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Understanding changes in welfare state regimes: some considerations

**Claude Martin, directeur de recherche au CNRS
Arènes, Unité mixte de recherche 6051
Université de Rennes, France**

The discussion on welfare state in social sciences has been constantly developing since the Second World War. Up to the 1980s, the literature mainly followed a socio-historical perspective, trying to understand the conditions (economical, political, institutional, etc.) that had triggered the development of these national systems to provide collective protection against the risks of life. Such a perspective tended to blur national differences, which were mainly understood in terms of forerunners versus latecomers. During the 1980s and 1990s, in parallel with the construction of Europe, the main focus was on understanding these national differences. Looking more closely at these national systems led to the construction of typologies. With the turn of the 21st Century, the main questions now concern understanding the processes of change. In this chapter¹, we review some of the key contributions to this debate, which aims at providing an insight into the reforms of welfare states during the last decades in Europe.

¹ This chapter is a translation of the second section of a chapter already published in French (Martin, 2019).

I – Triggers, drivers and mechanisms to understand changes

Path dependence and convergence subject to market pressure

Whatever the subject considered (*welfare state regimes, gendered regimes, caring regimes*), the typological analysis of national social protection systems that was prevalent in the 1990s involved differentiating systems based on a few key criteria, without considering other dimensions, like local infra-national variations for example. The authors of these typologies have in fact recognized these limitations². How, then, can we consider all the pertinent variables and bring them into play while avoiding the risk of only retaining those that confirm a certain number of presuppositions? How can we convey a model's capacity for adaptation or change? What factors trigger such changes?

With the accelerated reforms of the last decades, the main issue has become the level of change generated by these reforms. In his analysis of the development of economic policies, Peter Hall (Hall, 1993) distinguished three levels of change, from the smallest (e.g. modifying access thresholds without changing either the instruments or the outcomes) to the biggest, i.e. paradigm change (which modifies the outcomes, philosophy and instruments of a policy). In this line of research, numerous analyses have focused on the question of "path dependence", underlining the inertia that results in systems due to the strength or robustness of institutions, despite actors' willingness to tackle the significant challenges and pressures related to macroeconomics (Pierson, 1998; 2000; Palier & Bonoli, 1999). Thus, for example, only six years after the publication of his seminal work, G. Esping-Andersen (Esping-Andersen, 1996) edited a collective study whose objective was precisely to identify the transitions and trajectories of change of the different welfare systems. Maintaining his initial typology, Esping-Andersen describes three main paths of change and reform (box 1).

² "In any case, it might not be possible to capture all aspects of differentiation in a single typology for the obvious methodological reasons and for the possibly less obvious reason that the measures will inevitably reflect what is considered to be the most important issue at stake". (Lewis, 1997, p. 166). Martin Rhodes moves in the same direction drawing from the work of Peter Taylor-Gooby: "Taylor-Gooby (1991) has argued that the most influential analytical work on social welfare – Esping-Andersen's regime theory – is less useful for understanding the dynamics of change in Welfare states than their stability. In order to understand change, we have to delve below the generalizations of the regime approach". (Rhodes, 1996(a), p. 311; Taylor-Gooby, 1991).

Box 1: Reform trajectories

Andersen distinguishes: 1/ The path followed by Scandinavian countries, which gradually abandoned the universalism that had led to full employment and the development of mostly female public service jobs to make a kind of “Bismarckian” turn of their regime involving budget cuts, decentralization and the progressive privatization of some services. 2/ The path followed by liberal countries (USA, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and to a lesser extent Canada and Australia), whose deregulation of wages has caused the development of precarious employment with little protection, bringing the risk of a considerable increase in inequalities and poverty. 3/ And the “growth without employment” trajectory followed by continental European countries, which promotes the “maintenance of acquired social rights”, the protection of the male breadwinner model, and the corporative defence of insider privileges, with women and young people maintained in a more fragile situation of dependence. Within this range of scenarios of changing social protection regimes, Esping-Andersen, faithful to his typology, promotes the social-democratic trajectory, expressing concern for the impacts of rapid neo-liberal deregulation whose weak point is increased poverty, and the rigidity of the continental model, which he qualifies as the “frozen welfare state”.

