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A New Social Contract?

Poverty and Social Exclusion:
A Sociological View

SERGE PAUGAM

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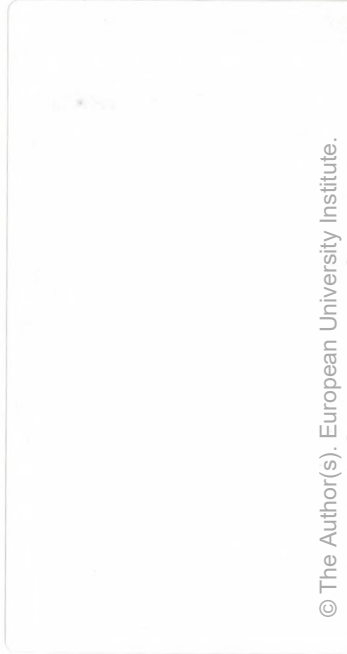
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**Paugam: *A New Social Contract?*
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ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE

A New Social Contract?

**Poverty and Social Exclusion:
A Sociological View**

SERGE PAUGAM

A Working Paper written for the Conference organised by the RSC on
A New Social Contract? held at the EUI the 5-6 October 1995,
directed by Yves Mény and Martin Rhodes

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The sociological literature on both poverty and social exclusion is large and varied, and the abundance of references means that providing a review is an arduous task.¹ It becomes even more difficult when trying to compare different nations or cultures. Thus, there is no question of providing an exhaustive study of recent past and ongoing research; however, it is more realistic to establish the complex linkage between this research, and social and political debate. The main problem for scholars in this field is constructing a research question which, whilst being distinct from contemporary ways of thinking which characterise the social debate (science must distance itself from the subject matter in order to build a conceptual framework) can also stimulate debate. Sociologists will favour studying what appears dysfunctional or anomalous in the social system at any given moment. They must therefore partially base their work in social debate. But the science which they aim to develop cannot simply be social criticism or, conversely, an ideological justification of existing norms.

After attempting to explain the equivocal nature of ideas found at the heart of social debate, we will try to operationalise some elements of sociological thought on the evolution and contemporary forms of poverty and exclusion in Europe.

The Equivocal Nature of ‘Exclusion’

It has become popular to juxtapose the question of inequality - a central theme of the Europe's so-called 'golden age' of economic growth - with the current (and, for some, new) problem of exclusion. The considerable changes that have occurred in the terms of social debate have been striking. The worsening of the jobs market and the weakening of social ties, such as divorce and separation, the atomisation of the work force and suburban strife, are major factors in explaining this evolution. The most pressing social question is no longer alienation in the workplace and disparities between socio-professional classes, but instead the re-emergence of a large number of the population who are likely to become increasingly dependent on social provision. Some see the concept of exclusion as a means of superseding the concept of poverty - which has become outdated because of its static nature and its linkage to inequality and especially income. We do not intend studying in detail the many definitions of poverty and their relative strengths and weaknesses: but it is clear that none of them can encompass the great variety of problems experienced by social actors today.

¹ To appear in Y. Mény and M. Rhodes (eds.), *A New Social Contract? Charting the Future of European Welfare*, Macmillan 1996. Translated by Jocelyn Evans

However, it is far from certain that the concept of exclusion is any better. In many ways, it is as hazy and equivocal a sociological category as poverty. Its use in describing diverse situations and populations with little or nothing in common has rendered it banal in the extreme. Julien Freund even claims that the notion of being excluded is 'saturated with sense, nonsense and contradiction and can be used to describe virtually anything' (Freund, in 'Xiberras' 1994).

As a result, policies against exclusion often contain as many specific devices as there are individual problems to be solved. One aspect of their weakness is a relative lack of understanding of the processes against which they are meant to work (Paugam 1996). Equally, they rely too heavily upon so-called 'common knowledge' which fills the vacuum left by the lack of serious analysis of the subject.

This common knowledge is nurtured by the media. Journalists are usually searching for something spectacular, and so do not worry themselves overly about how representative of real life the (often caricatured) images and examples that they use are. Let us cite three examples which are widespread in France: 1) French society is made up of two opposed social groups - the 'included' and the 'excluded'; 2) exclusion can affect anybody in contemporary society; 3) the suburbs are about to become dangerous ghettos like those found in the United States. Not only is each of these images false: each prolongs a myth which in the long term hinders the search for solutions.

