penty's protest was more romantic than philosophically grounded. He was a great admirer of the Middle Ages and saw in its guild system an answer to man's need for communion and personal responsibility (Lappalainen 1992, 31-33).

7. The impact of solidarism on French social security ⁴

The bases of the French social security system were built up by radical governments approximately in 1900 - 1914. Léon Bourgeois was involved in almost all social projects during this period.

In practice, the most useful and gratifying idea was that of *social law*. It was first formulated to cover industrial accidents. A new and typically solidarist element of

⁴ It should be noted that in French discourse the terms 'social security' and 'social insurance' are used synonymously.

social law was that it did not try to accuse anybody of the accident. Industrial accidents were a realisation of social risk which did not necessarily depend on somebody's negligence, neither that of employers nor that of employees (Ewald 1986 a, 360-361; Rabinbach 1996, 61-62; Stone 1985, 104-106).

This interpretation paved the way for modern social security legislation, which presupposes the joint responsibility of society as a whole. This task was not easy for radical-socialist governments who bore the political responsibility at the beginning of the 20th century. Social security legislation did not always match the interests of their clientele, especially small entrepreneurs. Radical politicians succeeded, however, in convincing their voters of the political necessity of social security. A crucial argument in their favour was that France was socially falling behind Germany and Great Britain (Stone 1985, 163-170).

So they established a complete secularisation of public services, separation of church and the State, educational laws, a law on military service, obligatory weekly rest, social assistance for the elderly, protection of orphans and the first pension scheme for farmers and workers (Buisson 1913, VIII-IX). In 1914 they finally got the Senate's approval for a progressive income tax, but its application was postponed to 1916 (Lejeune 1995, 169).

The list of achievements of the radicals looks impressive, but the proportion of public expenditure of GDP in 1913 in France was still only half of the corresponding figure for Germany and also much lower than in Great Britain (Maddison 1991, 77).

Of course Léon Bourgeois had a unified national social security scheme in mind. His basic idea was that membership in mutual aid associations could be made obligatory for all citizens. So, they would form a frame for an insurance type of national social security. Maurice Hauriou thought likewise that it would be the State's duty to take care of the social debt. In the first instance it would be the State that would organize the redistribution of incomes according to solidarist principles (Donzelot 1984, 86-103; Hauriou 1903, 13; Jèze 1912, 180-183). According to these ideas, French social security would have approached the Scandinavian universal model.

On the other hand, Léon Duguit wanted to leave social security in the hands of corporations or syndicates. His thought came nearer to Mediterranean thinking where patrons and workers associations would have at least formal responsibility for the realization of social security (Niemelä - Salminen - Vanamo 1996, 13-14).

8. Individualisation of radicalist ideology and fading of solidarist philosophy

From the very beginning the Radical-Socialist Party suffered from an inner contradiction. Its social principles and social security programs were not very attractive to its petit bourgeois and peasant followers. However, up to World War I radical leaders succeeded in convincing their followers of the political importance of 'social democracy', which in practice meant social security.

On the other hand, the lower middle class in the public sector, especially school teachers, who had been an important element within the Radical-Socialist Party, changed their sympathies leftwards simultaneously with their syndicalization and began increasingly to vote socialist (SFIO).

After the war, the Radical-Socialists as a party moved more and more in the liberalist direction. They became a true centre party which made them a useful partner in government for both the right and the left. At the same time, however, they lost their parliamentary power. The socialist party, SFIO, became gradually the leading left wing party between the 1920's and 1940's. Some writers have even wondered why Édouard Herriot decided to preserve the old label 'Radical-Socialists', though he certainly knew that there were parties more radical and more socialist than his (Hänninen - Palonen 1990, 10).

In their official ideology, socialists preferred collectivism to solidarism. In practice, however, they adopted a revisionist rather than a revolutionary attitude towards social reforms as did social-democratic parties all over Europe.

The solidarist philosophy did not stand the test of time. Radicals could refer to it when they wanted to stress their unity with the left, but it seemed to have no political relevance outside the radical propaganda.

9. Attempts to apply solidarist principles in French social security

In France, significant progress in social security was made after the Second World War. France was governed by a coalition of the three largest parties, first with and then without the leadership of Charles de Gaulle. The Christian Democratic MRP was the largest party in France. It was joined in the government by the French Communist Party and the SFIO, the Socialists.

The Communists and the Socialists traditionally supported State regulation of the economy. After the war, also the new political actors, the MRP and the Gaullists, were favourably disposed to increasing the role of the State in the economy.

The Beveridge report was an inspiration to social policy thinking in France as well as in other European countries. The conclusions reached in the report were constantly referred to.