During the same period, Martin Rhodes adopted a similar perspective (Rhodes, 1996a). He claimed that both the future of these systems and their capacity to change were totally uncertain, mainly because of economic globalization, which spurs many European governments to undertake a spiral of reforms to maintain the attractiveness of their territory. As a result, the capacity of these governments to define their economic policy and public policies independently from international forces and the power of financial markets is considerably reduced. Financing issues therefore lead to an inevitable coming together of formerly very different systems. Scandinavian countries were obliged to renounce universality and make a “Bismarckian” shift, while conversely, countries that formerly promoted an insurance-based approach, like Germany and France, identified elements of the social protection system that could be

disconnected from employment and taxed (health care, family benefits, and then gradually unemployment benefits)³.

In the same vein, numerous studies have put forward the idea of a “race to the bottom” triggered by the spread of neoliberal policies and neo-managerial methods. Nevertheless, while most countries have indeed employed the same reform measures, such as stricter criteria for accessing pensions and unemployment benefit, targeted benefits, and the implementation of so-called active unemployment policies rather than passive policies centred on compensation⁴, the result has not been less expenditure on social protection, which has continued to rise over the decades. In any event, according to Martin Rhodes, at the turn of the century, European social protection systems had reached a crossroads, with the double pitfall of deadlock and the deregulation/duality option. The key challenge was to identify a third way: a “progressive competitiveness” or “cooperative re-regulation” model, as described by Wolfgang Streeck in Ferrera & Rhodes, 2000). However, in this first method for interpreting change, the determining variables were clearly centred on economics, with the social aspect taking only a secondary role.

Change under pressure from demographic and social developments

Nevertheless, as Bruno Jobert put it in the late 1990s, “reflections on changes in governance regimes due to the internationalization of economies have become so polarized that they have overshadowed other dimensions of change” (Jobert, 1998, translated from the French). Regarding these dimensions, other authors have mobilized more sociological variables, such as those related to how family structures, age structures, and work cycle stages evolve, and also the conception of the division of gender roles. Jane Lewis, for example, insists on the “*gendered nature of welfare state change*” (Lewis, 2002, p. 332)⁵.

³ The reforms implemented in 2018 by Edouard Philippe, then French prime minister, concerning financing of the health and unemployment insurance systems are a good example of this type of reform. The social security financing act of 2018 thus abolished the health insurance contributions (0.75%) and unemployment insurance contributions (2.40%) payable by employees in the private sector. In exchange, the rate of the generalized social contribution (tax employed to finance social protection) was increased, but in a smaller proportion (1.70%).

⁴ According to the *Enabling Welfare State* model (See Gilbert & Gilbert, 1989, Gilbert, 2004 and Leibfried, 1993).

⁵ In this article, Jane Lewis underlines the consequences of the increasing adjustment of the relationship between work and welfare in welfare states that follow the activation path: “I argue that from a gender perspective such a recasting constitutes a third-order change (*in Peter Hall terms*); indeed women are

If we move on from solely macro-economic determinants to consider socio-demographic issues in the reformulation of social protection measures, we arrive at a different interpretation of change. Instead of simply considering what takes place in the economy, the workplace and the accompanying protection systems, in this case, family life and the work of protection and care that it provides are also taken into account. In this perspective, the “family question” is not just sectorial, boiling down to an analysis of family policies or what the state and social partners devise to support and protect families, but rather a fundamental question: that of the split between private and public forms of protection for individuals and their trajectories; the respective roles of the state, public authorities, the market and the family – and, within the family, of men and women. The rapid change in family behaviours in the entire European Union, the breakdown of family relationships and the obligations and solidarity that they entail, coupled with an ageing population and shifting life cycle stages, thus represent key issues and arguments in discussions on the future of social protection systems⁶. Never-ending youth and never-ending old age combine with the impacts of unemployment and non-integration into the labour market, and those of instable coupledness, to call into question the mechanisms on which the philosophical and financial equilibrium of these systems was initially based. For a long time, two schools of thought took opposing views to this understanding of the role of socio-domestic variables. The first, conservative view, considered that family and demographic changes were mainly the result of the development of the welfare state itself which, by taking the place of the family institution, has deprived it of its essence and functions, leading to devastating individualism, and citizens who are less responsible and more dependent on the state. The solution for the advocates of this position is a return to supposed original values (“back to basics”, as coined by Margaret Thatcher), which involves re-establishing obligations and responsibilities within primary

being asked to bear the main burden of welfare state restructuring”. Op. cit., p. 333.