The image of French society as a duality lends to the confusion. The 'excluded' are meant to form a new social class which is separated from the rest of society. It is true that the many marginalised groups in society are outside the job market and are forced to live on social security in neglected suburbs. It is also true that social policies such as the minimum wage (RMI) indirectly help institutionalise and make more visible the poor members of society, and thus stigmatise them further. That said, the sociological analysis of populations, designed to look at the lowest strata of society, emphasises the diversity of individual situations. This heterogeneity does not always leap to the eye of observers looking for a sensational news-story. Often suffering from class ethnocentrism, they are sensitive to what distinguishes themselves from those they are talking about; but they are usually unable to recognise the objective differences and the ways in which they might do so. We should remember that even those who receive the minimum wage do not form a homogeneous social group. We can distinguish between various types if we look at contrasting backgrounds, advantages and disadvantages in the jobs market, and the strength or weakness of social ties. The image of a dual society is doubtful because it

disguises this reality. In over-generalising situations and then opposing them in such a radical manner, it is common to forget that exclusion is primarily a process which starts from fragility and can sometimes end in the breaking of social ties, but which does not on the surface seem to be the result of deterministic effects or of an inescapable rut. This process, which I have called 'social disqualification', is comprised of various phases which can progressively follow each other into situations of extreme deprivation, but which are not irreversible (Paugam 1991).

The phrase 'It doesn't only happens to others' is a result of the same error in perception. It supports the currently widespread idea that anybody can be affected by exclusion. This phrase, however, is more the product of collective anxiety in the face of unemployment than a strict analysis of the available statistics. Certainly, charity organisations are making themselves available more and more to people who have undergone a serious class upheaval. Their directors often cite the example of the unemployed senior manager who has to face divorce, the loss of his home, separation from his family and who gradually drops down the social ladder until he finds himself on the street. The strength of this example derives from its challenge to the current depiction of the unemployed or the poor from humble origins. It thus contributes to alerting public opinion and also to putting pressure on public authorities. But we should not think for a moment that the risk of exclusion is equal for all individuals, whatever their social situation. The diverse forms of precariousness may be spread throughout French society, but they do not negatively accumulate in the case of all individuals.

Finally, the general use of the term 'ghetto' as a label for the French suburbs is inappropriate. It does not help resolve the problems to be found there which sustain a collective sense of insecurity in the face of possible 'social upheaval'. Of course, it is not a matter of denying the existence of deprived communities, where a large proportion of the unemployed are to be found, or of minimising the social effects which result. Rather, it is to encourage a rigorous analysis of the facts. This term 'ghetto' is at the root of many misunderstandings. To equate the poorer parts of the Paris suburbs with the ghettos of Chicago and New York demonstrates a serious misunderstanding of the American situation (Wacquant 1992). French suburban areas, including the most hemmed-in ones, are rarely completely sealed off as they are in the United States, due to their geographic positions. Their ethnic composition is highly diverse, and their levels of poverty, the degradation of the quality of life, and the extent of criminality, are incomparable with the American ghettos. One should not discount the reality of the social horrors of violence, drug-trafficking and confrontations with the law which have become the norm in certain French city

districts; but the generalisation of these isolated cases encouraged by the media to cover all suburbs makes their inhabitants feel as if they belong to an abandoned world. The danger of being simplistic is a real one and is at least partially responsible for creating bad reputations for certain areas. If policies are to be elaborated and adapted, a detailed understanding of the social relationships and the institutionalised stigmatisation of these areas and their inhabitants is essential.

Any representation of French society which tries to oppose the 'excluded' from the rest of the population is not only false, but it also impedes the fight against exclusion. It misdirects efforts towards intervention at too late a stage, when social actors try to implement solutions for groups which they believe are easy to identify, but which are in fact quite indistinct due to their unstable and heterogeneous nature.

The Necessary Deconstruction of Concepts From Social Debate

As I have tried to show using France as an example, sociologists are able to point out the incoherences in social debate and thus reformulate the social processes through which public action is taken in their country. However, I do not feel this is sufficient by itself. Without the deconstruction of concepts which spring from the debate, and a consequent reconstruction of a framework for analysis, sociologists risk being simply experts who provide their opinion, whether it criticises or justifies current and future public policy. But their ambitions usually hinder this task.

On questions as socially and politically sensitive as poverty and exclusion, sociologists must first of all recognise the impossibility of finding exhaustive definitions. These concepts are relative, and vary according to time and circumstance. It is unreasonable to expect to find a fair and objective definition, which is distinct from social debate, without falling into the trap of putting unclearly defined populations into clumsily defined categories. Defining the 'poor' and the 'excluded' according to precise long-term criteria leads almost to a reification of new social groups, or ones that are similar to the current categories, and gives the impression that the study of poverty and exclusion is an exact science which can divorce them from their social and cultural context.

Poverty and exclusion are, by definition, concepts which come from common parlance and lack any innate contextual framework. This causes problems for those who wish to construct a theory which goes beyond their everyday implications. These concepts are also to be found in the discourse of

professional social organisations which, according to short-term institutional interests and considerations, endow them with narrow meanings which may, however, come to be accepted as irreversible definitions. In all modern societies, these concepts formed the core logic of welfare-state construction and the creation of various welfare institutions at the regional and national level.

Because of both the multiple social and institutional uses of these concepts, and the common knowledge which inevitably accompanies them, it seems to me to be fruitful to leave them to one side. 'Exclusion' and 'poverty' should be considered *prénotions* (pre-concepts) in the Durkheimian sense. It is useful to distinguish scientific from social usage, as the latter can prove a major obstacle to the clarity of the former as well as to the development of theory.