However, the planners of French social policy rejected out of hand some of the central ideas contained in the Beveridge report. They did not wish to submit social insurance to the direct control of the State, but supported instead a model based on one independent fund, which would only be supervised by the State. Their objective was a system that would cover citizens against all social risks; however, they considered the flat-rate principle inequitable (Niemelä - Salminen - Vanamo 1996, 20-21).

The intention in France was to unite the scattered elements of the existing system into a single social security fund managed by the labour market organizations. The system was envisioned to be self-funded through contributions. From the start it was created as a pay-as-you-go system, reflecting a wish to disburse reasonable benefits right away (Baldwin 1990, 164-165).

The French social politicians tried to combine Beveridgean and Bismarckian principles. At the same time they wanted to go further in the solidarist direction. They tried to make social security contributions progressive, so that people with higher income would also proportionally pay more for the social security as a whole. This did not work. The middle classes and their organizations accused the plan for hidden taxation. They demanded that social assistance for the poor be collected in tax form without confusing it with social insurance proper.

The Christian Democratic MRP supported in principle the government reform. However, it was strongly represented in the funds administering the old system and was therefore afraid of losing influence once the new unified system was introduced. The socialist SFIO, for its part, wanted to limit the role of the Communist-led CGT union in the management of the system. Unity among the parties of the left, which would have been crucial to a successful reform, was thus not achieved.

10. Possibility of solidarist resurrection in late modern Europe

Nowadays we have lost confidence in the Fordist conception of economic regulation. Socialism in the Marxist sense has lost its attraction with the collapse of the Soviet centred socialist regimes in Eastern Europe. A rather crucial viewpoint is also that trust in the State has collapsed all over Europe.

In spite of Beveridge, the Welfare State has never had a proper justificatory theory in Western Europe. European Welfare States have grown as a side effect of Fordism and Keynesian economic policy.

The Welfare State has been in a crisis since the mid 70's. Its crisis was aggravated by the world wide depression of the first half of the 90's. Now the economic crisis may be over, but Western societies suffer from an anomic division of labour (cf. Østerberg 1995). Perhaps two thirds of the population can profit from economic growth, but the rest are threatened by permanent *social exclusion*. Especially in the

Scandinavian countries we are accustomed to thinking that social benefits are dependent on people's willingness to take part in the labour market. It is rather difficult to admit that man should have a decent standard of living without in anyway contributing to the growth of national wealth.

This means that the question of social solidarity must be reconsidered in light of the experiences of the past few decades. It is certainly true that we cannot accept solidarity as a science-based social philosophy. As a matter of fact, solidarists themselves had to revise their original scientism. If we use scientific arguments in moral discussions, we must always remember the provisional character of scientific theories. When they are abandoned, our ethics based on them will share their fate (Bouglé 1924, 48-50). Perhaps we should also bear in mind that according to strict philosophical criteria solidarists' "scientific" social ethics was grounded on the so-called naturalistic fallacy (cf. Moore 1922, 38-41).

Instead, what is adequate of solidarist philosophy in modern societies is the purely ethical concept of social debt. We can easily understand that we are indebted to former generations and to society both for our cultural and our material capital. And it can also be argued that the division of society between the proportionally affluent and mobile upper classes and those who have been excluded by permanent or recurring unemployment is unjust because it does not honour the terms of the quasi-social contract or does not admit the existence of social debt.

But is there any hope that those who are nowadays rather well off should have whatever incentive there is to share their well-being with their less well-to-do countrymen or even co-europeans? There are some viewpoints which could favour some kind of solidarist revival.

When the solidarist philosophy saw daylight in turn-of-the-century France, it was a creation of the liberal middle classes, who had proved to be rather egoistic until then. For some reason or other they began to understand that a society torn by deep cleavages was rather explosive and responsive to revolutionary movements like those the French history had witnessed.

Today even the middle classes are threatened by social exclusion and downward social mobility (Lasch 1995). When the middle classes have reason to feel socially insecure, they should be even more easily impressed by social philosophy that tries to find an abiding ground for solidarity. There are also multiple popular movements, for example environmental activists, that bear some resemblance to solidarists' associationism. By appropriate policies they could be led to consciously build social interaction from below, which was one of the solidarists' utopias.

On the other hand, solidarism was developed within the limits of the Nation State and it was planned to apply to the Nation State (as was also the social policy developed after World War II). It is really difficult to estimate the impact of fast globalization of the economy to national social policies. We can already see that harmonization of national social security legislations within the limits of Europe will encounter almost insurmountable obstacles, although Europe is a culturally and economically relatively homogeneous area. And nowadays great economic units like big business corporations, which should be important in providing financial resources for social policy, tend to spread out of Europe seeking for profits exactly by avoiding social expenditure.

What is said above are only preliminary observations of the possible development. One realistic way to go on would be to investigate the implications of solidarist theses in the modern European perspective and evaluate their success in the globalizing world economic order.

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