⁶ Following feminist criticisms of his 1990 study, Esping-Andersen claimed that the familism characteristic of the “old” continental welfare system was the model’s weak point insofar as it compromised both the formation of families and the labour supply, with low rates of female employment, thus reducing the financial sustainability of collective protection systems. This led to a call for higher female employment rates and the promotion of the adult-worker model, at the risk of underestimating the unequal impacts on women of this political line when it comes to the division of care work (Esping-Andersen, 1999).

family networks. The second, progressive, school of thought, considers rather that the development of social protection and services aimed at families has simply served to supplement and rebalance functions that were very unequally fulfilled by primary groups, without ever replacing them. It is therefore essential to preserve this complementarity to avoid reinforcing inequalities and social regression.

Following the financial crisis and the crisis concerning the legitimacy of the welfare state, the focus increasingly moved towards the family's contribution to protecting dependent individuals (children, young unemployed people, older people losing their independence, vulnerable people subject to financial or mental problems, etc.). For those devising public action, this form of "closer protection" and concrete solidarity (non-substitutable and mostly "free") even became a potential alternative to make up for the limitations of state intervention. Refusing to consider the fact that these family solidarities reinforce inequalities rather than reducing them, numerous social reformers regularly take up this argument to get out of a deadlock (e.g. by increasing alimony obligations). The same thing occurs regarding the role of associations and other non-profit organizations (transfer of responsibilities to associations).

[Understanding the mechanisms of change](#)

Since the early 2000s, institutional inertia and the dependence of systems on original choices have been increasingly called into question. Following close examination of the numerous reforms from 1995 to 2005 in Bismarckian type countries, - which Esping-Andersen considers to be difficult to change ("frozen welfare states") precisely because of their "imprint of origin" (insurance model, self-administration and joint management) - a group of authors have showed that these systems have in fact changed considerably following reforms, and even made a paradigm shift (Palier & Martin, 2008; Palier, 2010).

Moving on from simply identifying what triggers reforms – i.e. macrosocial factors that impose change from the outside – researchers attempted to understand the mechanisms, the process of change involving actors, ideas and controversies in a battlefield, which they gradually began to call "drivers of change" (how does change come about?), to differentiate them from "triggers of change" (why does it happen?) (Guiraudon, Martin, 2013). While a relative consensus emerged on the two main types of trigger or the structural causes of

change, i.e. macroeconomic and financial factors on one side and sociodemographic factors on the other, the same cannot be said for the drivers. An analysis of change as a process requires looking at how these systems have evolved over time, their foundations, frame of reference and cognitive dimensions. It involves considering the “political heritage” (Hecló, 1974) because, to be understood, a new public policy often needs to be compared to previous policies whose negative or undesirable effects it aims to correct. This therefore requires asking a series of questions, such as: Why was such and such a measure implemented at a particular time rather than another one? What arguments were put forward by the reformers? Which groups of actors managed to establish their legitimacy to assert their point of view? In this area, particular attention is paid to public policy forums and arenas and the role they play in building the representations, frames of reference and categories of the regulation.

In the 1990s, several authors brought together institutional and reference-related dimensions in the “citizen regime” concept, to indicate the means of legitimization that anchor a particular regulation process in civil society (Lister, 1997; Jobert, 1998; Jenson & Philips, 2012). These include designating legitimate collective actors (inclusion or exclusion of certain actors from the public sphere); defining the limits of political intervention in society; and establishing a ranking of different statuses, etc. Thus, for example, the question of distributing care for dependent and vulnerable people between individual actors, family, local communities and the state, results in a struggle to define the relevant representations for public action. Central to this struggle is the debate between those who defend economic determinants and those who put forward sociodemographic aspects. Another factor, however, is the position defined by different social groups concerned by a public problem (the “middle generation” for problems of loss of autonomy for older people, working women aged over-50, etc.), to the point of being identified as a collective actor. The role of these “citizen regimes” and their development are particularly important during crisis periods.