Of course, this does not mean that the sociologist should renounce the use of empirical tools, such as statistics, to measure the extent of these phenomena. The cross-national comparison of poverty lines is a helpful way of demonstrating disparities in living standards and income gaps between different social groups. Similarly, we can try to compare non-financial indicators, such as social linkages - family ties, participation in communal life, private aid networks, *inter alia* - with economic indicators, in order to study the accumulation of handicaps amongst the most heavily disadvantaged.

As useful as this approach is, it is not exhaustive at the sociological level. Sociologists should remember that the meaning of such indicators varies according to the cultural context of each society. They should therefore aim to apply them to collective organisations and to the history and the measures used by institutions in the fight against poverty and exclusion while remembering that the latter are also conditioned by the context of economic development and the condition of the jobs market.

As early as the beginning of this century, Georg Simmel pointed to the ambiguous nature of poverty as a sociological category. 'The fact that someone is poor does not mean that he belongs to the specific social category of the 'poor'. He may be a poor shopkeeper, artist, or employee but he remains in this category, which is defined by a specific activity or position.' He concludes, 'It is only from the moment they are assisted - perhaps also when their overall situation would normally require assistance, even though it has not yet been given - that they become part of a group characterised by poverty. This group does not remain united by interaction among its members, but by the collective attitude which society as a whole adopts towards it' (Simmel 1908). This approach, which today would be labelled 'constructivist', is essential in analysing the issues of poverty or exclusion. It has various theoretical

implications. The first is that, from a sociological perspective, the social institutional format of any society at a given moment is what matters, not the definition of poverty or exclusion as such. The second is that these institutions are not static, as they themselves are formed by social processes. The third is that the status of the poor and the excluded depends on the meaning given by each society to criteria such as the standard of living or the degree of participation in economic and social life, and on the position in which 'poor' or 'excluded' groups find themselves *vis-à-vis* those who label them as such.

International comparisons can help construct an appropriate framework for analysis, because they allow the step backwards required to advance beyond the common meanings of these categories.

The Social Orientation to Poverty and Exclusion in European Societies

Sociological thought on poverty and exclusion cannot therefore base itself entirely on a substantive analysis of 'the poor' or 'the excluded'.² It should also contribute to the understanding of *social orientation* to poverty and exclusion. To define this concept, I propose the consideration of two dimensions.

The first is of a macro-sociological type, using a collective and social representation of this phenomenon and a social explanation of the 'poor' and 'excluded'. It can be seen, at least partially, in the analysis of the institutional forms of social intervention which aim to help the members of these groups. Such forms of social intervention are responsible for shaping the social perception of poverty and exclusion, the importance given to these questions, and the ways in which they aim to address the problems.

The second problem derives more from micro-sociology, considering the importance of these peoples own experiences, the attitudes they have towards those who give them these labels and the way they adapt to different situations. 'The poor' and 'the excluded' are not defined and treated in the same way within different European countries, let alone cross-nationally. At similar standards of living, social assistance during one's active life will not necessarily have the same meaning or evoke the same attitudes in a nation of limited unemployment and heavily anti-marginal attitudes as it does in a society experiencing structural unemployment and widespread economic change. In the former case, the individuals concerned are in a minority and face stigmatisation

² This is why I use inverted commas when I use the 'social' rather than the scientific meaning of these words.

by not conforming with general social norms; in the latter, they are less marginalised and have a greater chance of recovering their previous social status through the material and symbolic resources available to them as members of the economic underclass.

These two dimensions of social orientation towards poverty and exclusion are linked to various factors which should be analysed simultaneously: the degree of economic development, the nature of the jobs market, the type and strength of social ties, the welfare-state profile, and more generally, the values and the culture through which individuals' attitudes are shaped.

Without entering into the details of this perspective, I propose to highlight certain elements to illustrate the diversity of social orientation in European societies. To do this, I shall use the classic methodological device of 'ideal types'.

Three ideal types

It is possible to identify three types of social orientation to poverty and exclusion: integrated poverty, marginal poverty, and disabling poverty.³ These terms link the concept of poverty to its social context. They do not take their point of reference from population groups, but instead from relatively stable groupings which, whilst having a social basis, evolve as they draw members, who are labelled 'poor' or 'excluded, from different social categories. Of course, they do not provide a profile of society at any one given moment, despite following the Weberian scheme of comparing the groups with their ideal types: they are only useful for highlighting convergences and differences and testing the strength of the hypothesis. As useful as this exercise may be, it should be carried out with care. The social construction of poverty and exclusion are never-ending processes. The social debate which accompanies this question, and the policies which target the area are constantly evolving. The social linkages themselves are no less mutable and should be studied dynamically.

