**The Quest for Social Justice: theories, practices and alternatives**

Is it exaggerated to say that left-wing and progressive politics basically concern the quest for social justice? Anti-capitalist struggles are not an end in themselves, they claim to promote a better world in which all people can live a life of dignity. Today, this inevitably has to be completed with a quest for ecological sustainability since people cannot survive on a planet with global warming and without biodiversity. *Briefly summarized: social and environmental justice go hand in hand and are the main objectives of all progressive struggles*.

Yet, it is surprising to see how social justice is being ignored by most of the research on alternatives to the current system. A lot of attention goes to geopolitics, macro-economics and trade, to non-discrimination and gender (which are indeed elements of social justice) and to local approaches on commons and social and solidarity economies. The central element of social justice however is rarely examined. I refer here to *social protection as the way in which economic and social human rights can be materialized.*

It is difficult to explain this neglect. Surely, for the radical left, social protection and welfare states, as they emerged in Western Europe, are seen as reformist policies, able to sustain instead of abolishing capitalism. It also is often seen as a result of colonialism having produced the wealth that was necessary to pay for welfare provisions. Welfare states were also made possible by the Cold War and the fear of communism. Many explanations are given, though one should never forget the social struggles that made the implementation of economic and social rights possible and the fact that thanks to the actions and campaigns of trade unions, *labour was largely de-commodified*. Finally, and most importantly, I want to argue that *social protection also is a major transformative policy*, that is, it contributes to social, political and economic transformation. Whether this becomes ‘anti-capitalism’ depends on the objectives of the social actors involved in the struggles.

Social protection, obviously, is only one element of social justice, though it is a crucial element. The social protection I want to promote consists of social security (a system of insurances against illness, unemployment, labour accidents, old age and family needs), social assistance (help to poor people who cannot be active on the labour market), public services and labour law. Next to this, social justice also concerns other elements such as gender equality, tax justice, migration, a right to participation in decision-making as well as environmental rights such as a right to water, to clean air to breathe and land for farmers.

*A lack of theorisation*

The several arguments I mentioned above to explain the lack of left-wing attention for social protection are sustained by a lack of theorisation. Poverty reduction policies usually have an ethical and philosophical basis, referring to the right to life. Neoliberal thinkers such as von Hayek and Friedman, accepted to help poor people, even with a kind of basic income. They could not accept however a ‘distortionary’ minimum wage. Philosophers like Rawls, Sen, Nussbaum or Pogge developed interesting arguments to defend and justify transfers to poor people. But the same is not true for welfare states. Once the point of redistribution comes in, political decisions are needed.

Nevertheless, some serious attempts have been made. I want to briefly mention three of them, since they continue to play an important role today.

The first one is T.H. Marshall and his theory on social citizenship.[[1]](#endnote-1) According to Marshall, social rights are a third generation of rights, after civil liberties (18th century) and political rights (19th century). These social rights allow people to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in society. They became possible in the 20th century because of a growing social consciousness in the 19th century of equality as social justice and of the conception of equal social worth, not merely equal natural rights. Citizenship is based on equality, but economic inequality undermines the political equality. Thanks to social rights it was possible to go beyond poverty reduction and to claim a universal right to real income which is not proportionate to the market value of the claimant. With social citizenship, certain goods are de-commodified (public services).

This theory came about in the 1960s and has since been criticized from various parts, mainly by feminists and by Marxists. Feminists note that women in many cases did have social rights before they obtained political rights. Marxists feel uneasy with any theory on citizenship, since it ignores class conflicts that are supposed to be the main drivers of progress. Nevertheless, faced with today’s threats on social security systems and a new focus on poverty reduction, opponents of social citizenship have qualified their scepticism. However imperfect the welfare states may be, they are by far preferable to any (neo)liberal system. They do not eliminate markets, but they do hinder them to determine people’s lives and livelihoods. Welfare states are perfectly compatible with Polanyi’s ‘embedded markets’, they are a consequence of social and political decisions on where and when markets are allowed to play a role.[[2]](#endnote-2)

A second interesting theory is the one of François Ewald.[[3]](#endnote-3) He explains the emergence of the welfare state, end of the 19th century, by a new conception of ‘risk’. Industrialisation forced employers to stop blaming individual workers for the many accidents that were happening in the factories. Risks were not individual facts anymore, but inherently linked to the production system and were to be seen as having a collective, social and even societal dimension. This allowed for introducing social solutions, that is social insurances. And these insurances were part of a re-conceptualization of social relationships, while introducing some solidarity between those who managed and those who suffered from the industrialization process.