In the 2000s, studies gradually moved away from the neo-institutionalist tradition, better suited to identifying inertia than change, and considerably

updated the analysis toolbox of welfare public policies⁷. Following a long period caught up the opposition between radical changes brought about by major institutional shocks and slow changes that did nothing to question “path dependence”, these new approaches analysed change processes that, despite being slow and incremental, can bring about profound paradigm changes (Hacker, 2004; Pierson, 2004; Streeck and Thelen, 2005). Several mechanisms were highlighted, including the following: shifts (corresponding to the introduction of new rules); layering, involving an accumulation of new rules without abolishing the old ones, in successive layers; drifts, where an absence of changes to the rules can lead to a change in the environment, triggering unplanned reforms; conversions (when some rules are aimed at new targets) (Béland, 2007; Guiraudon & Martin, 2013). Recent developments include the use of the “policy tracing” or “process tracing” method. To clearly set out this method for analysing “reform paths”, Bruno Palier and Philippe Bezes (Palier, Bezes, 2018) propose a series of precepts, drawing in particular from the work of Andrew Abbott (Abbott, 2001).

II – Changing concepts to understand change

Understanding change also means changing concepts, as suggested by Robert Castel (Castel & Martin, 2014). Over the last decade, several notions have emerged in what Peter Abrahamson calls the “welfare modelling business” (Abrahamson, 1999) that once again put the accent on changes in the private sphere. Here we develop two of these notions that have sparked significant debate and led to numerous publications: “new social risk” and “social investment”; the latter notion gives considerable room to the idea of prevention and the promotion of well-being, and even happiness (or the good life) for future generations. This production of notions, and potentially future key concepts, also involves the reinforcement of normative orientations, partly due to the political uses of these notions or concepts, but also the coproduction of these

⁷ The two seminal works in this area are Streeck and Thelen, 2005 on institutional change, and Clasen and Sigel, 2007, that looks at the question of the dependent variable employed in comparisons of welfare regimes.

concepts in a multitude of scientific, political, institutional and media arenas, and the porosity of these arenas (Commaille, 2015).

“New social risks”

The notion of “new social risk” emerged at the turn of the 2000s, in particular from a joint publication edited by Nick Manning and Ian Shaw (Manning & Shaw, 2000), sparking a rich international academic debate (Bonoli, 2005 and 2007; Armingeon & Bonoli, 2006; Lewis & Sarre, 2006; Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006)⁸. The main idea is to identify types of “collective” risk that were not seen to be collective at the time of setting up social protection systems. While the construction of social risks took place at the same time as the development of industrial society, the idea of “new social risks” characterizes risks that correspond to post-industrial society (service society, digital society), in which new demographic, economic and social trends have emerged (such as less stable career paths)⁹.

The old social risks, whose timeline François Ewald drew up in the 1980s (Ewald, 1986), and whose origins Robert Castel reconstructed in his history of the labour society (Castel, 1995), corresponded to the identification of collective (and insurable) risks that progressively justified measures to maintain workers’ income. These include the risk of occupational accidents and disease, old-age risk and the right to a retirement pension, the risk of disease (initially mainly compensated by a daily allowance), and the risk of losing employment (recognized later on in France). The “family risk” was not initially really considered to be a risk, but, in France at least, was seen more as a need to anticipate additional pay in proportion to the number of mouths to feed in the worker’s household (Friot, 1998). If any risk was perceived, it was rather the impact of an insufficiently low birth rate on the country’s economy and influence. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that a real “family risk” was considered as such, with the rise in the number of separations and divorces, and so single-parent families, resulting in the creation of one of the first minimum social

⁸ For a summary, see Martin, 2017.

⁹ Peter Taylor-Gooby defines them as follows: “*The new social risks are the risks that people now face in the course of their lives as a result of the economic and social changes associated with the transition to a post-industrial society*” (Taylor-Gooby, 2004, p.2-3).

benefits, for family reasons, i.e. the single-parent benefit (Le Gall & Martin, 1987; Martin, 1995).

The emergence of new social risks therefore seems to be the result of a double change in our contemporary societies: on the one hand, profound demographic developments combining more fragile families and couples with the impact of ageing populations and, on the other hand, an equally deep shift in the labour market, involving less secure, more flexible jobs and the protections that they provide. A combination of factors went on to generate new public problems in the socio-political debate and trigger changes in ways of regulating and dealing with them: the feminization of the labour market, leading to a higher number of two-wage households, raising the issue of sharing domestic work and care for family members, mentioned above; the rising number of older people and in particular very old people (aged 80+), which has major impacts on the burden of carers and on long-term care systems and policies; and fewer employment opportunities for unskilled workers compared to during the industrial society (low wages for unskilled workers, insecure work contracts, unstable jobs, poor workers). Several examples of “new social risks” are mentioned in this body of literature, such as not being able to juggle professional life and carer responsibilities (in particular for women who undertake most of this type of work); the risk of losing “autonomy” for older people, calling for almost-permanent care and assistance, once again mainly provided by women; and the risk of long-term exclusion from accessing work and an income due to a low level of skills.