1. *Integrated poverty* refers more to traditional forms of poverty than to social exclusion. Those labelled 'poor' are, from this perspective, extensive in number and relatively indistinguishable from other social strata. Their situation is of such immediacy that it is more likely to be treated as a regional or local problem, rather than one affecting a particular social group. Social debate is organised around issues of socio-economic and cultural development in their broadest sense, and focuses especially on the territorial dimension of social

³ cf Appendix, Tables 1 and 2.

inequality. Poverty in the national population and the entire social system is linked, via collective representation, to that found at the regional level. Because 'the poor' form a broad social class, rather than a strictly defined 'underclass', they are not heavily stigmatised. Their standard of living is low, but they remain part of the social networks which stem from family and the immediate neighbourhood. Moreover, although unemployment may also impinge upon this group, it does not lead to a concomitant loss of status. In fact, its effects are usually compensated for by resources available from the underground economy, and furthermore, such activities play an integrating role for those who participate.

This type of social orientation towards poverty is more likely to develop in traditional, 'under-developed' or 'under-industrialised' societies than in their advanced, modern counterparts. It is often linked to the economic backwardness of pre-industrial societies as against those with more advanced production and social welfare protection.

2. *Marginal poverty* also refers more to traditional forms of poverty than to social exclusion as such. As opposed to integrated poverty, those who are referred to as 'the poor' or 'the excluded' in this case constitute only a minor part of the population. In the collective consciousness, they are made up of those who cannot adapt to the progress of modern civilisation, or conform to the norms of economic development. Even though they are only a residual minority, their existence is disruptive because it demonstrates the presence of 'system drop-outs' and may foster 'disillusionment with progress' (Aron 1969). It is for this reason that social welfare institutions ensure that they cater for those socially and professionally unable to integrate with society, without the influence of any outside pressure. This social orientation towards poverty is based on the idea that this peripheral minority is unlikely to challenge the economic and social functioning of the system in its entirety. Measures should be taken, but they should not monopolise the efforts of economic, political and trades union actors. In any case, the social debate is organised not so much around this residual group, but rather around the sharing of benefits amongst socio-professional groups. The social status of those judged unable to integrate is thus badly compromised. Social intervention reinforces the feeling that these people are on the margins of society, and once stigmatised, they are unable to escape fully from the protection of the social organisations who look after them.

This social orientation towards poverty and exclusion is more likely to manifest itself in advanced and developing industrial societies, where unemployment can be controlled to a certain degree, and revenues are sufficiently high to

guarantee everyone a high level of social protection - often the result of union demands. Without automatically sweeping away the protection afforded by close ties (such as the family, for example) the welfare state which provides more general security may, in the long term, eventually replace them in their role as social stabilisers.

3. *Disabling poverty* is concerned more with the question of exclusion than that of actual poverty, although social actors continue to employ both terms. Those who they refer to as 'the poor' or 'the excluded' are becoming steadily more numerous. They exist outside the productive sphere and become more dependent on social welfare institutions as they encounter greater and greater problems. It is not so much a question of abject destitution, spreading more widely every year, but rather a process which can produce sudden changes in daily life. Although we should not generalise, as we noted above, it is nevertheless true that progressively more people are confronted with precarious situations in employment which are liable to increase their burdens: low revenue, unsatisfactory housing and health care, weak familial ties and social networks and unstable position in institutionalised social networks (Paugam, Zoyem and Charbonnel 1993). Material decline, even if only relative, and dependence upon social benefits - especially financial aid - result in the feeling of an inevitable descent into social hopelessness for those in such a situation. Their self-devaluation is accentuated by the fact that many have not experienced any sort of childhood deprivation.

In contrast to marginal poverty, the scope of this phenomenon affects society as a whole and is turning into the so-called 'new social question', which threatens social order and cohesion. 'Disabling poverty' is a social orientation towards 'the poor' and 'the excluded' which generates collective anxiety, as the membership of this stratum grows, and the number of its potential members similarly increases.

This specific orientation to poverty and exclusion is most likely to develop in societies faced with high unemployment and an unstable jobs market - linked to changes in the productive sphere and the globalisation of economies - and manifests itself in what Robert Castel refers to as the 'crisis of the wage society' (*la société salariale*) (Castel 1995). Normally in this type of society, the role of family ties, although not completely absent, has diminished: far from balancing economic and social inequalities, they may in fact exacerbate them. Furthermore, the parallel, or underground, economy is too regulated by public institutions to offer any stable support for the most disadvantaged. The processes which help soften the effects of unemployment under what we have termed 'integrated poverty' are less effective, and certainly less organised

under 'disabling poverty'. As a result, dependence upon social welfare institutions is more evident in the case of the marginal sections of the population.

National and Regional Realities Contrasted

Unsurprisingly, national and regional situations do not correspond precisely to these three ideal types of poverty and exclusion. However, we can at least draw comparisons between them.