Ewald’s theory is interesting because it links up with current views on ‘risks’ and on individual responsibilities, more particularly at the World Bank. In its first proposals for a new theoretical framework for social protection[[4]](#endnote-4), the authors present a ‘risk management’ scheme. Amazingly, it uses part of ecological thinking in ‘naturalizing’ the economy and risks. In conformity with Ulrich Beck’s reasoning on risks – though this only concerns industrial risks – people are said to be equal, all facing the same risks. The only problem is that poor people are somewhat more exposed, but the risks are basically the same for all. Moreover, most risks cannot be avoided, they just happen. The only thing people – and States and families – can do is ‘mitigate’ them or ‘cope’ with them’. The risk management then is never about protecting people against risks, but to teach them how to live with them.

Christophe Ramaux[[5]](#endnote-5) rightly points to the fact that most attempts to theorize social protection are limited to this one protection system, whereas in fact it is totally embedded in a coherent and larger whole which is the State.

The ‘social State’, as he calls it, is based on four pillars: social protection, labour relations, public services and economic policies. This last point is particularly interesting, because it usually is left out of all social protection thinking. But if we accept the transformative potential of social protection, than yes indeed, economic policies have to be looked at.

Our social State is said to be underestimated, as it did constitute a real revolution in our thinking and in our being. It is not only anti-liberal, but also anti-capital with whole sectors of the economy that have been de-commodified. We do not live in mono-capitalistic societies. People do have some degree of economic and social security.

Moreover, by including economic policies into the concept of the social State, the reasoning allows for reflection on budgetary, monetary, tax, trade and commercial policies, as well, obviously, as on distributive mechanisms. The natural aim of social protection is to destroy a market in which labour has become a commodity.[[6]](#endnote-6)

As neoliberal attacks continue, we have to reject the notion that everything is at the service of markets and of the economy. Instead, the economy must be put at the service of society and the collective dimension of our social protection and its links with other aspects of life reaffirmed. These are all eminently political decisions that need to be taken, but they do require a change in our way of thinking.

*Right-wing hijacking*

The re-thinking of social policies in the context of social justice is all the more urgent because of two facts. First, the real situation in which people in general and workers in particular are living. Formally and according to World Bank statistics, extreme poverty has been dramatically reduced on the past thirsty years. But if one takes a closer look at the poverty lines and the needs to really escape poverty, one arrives at 4,5 billion people, that is more than half of the world population![[7]](#endnote-7) Secondly, and as importantly, the whole thinking on social policies is now in the hands of the right. When The Economist puts the need for social protection on its cover and when prominent economists such as Joseph Stiglitz start to write books on social protection, one should know there is a problem.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The current thinking on social protection, mainly influenced by the ‘poverty reduction’ priority of the World Bank in 1990 is totally compatible with neoliberalism. It still is targeted to the poor, it implies a deregulation of labour markets and a privatisation of public services. In other words, it is a social protection at the service of markets, of productivity and growth. This new social paradigm is being introduced in all parts of the world and presented as a major progress in the South and a ‘modernisation’ in the North. In fact, it aims at a more or less uniform and minimal system, with large opportunities for the private sector, indirectly subsidized by States through systems of cash transfers.

The existing international initiatives, such as the Social Protection Floors of the ILO or the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals do not oppose this philosophy, even if the ILO starts from a different background.

It is unacceptable to leave the monopoly of rethinking social protection to neoliberals who only know about markets. Fulfilling its potential requires a reconsideration of a whole series of issues concerning the future of our planet and our collective living.

*Time to react*

Taking into account the dire poverty that is still prevailing, the lack of respect for all human rights, more particularly economic and social rights and the growing inequality, it is urgent for the left to develop its own philosophy on social protection and social justice. The current awareness of the climate crisis and its indissociable link with social justice, make this topic even more pressing.

In this last section, I want to briefly spell out three major ideas that can guide us to develop a new kind of social protection.

The need for universal policies

The Social Protection Floors of the ILO do mention social protection should be universal, but is somewhat contradictory in also saying it is for those ‘in need’. The World Bank from its side continues to promote targeted interventions in favour of the poor. Both organisations have published in 2015 a joint statement in favour of universal social protection, though it does not seem the World Bank has changed its practices. What has happened is that ‘universalism’ has received a new meaning, now only referring to specific groups of people, such as the elderly or children.

What is clear however is that policies in favour of the poor are not enough. If well implemented they might indeed help people to be lifted out of poverty, but they do not stop the creation of poverty. That, again, is the big advantage of social protection with labour rights and public services: ***they stop the impoverishment processes and prevent poverty.*** This is the main argument in favour of universal policies, next to the generally admitted point that policies for the poor rapidly become poor policies. It is difficult indeed to convince middle classes and the rich to pay for policies they themselves do not benefit from. As for the rich, it is obvious they also have to contribute to the common good of all

Social commons

Commons are the result of a social and political process of participation and democratic decision-making concerning material and immaterial goods that will be looked at from the perspective of their use value, eliminating or severely restricting private ownership and the rights derived from it. They can concern production as well as re-production, they refer to individual and to collective rights.