Before they were perceived as social risks, these problems came either under the responsibility of families and kinship (known as “family solidarity” in France, but not excluding maintenance obligations) (Martin, 2004), or social assistance and action. However, with their development and the rising number of people concerned, this set of social risks shifted and had the effect of moving the borders and definitions of risk sectors. The changes brought about by these new risks were nevertheless different depending on the welfare regime and the country. Primarily because all new social risks in some ways compete with the old risks. The result was tensions between the wide range of interests defended by the old social risks and those favoured by the new ones. From the perspective of old social risks, the issue was income replacement, and

decommodification taking social stratification into account; for the new risks, the issue is more about facilitating access to employment through activation, recommodification, and flexibility. For the old risks, action was based on power relationships and obtaining social agreements, based more on individualization, customized responses, responsabilization, and so-called “free choice” among individuals. This is undoubtedly one of the weak points of the promotion of the new social risks: their potential beneficiaries have relatively weak influence capacities and often experience great difficulties in asserting their needs and expectations. However, given the great number of people involved, political actors at times make use of them in the political arena to avoid blame, or get votes.

Towards a social investment state

Another notion, that of “social investment”, has generated even more developments over the last twenty years, not only in the academic sphere, but also in institutional spheres, at national, European and international levels. While this notion has been increasingly employed since the start of the 21st century, with a series of academic publications¹⁰ and official reports released by different national and international organizations¹¹, the history of this concept and its theoretical consistency are subject to debate.

While the expression itself and its wider usage are recent, the origin of the concept goes back decades. Its varied uses, according to the period and country, also show how malleable it is. For Nathalie Morel, the roots of this pioneer vision of social expenditure as a productive factor date back to the Swedish social-democrat experience of the 1930s, and the couple Alva and Gunnar Myrdal (Morel, 2013). Several scholarly contributions punctuated the formulation of this notion, which was put forward in the late 1990s as the promising “new paradigm”. Among them were Neil and Barbara Gilbert, who in

¹⁰ The list of publications on this theme is also very long, but worth mentioning are Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Lister, 2004; Saint-Martin & Jenson, (2008); Abrahamson, 2010; Morel et al., 2012; Jenson, 2012; Hemerijck, 2013; Bothfeld, Rouault, (2014); Hemerijck, 2015; Midgley et al., 2017; Garritzmann et al., 2022..

¹¹ Restricting ourselves to the case of France, we can mention the publication by Jacques Delors, former president of the European Commission, and Michel Dollé, general rapporteur to the Council for Employment, Income and Social Cohesion (Cerc) (Delors & Dollé, ,2009). This report results from a seminar organized by the French family benefit fund (CNAF), the Directorate General of Social Cohesion (DGCS), France Stratégie, the Apprentis d’Auteuil and the Laboratory for Interdisciplinary Evaluation of Public Policies at Sciences Po Paris.

the late 1980s championed the idea of the move from a providing state to an “enabling state” (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1989) in the USA; and Anthony Giddens, probably the first author to use the expression “social investment state” to support the concept of the British “Third Way” and the construction of an alternative to the Labour party’s traditional welfare state (Giddens, 1998). In any case, it is clear that this notion establishes a direct bridge between academic thought and political project¹².

As pointed out by Ruth Lister (Lister, 2004), the idea of social investment is therefore both a normative ideal to guarantee a more inclusive society in the future; a pragmatic response to the challenges of post-industrial society ranging from the drop in fertility to the increase in unemployment, and including more insecure career paths for low-skilled workers; and an analysis tool to think through changes to welfare systems, avoiding both the pitfalls of neoliberalism and the limits of a social democrat model that had become untenable.