1. European societies similar to the first type (integrated poverty). If the standard threshold of 50% of equivalent national mean spending is taken as a statistical definition of poverty in each country, it becomes immediately clear that the economically poorest countries are also those with the highest percentage of poor people. For example, in 1985, more than 30% of the population of Portugal could be considered poor, as against less than 10% in Belgium, Denmark and Germany (Eurostat 1990). It should be stressed that there are often strong regional disparities in these societies. In 1993, using the same threshold, 20% of families in the south of Italy would merit the label poor, as opposed to 5.4% in the north and 7.8% in the centre (Commissione di indagine sulla povertà, 1994, Sgritta and Innocenzi, 1993). In 1991, 11 out of 43 provinces had from 30% to 41% levels of poor families, whereas the national average is 19.4% (Juarez, 1994).⁴ These high levels of poverty are accompanied by differing social representations of the phenomenon and of the status of the unemployed in comparison with those found in economically more developed regions or nations.

According to an opinion poll by Eurobarometer in 1989 (EEC 1990) the majority of respondents in southern countries see poverty as a permanent condition (Greece: 65%; Portugal: 63%; Italy: 55%; Spain: 50%) whereas in Holland, the proportion of respondents with the same opinion is only 17%; in Denmark, 20%, and in Germany 24%. In the latter countries, the majority of the population feel that poverty is at the end of a 'slope' ('the poor' having 'slipped' into poverty). It is evident that poverty is perceived differently according to the degree of economic development. Collective representations thus partially account for national contrasts found in statistical evidence.

⁴ Moreover, this was calculated using 50% of annual mean family income rather than the 50% threshold of equivalent national mean spending.

In those regions where the level of poverty is high, 'the poor' or the unemployed are not heavily stigmatised. Social integration seems to be founded principally on belonging to the family unit. Those who are most economically disadvantaged do not lose this security, as is often the case, for example, in France and Great Britain. In the statistical analysis using correlations of certain variables (Paugam, Prélis and Zoyem 1994) we could observe a lack of correlation between low standards of living and weakened family cohesion in Spain and in Italy (Portugal and Greece are absent from the study due to a lack of adequate statistical data). In these countries, results obtained from other indicators, such as private aid networks, were similar: even those who were poorest economically were not deprived of contacts or the possibility of help if needed.

In the south of Italy, one can refer to a 'solid base of unemployment' (Pugliese 1993) linked to the specific way in which the jobs market functions in a region with three identifiable sectors: the public sector, socially the most valuable; the private sector, made up of unstable companies with low salaries and virtually no career prospects; and the informal sector. The ideal situation for any worker looking for a job is to enter the public sector, and complement this position as much as possible with additional work in the informal sector. To secure a place in this sector, one must wait for positions for which demand is greater than supply. Moreover, clientelism determines the distribution of these posts (in much the same way as it regulates the distribution of invalid pensions). In the full knowledge that the system favours those who have been registered unemployed for the longest - it is not inconceivable that a long-term unemployed person will be accepted into the public sector - many will refuse to work in the private sector, instead searching in the meantime for work in the informal sector.⁵ The unemployed survive for the most part thanks to work on the black market. In this sense, poverty is evidently not related to unemployment, and these people remain integrated within the social system.

The social orientation to poverty we find in these regions is often a hindrance to new social legislation. Poverty is a component of the social system and might even be said to help regulate it. Institutional and political elites, who are responsible for managing the social aid system, have often taken into account the social and cultural logic of compensation behind the jobs market and collective action against poverty. They also recognise the importance of the family, which often leads them to conclude that it is pointless changing existing policies. In Italy, sociologists openly condemn this attitude because they see it

⁵ I am relying here on information provided by Nicola Negri in an article entitled 'Politiche di sostegno del reddito in Italia', forthcoming in a collection on the minimum wage in Europe.

simply as a pretext for inaction (or rather, for action without an institutional framework). In Spain, the situation is very similar, even if the use of clientelism is less evident. The autonomous 'Comunidades', with their minimum wage policies, have all adopted different principles, according to the types of poverty aid which they see as best adapted to their specific social and cultural context (Aguilar et al. 1995). Most of them have chosen not to weaken family ties.

In these examples, we can see that there has been an advance since the time of kinship aid amongst the peasantry. In describing these societies, Henri Mendras (1976) emphasised that the social relationships which developed '...are all linked together by bilateral relationships which involve a recognition of solidarity and homogeneity and form a stable, interlinked collectivity'. From this perspective, it is clear that Mediterranean societies still have much in common with their peasant predecessors. A society based on wage income, under a modern economy, is evidently less well organised, and its type of development allows the coexistence of various subsystems of production and exchange, be they complementary or conflictual. This heterogeneity partially explains the reason for the maintenance of this specific social orientation to poverty and exclusion. It is even tempting to postulate that, though these informal social systems of action against poverty still exist today, they would disappear were economic development to become more intense. However, we should note that they still exist despite various industrial development programmes in some of these regions. The functioning of the welfare state and the different types of aid distributed amongst certain sections of the population have not dissolved these close ties either. We must therefore consider the effects of the social and economic system functioning as a whole, and the force of inertia that these might present to any future reform.