Following this definition, social protection systems, broadly speaking, can be considered to be commons as soon as a local community, or a national organisation or a global movement decide to consider them as such, within a local, national or global regulatory framework. If they organize direct citizens’ participation in order to find out what these social protection systems should consist of and how they can be implemented, they can shape them in such a way that they fully respond to people’s needs and are emancipatory.

***Considering economic and social rights as commons basically means to democratize them, to state they belong to the people and to decide on their implementation and on their monitoring.*** This clearly will involve a social struggle, because in the past neoliberal decades these rights have been hollowed out, public services have been privatised and labour rights have weakened if not disappeared. One can compare it to an ‘enclosure’ which deprives people from their livelihoods. That is why to-day, more and more people reclaim their rights and the services they need. Citizens then do not wait for initiatives to be taken by public authorities, but take matters into their own hands and organize themselves.

This does not mean States or other public authorities play no role anymore, on the contrary. We will always need States for redistribution, for guaranteeing human rights, for making security rules, etc. But the States we are talking of in relation to our economic and social rights or our public services will be different from what States are today, they will be themselves a kind of public service, helping their citizens. So, if we say **social commons go beyond States and markets, we do not say they go without States and markets. It will be a different logic that applies.**

System change

To-day, social movements and their struggles are very fragmented. Trade unions fight for labour rights and next to them non-governmental organisations and movements fight for better pensions, for children’s rights, for universal health care, for better care for disabled people, for water, for public transport, for land, etc. etc. This focused approach is necessary and useful in order to build expertise. Social struggles today not only have to be fought against governments, but more and more against powerful corporations with hegemonic power over knowledge and communication.

However, it is also clear to see that a **fragmented approach weakens the movements.** More openness to others and more trust in reciprocal learning could help a lot in moving forward together, on the same path but at different speeds and with similar objectives.

**Social justice can be an ideal entry point** to do just that. Many connections can be made, among basic elements of social security, among social protection and other social policies, among social policies, climate justice and more systemic issues. Each time focusing on the interlinkages can help to strengthen demands and bring more compelling arguments. Pointing at the income dimension of poverty is crucial for raising wages and social allowances, at the right to water for health, at the toxicity of pesticides for preventive health, at child care for women’s work, at land rights for food production, at …

**This is what I call ‘obstinate coherence’: to push for changes in sectors that at first sight are not related to the issue one fights for, but in the end are crucial for it.** It might be rather easy to organise commons at the local level, but it is far more difficult to achieve something at the national, let alone the global level. It is not easy, the fight will be long, but is there any other strategy?

The is why the links between different sectors and elements of social protection are so important to reveal, and that is why social protection can indeed be an entry point to policies of systemic change. **Social policies, as such, will not be enough to counter neoliberalism and capitalism,** but they can be a crucial contribution to it. It is also how the potential for alternatives can be brought to light.

Conclusion

Social justice as an entry point for policies of systemic change is in line with the practices and policies that led, one century ago, to the emergence of socialism. Offering soup was a reason for many hungry workers to join the new movements. Offering systems of solidarity was a mechanism to keep them into the new movements. It is time for progressive movements to take up this agenda in an emancipatory way.

Social justice is the adequate way for progressive movements to win a larger audience. **New narratives on commons and on how people can take their future into their own hands might be the right way to convince them to abandon right-wing populism.** Emphasizing our interdependence and the necessary collective dimension of all solutions can be the right approach to strengthen social movements and build citizens’ power.

Social justice can be a strategic and transformative instrument for social struggle, whether you work for just taxes, the elimination of debt, decent pensions or adequate wages. We do not have to do away with capitalism first, we can start the other way round. Social commons and obstinate coherence and consistency means you do not stop in the middle of the road, but you continue till the system is changed in such a way it cannot identify itself anymore.

**Transformative social policies are, in the end, about much more than social policies.** They are people-oriented and want to preserve the environment. **Their objective is social justice for all, a condition for sustainability and, in the end, for peace.**

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2. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation,* Boston, Beacon Press, 1957. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
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4. Holzmann, R. & Jorgensen, S., *Social risk management: a new conceptual framework for social protection and beyond’,* Social Protection Discussion Paper Series, no. 0006, Washington, DC: World Bank, Social Protection Unit, 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ramaux, C., 2012, *L’état social: pour sortir du chaos néolibéral*,Paris, Mille et une nuits. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Polanyi, *op. cit.* p. 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Summers, A., *5 Facts about Global Poverty that May Surprise You,* Development Maters, 14 March 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Mestrum, F., *Beg for more?,* AEPF/Transform! Europe, Social Commons. Social Justice. System Change, Barcelona Conference 8-10 June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)