Schematically, defenders of this notion consider social protection expenditure not as a burden for economic activities, but rather as an investment in human capital, with productive and economic returns. However, this general idea takes on a different accent depending on whether it is polarized on: an objective of activating social expenditure, in order to direct this investment in human capital towards insertion in the productive sphere (improved skills of productive workers); or the idea of investing in childhood to prepare this human capital of the future and avoid the social expenditure that children and young people ill-prepared for the challenges of development would undoubtedly generate for communities and states. According to this latter interpretation, preventative social investment is in some ways an investment made to avoid forthcoming expenditure. In this area, the work by James Heckman, winner of the Nobel prize for economics in 2000s, demonstrating the level of economic returns following investment in early childhood, constituted a powerful lever (Heckman, 2012)¹³. The well-known [Heckman Curve](#) went on to be frequently mentioned

¹² The vision promoted by the Third Way, in particular by Gordon Brown, put a particular focus on the national challenge represented by poor children. However, like more Nordic versions, it emphasized empowerment to avoid dependence and defended “proportionate universalism”, in other words, doing more for those who need it more (see Brown, 2001).

¹³ In a now-famous article measuring the economic returns of investing in a pre-school programme, J. Heckman and his colleagues evaluate this return on investment as between 7% and 10% per year (Heckman et al., 2010 and Heckman et al., 2014).

in political arguments and official reports that defended social investment as early as possible during childhood.

This preventative interpretation is also put forward in the report entitled *A New European Welfare Architecture*, commissioned by the European Union in 2001 from a group of experts led by Gosta Esping-Andersen and published shortly after with the title: *Why we need a new Welfare State* (Esping-Andersen, 2002). In this report, Esping-Andersen promotes a social investment strategy centred on children, in other words giving priority to all measures likely to prevent them from falling into poverty and social reproduction, and to promote their human capital, thanks to early childhood care services, and set-ups by which parents, especially mothers, can balance their professional life with family responsibilities, extended by investments in education. This expenditure is presented as an investment that then leads to “dividends”¹⁴. Yet in doing so, this strategy appears to restrict children to the future citizen workers that they will become, in other words, potential citizens, and neglect the children of here and now whose condition, well-being and rights need improving. Ruth Lister puts it this way: “The future orientation and discourses of the social investment encourage not just the elision of demands for equality in the here-and-now but also, paradoxically, the partial disappearance of childhood and of the child qua child, including the child as a right-bearer (under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child)” (Lister, 2004, p. 171). The idea is in particular to boost children’s potential so that they become “autonomous” adults.

It becomes clear why Jane Jenson considers that with social investment, the accent has moved from the responsibility of the state to the responsibility of the individual, and also from the paradigm of family responsibility to that of investment in children, or from the citizen worker to the model of children as citizens in the making (Jenson, 2012). When centring on this approach of prevention and preparation of future adults, not only does this perspective tend to individualize the target of the interventions, but it eludes the present condition and well-being of today’s children. Another criticism is the neglect of social returns (as indicators of objectifiable, subjective well-being) to the advantage of

¹⁴ “Minimizing child poverty now will yield an individual and social dividend in the future. And in the far-off future, it should diminish the risk of old age poverty”. *ibid.*, p. 26.

economic returns (expenditure avoided in the future). In this sense, social investment could be the Trojan horse of economic arguments disguised as social and well-being objectives, or the sign of a reintegration of the social aspect in economics.

This perspective of social investment accompanied not only the return of the “well-being” theme, but the proliferation of reflections on the question of happiness, tackled from an angle either of positive psychology or happiness economics. Faced with this growing focus on the “good life” at a time of fears about the future, we might, along with numerous other authors, look at these semiotics of happiness and wonder whether they are not subject to a marketing phenomenon, with rocketing numbers of experts and other coaches defining standards and good practices, both at work and in the home¹⁵. This good life factory according to the experts, this development of “therapies for healthy people” or “normal people”, also identified by Robert Castel in the early 1980s¹⁶, may only be the sign of an aversion to risk and the rise of a behaviourism that reduces happiness to individuals’ conformity to models of conduct¹⁷.

A few opening points

Following this overview of the ways to analyse changes in types of collective protection over the last thirty years, or ways of regulating the social sphere, we can highlight several key ideas. First, we should recall our objective, i.e. to understand these changes as the result or the mirror of transformations in contemporary societies. Second, we draw attention to a long-term trend, i.e. the progressive shift from a protection approach through labour law and the definition of social rights – “social property” as defined by Robert Castel (Castel & Haroche, 2001), in other words property directly attached to work and employment in the form of the support that it guarantees – to a protection approach that puts the emphasis on accompanying individual trajectories,

¹⁵ Once again, the literature is abundant on this subject. Examples include Bok, 2010; Ahmed, 2010; Graham, 2011; Frawley, 2015; Cederström, 2018; In French: Pawin, 2013; Senik, 2014; Cabanas & Illouz, 2018; Rosa, 2018.