2. European societies similar to the second type (marginal poverty). The period of the 'golden age' in Europe closely matches this type, especially in the case of France. It was during the course of this era that the movement 'ATD Quart-Monde' was formed, with the objective of defending the interests of the underclass, stricken by inter-generational poverty, which in the past had simply been disregarded as a 'residue' of economic growth. It is certainly true that the economic climate allowed for optimism for the level of unemployment was still insignificant. Housing problems, which were serious in the 1950s, became progressively less important (Paugam 1993). However it is also true that 'the poor' were to be found in large numbers during these years of prosperity - indeed, to such an extent that it was normal to consider them as representative of the entire working-class, at least until the early-1970s. Granted, social debate was also organised around the questions of low salaries and unacceptable working conditions, etc. However, using Simmel's terminology, this related

more to social inequalities than to social orientations towards poverty. These labourers were integrated in terms of factory employment, social conflict and neighbourhoods settings. Their social identity was not primarily that of being poor as such, but was rather defined by their position in the workplace, as opposed to the underclass, who were to be found only on the fringes of the economy. The latter group were targeted by specific social policies, such as halfway housing and supervision, in an attempt to remove their accumulated handicaps. This period was characterised by a dual phenomenon: the worker still involved in social conflict with its roots in 19th-century class struggle; and the maintenance of a disinherited social group on the margins of a thriving society. The situation in France today has changed considerably, and thus the social orientation to the problem has also been transformed.

Certain European countries are still close to this model. This is not so much because their socio-economic circumstances have not changed over recent years, but because of the stability of collective representation and modes of intervention in favour of 'poor' groups of the population.

Germany is a case in point. We will not consider the comparatively low level of economic poverty in this country, or its (until recently) low rate of unemployment. Rather, we wish to emphasise that Germany has always nurtured a specific social orientation to the problem, which can be found in its value system and historical traditions. Firstly, debate on poverty and exclusion seems to be virtually non-existent. The German state has always hesitated in participating in any European programmes against poverty. Indeed, it still has not approved the Fourth Programme on Poverty proposed by the European Commission, which may lead it to be scrapped. The German Ministry for Social Affairs follows the argument that poverty is being 'fought' - especially thanks to the quality of German social and legal institutions - and that it is therefore pointless, and even detrimental, to make it a central theme of social debate.

Of course, this does mean that 'poverty' does not exist in Germany. Many German economists and sociologists study this phenomenon in universities, often funded by charity organisations who wish to provide a forum for the expression of the views of the most disadvantaged (Hauser 1993). Yet, the number of such studies is still limited, and they are less likely to stimulate social introspection, as is often the case in France.

The depiction of poverty in Germany seems to fit this pattern. According to a recent survey, 50% of Germans consider poverty to be extinct in their country, 30% did not express an opinion, and only 20% believe that it has not been

totally eradicated (cf. Schultheis 1996). To understand the meaning of these results, it is evidently necessary to carry out some historical analysis. Franz Schultheis ascribes the specific nature of this social orientation to poverty to a socio-cultural tradition, founded intellectually in the 1950s, when, during the 'German miracle', many authors and political figures believed that social inequality had been overcome and that notions of 'class' and 'poverty' were now redundant. This was the result of a collective suppression of reality, in which the trauma of the war undoubtedly played a significant role. We should not overlook the importance of collective belief in social welfare institutions and the legislation adopted at the beginning of the 1960s to guarantee a minimum wage for all. The advantage of this system lies in permitting both the distribution of elementary rights to all those in a situation of poverty, and providing them with supplementary help according to their specific needs.

The Scandinavian countries are equally close to this model of social orientation to poverty. But we should also pay close attention to the differences between the Nordic countries. We will simply note that the concepts of poverty and exclusion are not to be found at the centre of social debate, even if an ever growing number of writers accept that the 'Scandinavian model' has reached its limits and that poverty is an actual problem (Abrahamson 1994). However, there are still many politicians, especially conservatives and liberals, who try to minimise its importance. As in Germany, poverty is still invisible for many. Researchers agree that it is a minority affliction, whatever the criteria for assessment. One Swedish researcher has stated that, during the 1980s, an average of 6% of the population needed some form of social aid to survive, and that these figures had never been higher in any other period of the twentieth century (cited by Abrahamson 1994). We can perhaps speak of a form of poverty management which has changed little over the years, despite economic changes. In the Swedish case, it is also worth emphasising the unique system of labour market regulation, which has strongly limited the extent of unemployment. According to Philippe d'Iribarne, this country 'belongs not only to the large family of countries (sometimes called 'corporatist') which are characterised by a search for compromise between groups via codetermination and consensus', but it is distinguished from these others 'by the strength of its agrarian culture implying both a rigorous work ethic and a sense of community. This latter seems far stronger than in countries where urbanisation is far older, and where bourgeois individualism is far more important' (d'Iribarne 1990).

Although the number of 'poor' in Germany and Scandinavia may be limited, their status is quite low. They are made the target of individual social welfare measures which often prove to be highly stigmatising. The groups which use

these services in countries where they are in a minority risk being perceived as 'social problem cases' or 'social rejects'.

