EHNE

A EUROPEAN “MODEL” DEFINED BY PUBLIC POLICIES

The Origins of the “European Social Model”

Assertion of National Character or Desire to Cooperate: The Hesitation of the Late Nineteenth Century

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of the first social policies before The Great War represents one of the highlights of European history: the consolidation of nation-states did not overshadow reflection regarding the development of a “European social model.” Despite constant hesitation during the fin de siècle between an assertion of national character and a desire for cooperation, the contours of a “reform network” surpassing national borders was outlined by way of congresses, conferences, and scientific and cultural exchange.

In a study of the first international Mutualist congresses from the end of the long nineteenth century, Bernard Gibaud noted the trace of a psycho-political distinction between “Nordic countries,” who were supposedly favourable *by nature* to authoritarian solutions in questions of social protection—meaning an imposed planning through mandatory insurance, for which the Bismarckian system set the tone—and “Latin countries,” which were more mindful of individual initiative, with free planning ensuring the full blossoming of mutuality. This European fault line between “Nordics” and “Latins,” which was often repeated by contemporaries, was by necessity

fluctuating as well as subject, like any listing, to criticism, all the more so given that the terms were not at all made clear. It nevertheless expresses the decisive issue of the period: what choice to make between liberty and obligation, voluntary planning and full-scale social protection? This simultaneously raised the questions of the individual, the responsibility and role of public authorities, and the role of private institutions, so many hesitations and concerns that were characteristic of the infancy of the Welfare State.

The consolidation of nation-states did not overshadow reflection on the development of a European social model, since initial collaboration in resolving social questions was outlined by way of congresses, conferences, and scientific and cultural exchange between institutions. While still tentative, these initiatives succeeded in bringing about a “reform network” (C. Topalov) that surpassed national borders. At the same time, however, social policy also illuminated the differences between countries, which were torn between fascination and repulsion for the “German model,” between a syndrome of “falling behind” and national pride.

Four subjects can be considered as central to these fin de siècle debates from the viewpoint of reflecting on the existence of a European social model: protection against the misfortunes of life (illness, accidents, old age); work regulations for what was called the “minor” population (children, female minors, and women), and later for adult men (duration, weekly rest); the institutionalization of the question of unemployment; and finally the readaptation of liberal positions with respect to the state’s role in social policy.

Between the 1880s and the eve of the Great War, there most certainly existed if not a kind of imitation, then at least a European concordance surrounding these different subjects. For example, on the question of work-related injury, Germany adopted a law instituting mandatory insurance for industrial workers on July 6, 1884. Switzerland, Austria, Denmark, and England also took preventive and/or reparative measures in the 1880s. In 1898, France and Italy in turn provided themselves with legislation for work-related injury after long parliamentary debates. The same simultaneity can be observed with female or child labour, retirement, illness, etc. It encouraged the exchange of experiences, the confrontation of ideas, plans, and projects between states, as well as observations in the field to assess the practical consequences of legislation. In this regard, some organizations played a determining role in the emergence of a major supranational reform network at the end of the long nineteenth century: the Work Offices organized by governments for the purpose of gathering, coordinating, and diffusing information relating to work matters and statistics, along with private institutions and associations, served as bonds in these networks that gradually linked Europe. Through its foreign correspondents and the international column of its monthly reports, the Musée social, which was instituted in 1894, helped familiarize people with projects, ongoing studies, and the accomplishments of neighbouring countries on social issues.

The simultaneity that can be observed on the European level in the addressing of social problems gradually fueled a desire for dialogue that notably translated into the organization of international conferences and congresses, often on private initiative (Congrès des accidents du travail in 1889, Congrès international de la Mutualité in 1900). Internationalization was also encouraged through world fairs and their sections dedicated to social economy.

The notion of genuine cooperation nevertheless still struggled to affirm itself: national logic quickly regained the upper hand when the possibility of international conventions in the area of work regulation was evoked. The conference prompted by Wilhelm II, in March 1890 in Berlin, faltered due to the primary participants’ (France, England) suspicion of the international commitments that would be imposed on states. Nevertheless, the usefulness of a harmonization on the European level was easily recognized. The adoption of measures favourable to workers, whether they involved reducing working hours in industry, protecting against work-related injury, creating retirement funds, etc., had a cost, and no state could commit itself to these without the risk of compromising its economic power, for the resulting charges would put a strain on industry and commerce. International agreement was therefore seen as decisive in maintaining competitiveness. Yet beyond general principles valid on the supranational level, it was clear that social legislation could not be disconnected from its

locale of application. Moreover, the contrasting position of unionism in the late nineteenth century tended to illuminate the different conditions in which the reforms should be carried out, in accordance with the conditions particular to each state.

A number of attitudes can be detected on the European level, although in any case they should be connected to the importance and nature of the union movement (revolutionary or reformist). They determined its force of mobilization and the pressure that unionism could exert over the implementation of social reforms and—when linked to mutualism in particular—over the obstacle it could pose for interventionism. In the 1880s Bismarckian Germany provided an example of how unions could be associated with the reforms through their inclusion in the management of social protection. Although this association prompted reflection in France, around 1900, as part of the social reform projects of the independent socialist Alexandre Millerand, the essentially revolutionary character of French unionism—as compared to the generally more reformist practice of German unionism—put a damper on the possibility of making it a genuine social partner.

The end of the nineteenth century was thus marked by a constant tension between centripetal forces encouraging the construction of social protection systems of a national character, and centrifugal forces encouraging a surpassing of borders. On the one hand, liberals or mutualists warned against the siren song of the Bismarckian model, and encouraged the development of policies suited to the characteristics and particularities of the country; on the other hand, it is undeniable that industrial development raised markedly similar problems for states. In both cases, there was generally a growth of the state through its social role, which resembled a three-part process: the creation and enlargement of a body of civil servants and especially work inspectors beginning in the 1890s to guarantee the implementation of the reforms undertaken; the emergence of new state organs that expressed the growing audience for work and planning issues (creation within the Spanish Ministry of the Interior in 1883 of a commission for social reforms to study questions relating to the improvement and well-being of the working class, the organization of the Bureau central des assurances de l'Empire in 1884 for the management of the Bismarckian insurance system, and the appearance of the first Labour Ministries before The Great War); and finally, a specialization of the work of parliamentary assemblies with the identification of commissions specifically focusing on the study of projects for social reform. The development of state prerogatives accelerated with the first global conflict, with the intervention of public authorities in social relations henceforth being acknowledged.

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