¹⁶ Castel talked about the general development of “therapy for normal people”, “the vocation of this practice is to treat both the problems of happiness (fulfilment) and unhappiness (pathology).” (Translated from the French.) Castel, 1981, (new extended edition in 2011), p. 165.

¹⁷ In the domain of child well-being, parents have become one of the targets of this phenomenon. See Martin, 2014.

punctuated by accidents and bifurcations, from a perspective of human capital and empowerment. This individualization and the focus on the life course accentuate the importance of classic sociodemographic variables (age, gender, cultural capital, etc.), as well as other sociological variables like the importance of solidarity and mutual obligations; the extent or weakness of social networks; social and relational capital; trust in institutions and in others, etc. However, as Robert Castel pointed more than a decade ago, this trend also has the effect of making individuals responsible for their own conditions, entrepreneurs of themselves¹⁸, leading to calls for autonomy, in particular for people who receive “social assistance”.

Third, we underline the rise of a normative approach in studies on welfare. Reading the latest contributions by several key figures in this research area (Esping-Andersen, Hemerijck, Ferrera, Palier, to mention a few), the line appears to be increasingly fine between research, analysis, and recommendations or political claiming, and between academic arenas and institutional and political arenas, perhaps due to the urgent need to propose solutions to overcome current difficulties. This is clearly the case regarding the discussion on the contributions of the notion of social investment, whose main argument centred on anticipating future social expenditure is understandably attractive to public decision-makers and institutional arenas.

Yet this porosity of frontiers between arenas, further increased by the multiple positions taken by some actors (authorities in the academic world who as a result are solicited as experts in institutional and sometimes political spheres), should not involve neglecting fields of force and struggle. In the welfare modelling business that we have tried to summarize here, some ideas are clearly more likely than others to spread, be taken up, and dominate a particular sphere (including the media sphere, which plays a role that we have not had time to develop here)¹⁹. Unless some periods turn out to be more suitable for

¹⁸ In the foreword to the new edition of his 1981 publication on “risk management”, Robert Castel insists on the fact that his diagnosis of the time has been largely confirmed since and is still relevant: “From the situation in the 1970s, two lines of development for individual management strategies have emerged that, while ostensibly very different, could turn out to be complementary. The constitution of populations at risk totally deconstructs the individual in a context of remotely programmed administrative planning. On the other hand, the aim of strategies to intensify individuals’ potential is to work on the individuals themselves and maximize their capacities.” (Translated from the French.) (Castel, 1981, p. 13).

¹⁹ For an overview of these questions in French, refer to Neveu, 2015.

their deployment or their rediscovery, involving a kind of revival that can be surprising.

To illustrate this phenomenon, we can compare the political outcomes of two of the notions that have recently emerged in this research area: “social investment” versus the “care society”. Compared to the success of the notion of social investment in institutional and political arenas since the 2000s, and despite the considerable developments that we have underlined, the notion of care has clearly not had the same fate. When this concept, which comes from the academic field, took on a political dimension, it came up against clear resistance in the political media sphere. An important moment in France was without doubt the 2010 presidential campaign, during which Martin Aubry, then leader of the Socialist party and a potential presidential candidate, suggested bringing care into politics. At this early stage in the election campaign, she mentioned her project to promote a “society of well-being and respect, that takes care of everyone and prepares the future”... “an economy focused on well-being rather than on having it all”, in other words, a “care society”, by which Aubry referred to the seminal works of Carol Gilligan and Joan Tronto²⁰. Reactions and criticisms were quick to weigh in, obviously from the opposition, which denounced “a return to state handouts and good intentions”²¹, but also from her own party²², and from political commentators, who unhesitatingly belittled her proposal (Martin, 2017). The reaction brought to a temporary end this attempt to give political consistency to a nevertheless highly fertile notion in the field of ideas.

²⁰ She could also easily have referred to the words of Roosevelt who, at a Congressional debate on 28 August 1931 announced his New Deal as follows: “Our Government is not the master but the creature of the people. The duty of the State toward the citizens is the duty of the servant to its master... One of these duties of the State is that of caring for those of its citizens who find themselves the victims of such adverse circumstance as makes them unable to obtain even the necessities for mere existence without the aid of others... To these unfortunate citizens aid must be extended by Government, not as a matter of charity, but as a matter of social duty.” (cited in Bernstein, 1985, p. 23).