3. European societies close to the third type (disabling poverty). Despite their differences, France and Great Britain are close to the third model of social orientation to poverty and exclusion. In both cases, we should note that the question of poverty evokes very old debates which have structured the representation of, and help to, disadvantaged groups. The British have had a national system of poverty aid since the sixteenth century and the Elizabethan edicts (Merrien 1994). The repeal of these laws and attempts to reform the system in line with changes resulting from the industrial revolution provoked fierce and prolonged debate in the nineteenth century - a debate which is surprisingly close to contemporary arguments. The French, for their part, remain favourable to the idea of a national debt to the weakest members of society, originating in the eighteenth century and especially from the Revolutionary 'Comité de Mendicité' (Committee against Begging). This institution stressed the need for a collectively guaranteed minimum level of support for those without resources, power or social status. Two centuries later, the vote on the RMI (see above) evoked once again this principle of national solidarity (Paugam 1993). So, for different historical reasons in France and Great Britain, this problem is still a topic for discussion, not just amongst academics, but also amongst the political elites who are often judged on their success in fighting 'poverty' and 'exclusion'.

The economic situation of the two countries are quite comparable: a steady worsening of the jobs market, growing instability of the work force, and increasing unemployment (Schnapper, 1981; Gallie, Marsh and Vogler, 1994; Morris, 1995). We can observe a high correlation between the increasing precariousness of employment - ie. the growing risk of redundancy and unemployment - and low standards of living and the weakness of the private aid network, family cohesion and participation in collective activity. The greater the distance from the ideal situation of stable employment, the more economic poverty, and also poverty of social exchange, is noticeable (Paugam, Préles and Zoyem 1994). Furthermore, the number of those receiving a guaranteed threshold of revenue has been on the increase in both countries over the past few years. The total percentage of the population dependent upon such a guaranteed revenue was around 10 % in France, and 17.4% in Britain, in 1993 (Evans, Paugam and Prélis 1995). The expanding marginal categories of the population, including young people who have never worked, are thus grouped together in an inactive and supported sector. The levels of exit from such sectors are low, and certainly much lower than the levels of entry.

The growing importance of this phenomenon in France and Great Britain has become a major preoccupation of the public authorities, firstly for financial reasons, due to the growing social costs, but also for social reasons. What will eventually happen to these people, who society can support financially but do little else, especially in terms of employment? They are rejected from the labour market, which can only lower their status, and their existence affects the social system as a whole.

Social orientation to poverty and exclusion can be similar, but the solutions are noticeably different. In Britain, this growth in poverty has not led to an increase in aid to those affected. On the contrary, it has been suggested that the levels of 'income support' should be lowered to provide an incentive for the poor to help themselves. In this context, the gap between rich and poor has widened considerably (Barclay 1995) and the disadvantaged groups who depend on support, and whose status is already weakened, are often suspected of profiting from social assistance. As a result, social debate still revolves, as in the nineteenth century, around the possible negative side-effects of helping the poor. The logic which seems to guide political thinking on the subject is to try to lessen the social costs on companies. Economic competitiveness is prioritised, which should provide jobs for 'the poor' as long as they possess the will to return to work. It is striking how many studies in Britain are devoted to these mechanisms of 'active interest'. Individuals are supposed to be rational actors, and so the welfare system is designed to benefit those who actively seek employment. This is also the way in which the question of the underclass is treated, especially amongst Conservatives. Once again, this returns to the classic view of the welfare class into which 'the poor have fallen': only policy incentives can lift them out.

In France, the question of poverty is addressed not from the perspective of an underclass, but from a general principle of national solidarity. The dominant view is that the collective nature of society has become weak. Debate on exclusion becomes generalised to include a collective fear of a loss of employment and of social advantages. Political elites or those in charge of social aid rarely use the argument that 'the poor' are taking advantage of the welfare system and that aid should be reduced to encourage them to find work. The current idea is rather to increase social expenditure to increase solidarity. Those who are labelled poor feel socially disabled, especially in the process of social disqualification. The concept of social integration through the workplace is adopted subconsciously by most people (Schnapper 1989). There are certain forms of compensation available for those leaving the jobs market which might indicate a type of unemployment or welfare support 'culture'; but it certainly does not indicate that the values organising society have been put in question, or that those on the margins of society no longer feel disadvantaged. Whatever

indications there might be, this process is certainly less advanced than in Mediterranean countries.

This social orientation to poverty and exclusion is not restricted to France and Britain. To a lesser degree, Belgium and the Netherlands are also close to this model.⁶ We might also hypothesise that, as this is an ongoing process whose effects have not yet been fully analysed, it is very likely to extend to other countries, including those who currently only experience what we have referred to as 'marginal poverty'.