²¹ In an article in *Le Monde*, former French minister Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet berated “*the triumph of good intentions*”. https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2010/05/13/care-ou-le-triomphe-des-bons-sentiments-par-nathalie-kosciusko-morizet_1350984_3232.html (consulted on 26/12/2018)

²² In an opinion piece in *Le Monde*, future prime minister Manuel Valls denounced “a profound error” and “a step backwards for the left”. According to the MP, who represented the right wing of the Socialist party, “individuals aren’t ill or asking for care” but rather want “to be able to act in total freedom”. For him, this “old idea from the 1980s (...) is totally inappropriate for today’s French society”. He went on to say that if the left were to win with this philosophy, it would generate huge expectations and a “new time bomb of disappointment”. https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2010/05/14/manuel-valls-promouvoir-comme-panacee-une-societe-du-soin-est-une-erreur-profonde_1351442_3232.html (viewed on 26/12/2018).

The current urgency to draw out the future of social protection systems is undoubtedly one of the consequences of the financial crisis of 2008-2010, whose impacts most Western countries are still enduring. Once again, comparison can be highly useful and it is worth drawing lessons from the ways in which different countries and social protection systems have dealt with this major recession²³. Despite obvious comparisons between the Great Depression of the 1930s and this major recession of the 2000s, there is an absolutely crucial difference. During the first crisis, social protection systems were only at their very early stages and, in many ways, the recession gave them a kick start. For the crisis that began in 2008, the social protection systems in place worked to cushion the blow in some countries and not in others.

The austerity packages implemented in numerous European countries, starting with countries in southern Europe and especially Greece, overturned the former status quo and upset political and partisan structures, way beyond the countries of southern Europe. This major shock not only generated increased poverty and the subsidence of well-being indicators in numerous EU countries, it also threatened social cohesion with a rise of inequalities, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, and a downward shift for the lower fringes of the middle classes, which in France took on the new label of *petits moyens* or “lower middles” (Cartier et al., 2008), and fuelled the “yellow vest” uprisings of the winter of 2018-2019.

In the case of France, the problem is more than a simple breakdown in the social ladder resulting in social downgrading; it also involves the fear of downgrading, the anxiety and feelings that it generates, and a lower level of trust in institutions and others (Chauvel, 2006 and 2016; Maurin, 2009)²⁴. These deep-seated changes in social stratification have given rise to new political phenomena: the collapse of traditional party bases; a rise in protest voting; and the emergence of new social movements, sometimes taking the shape of new political parties with a different position in national politics (like the “Podemos” movement in Spain, the “Five Star” movement in Italy, and the explosion of the

²³ In a recent major joint work, S. Olafsson, M. Daly, O. Kangas and J. Palme tackled the difficult job of cataloguing how individuals and households have been affected by the great recession in different ways depending on the country (Olafsson et al., 2019).

²⁴ On the yellow vest movement, readers may be interested in Algan et al., 2019.

“yellow vest” movement, which became shortly part of a new political landscape).

To tackle this particularly shifting and strained situation, in the run-up to the 2019 European elections, Maurizio Ferrara suggested and defended, following the official proclamation of a European Pillar of Social Rights in Gothenburg in November 2017, the adoption of a Social European Union, a compromise that he considered justifiable to reinforce European social citizenship (Ferrera, 2018). The political translation of this discussion draws out a map, formalizes a dilemma, and sketches an alternative between two main paths for social protection in the 21st century: one of them tends to reinforce the share given to private forms of protection (in the sense of primary social connections), taking an approach that accentuates individual responsibility, at the risk of lumbering individuals and their families with the share formerly taken care of by public authorities and collective forms of protection; the other one attempts to stabilize the changes in our national protection systems with a supra-national framework, a common pillar. Without doubt, the writing of our futures is continually fuelled by the way we understand the changes underway. The work of following these changes is not over yet.

Since the redaction of this text, many major and hard time changes occurred and many other developments are necessary to actualize this overview: the COVID19 pandemic, first, but also elections in Sweden, Italy and France, where extreme right parties are more and more in position to disseminate their views for the future.

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