Conclusion

It is striking that sociologists often criticise current and planned policies designed to fight 'poverty' or 'exclusion' in their countries. Italian sociologists have a tendency to qualify the role of family solidarity, especially in the south, because they believe that this is helping to relieve the State of its social responsibilities. Scandinavian sociologists point out the stigmatising effect of social intervention towards the marginalised 'poor', as did certain French sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s regarding certain policies directed at the underclass in disadvantaged areas. Contemporary German sociologists, understanding the circumstances of the most socially disabled, help in some ways to discredit the collective view of 'fighting poverty'. Finally, French and British sociologists try to reveal the gap between the reality of exclusion and the impact of social policies. As we stated in the introduction, sociology, when dealing with sensitive subjects such as 'poverty' and 'exclusion', will inevitably stimulate and play a role in social debate, but it must limit itself in this respect. Its main purpose should be to explain how each society regulates its orientation towards 'the poor' and 'the excluded'.

In democratic societies, 'poverty' and 'exclusion' are almost inevitably to be found at the heart of social debate, although varying according to the time and place. The persistence and renewal of forms of destitution provoke outrage because they turn the concept of equal rights for all citizens on its head. Social impotence in the face of this phenomenon is all the greater in societies where there has been a progressive implementation of social protection which aspired to eradicate the problem once and for all. Even if the standard of living around the world has continued to rise throughout this century, and destitution is now

⁶ The stigmatisation of the poor seems less salient in the Netherlands, which has maintained a high level of social protection towards the most disadvantaged, while trying to find ways to return them to the labour market and economic independence.

less common than before, it is quite clear that there are still groups living outside the social norm, and that some of these are suffering in conditions of extreme poverty. It is also the case that these inequalities, as Raymond Aron rightly predicted, have not only continued to exist, but have also given birth to new forms of poverty. These can be linked to the social inferiority of certain strata, which depend on social welfare, for example, and which provoke as much dissatisfaction as traditional forms of destitution.

The contradiction between the egalitarian ideal and the inequalities linked to the way the economy functions cannot be totally overcome. The latter can be partially reduced by the identification and application of what are called 'credit rights' - which help especially those who are most economically and socially disadvantaged - but it is impossible to eradicate them completely. This conclusion inevitably leads to frustration. Far from disappearing, these frustrations can only increase in relation to the increased satisfaction of demands for equality and the crumbling of social barriers. Everyone wishes to achieve social betterment; but, because of this, the social mechanisms which hinder individual and familial aspirations are seen as unfair and denounced as undemocratic.

As a result, social debate would seem to be unavoidable: indeed, it is all the more so because of its integral role in the functioning of modern society. Social scientists should try to contribute to this debate without becoming immersed in it. Attempts to distance themselves should occur through a clarification of concepts and a comparison of different nations and cultural systems. Their role is not to provide solutions for the politicians, but is rather more modest: namely, to suggest that they address the real questions, and consider the meanings, the possible drawbacks and the eventual contradictions of their policies. Under these conditions, a sociological perspective on 'poverty' and 'exclusion' can serve a purpose.

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Appendix

Table 1: Types of social orientation to poverty in Europe

General characteristics

Types of social orientation to poverty	Collective representation	Identity of 'the poor'
Integrated poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - poverty defined as a social condition affecting a large section of the population - social debate organised around the question of socio-economic and cultural development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the poor do not form underclass, but an extensive social group - low stigmatisation of the poor
Marginal poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'fighting' poverty - social debate around inequality and the distribution of benefits - visibility of marginalised social group ('4th world') 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - people with a 'poor' social status (c.f. Simmel) are few, but heavily stigmatised - labelled as 'social problem cases'
Disabling poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - collective conscience faced with 'new poverty' or 'exclusion' - collective fear of the risk of exclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a growing number of people being labelled as 'poor' or 'excluded' - highly diverse social situations - underclass impossible to define (see above) but still used in social debate

Table 2: Types of Social Orientation to Poverty: Factors which Contribute to their Construction and Maintenance.

Types of social orientation to poverty	Jobs market	Social links	System of social protection
Integrated poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - weak economic development - parallel economy - hidden unemployment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - strong family solidarity - familial protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - weak social protection - no guaranteed minimum revenue
Marginal poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - close to full employment - reduced unemployment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - maintenance or progressive reduction of resorting to family solidarity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - generalised social protection system - guaranteed minimum revenue for the most disadvantaged (limited availability)
Disabling poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - high increase in unemployment - instability of employment - difficult social re-entry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - weak social ties, in particular amongst the unemployed and disadvantaged groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increased claimants of guaranteed minimum revenue - development of assistance for poor

Biography

Serge Paugam is a sociologist at the CNRS. He works in the Observatoire sociologique du changement (FNSP/CNRS) and at the Laboratoire de sociologie quantitative (CREST/INSEE). He teaches at l'Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales and at the Institut d'études politiques in Paris. His main publications include *La disqualification sociale, essai sur la nouvelle pauvreté* (PUF), and *La société française et ses pauvres, l'expérience du revenu minimum d'insertion* (PUF). He has just directed the production of a collection of works, *L'exclusion, l'état des savoirs* (La Découverte). At the moment, together with Duncan Gallie of Nuffield College, Oxford, he is co-ordinating a European research project on the themes of social instability, unemployment and social exclusion.



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