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Workshop

“Western European Concepts of ‘Welfare’, ‘Philanthropy’ and ‘Charity’ :
Changes in Meaning over Space and Time, c. 1800-1940”

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French ‘Bienfaisance’ with a British Future : How Did Charity Protagonists give Meaning to their Action in the Early 3d Republic (1870-1918) ?

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In this brief presentation, I'd like to try to adress three different issues.

One is methodological : how useful could it be to approach international comparison in our field through the questions raised by the history of transfers, crossed or shared history ? Instead of comparing the French and British experiences, institutions or discourses on the poor at the turn of the 20th century, let's observe protagonists do their own comparing : how did they used some image (or translation) of a foreign situation as a tool for understanding their own, and acting upon it. In this case, we'll listen more to French people looking at Britain than the other way round. One reason being that, as far as charity and relief were concerned, I didn't find much interest for France in the British literature of the time.

Second issue : instead of talking of "France" or "Britain" as solid and distinct entities calling for being compared, I' d like to describe "France" (and "Britain" as well) as a diversity of philanthropic activities, institutions, competing groups and sets of intellectual references. Among the people involved, there were a good number who believed that the field of benevolence in France was in a rapid process of change leading soon to what they observed in Britain. The image of Britain they built then was the future of France to them. I think this image and the actions it made possible should be taken seriously. It happens that we know what followed : the flowering of private charitable initiatives and institutions they found in Edwardian Britain never took place in France, and indeed did not last very long in Britain herself, where the State took over pretty soon, actually rather sooner than in France. But at the time, the actors didn't know it, and their action should be related to what they thought they did, rather than to the eventual wreck of their dreams.

Third issue : there is something puzzling about what was happening in France in the field of poor relief around 1900. In the political context of the time, the men in charge of public relief institutions, all solidly Republicans (even though some rather conservative), should have been at war against the men running private charities, many of them being Roman Catholics (hence either squarely Monarchists or moderately loyal to the regime). Instead, aften some ten years of tension, both sides were then converging toward an overall agreement on methods of action and even division of labor. The International Congress of "Bienfaisance et Assistance" (more on these words later) which convened at the

World Exhibition of 1900 in Paris was described by both sides as “un concordat charitable” (“concordat” was the agreement between church and state which was reached by Napoleon to put an end to the upheaval of the French Revolution). How was this possible ? Part of the answer, in my view, lays in the British reference both sides shared.

Reform as a shared language

Let me develop this last point first.

If the 3d Republic formally began in 1870 with the fall of Napoleon III, the new regime had been only consolidated in 1880, when the Republicans prevailed over the Monarchists in all of the main political institutions (even though not in the Military). At the World Exhibition of 1889, a great deal of attention was given to social reform issues and, in many so-called International Congresses, an interesting phenomenon could be observed : a number of characters who had been wiped out from politics by the electorate, or purged from official positions by the new Republican establishment swelled the ranks of new voluntary organizations dedicated to the multiplying causes for social betterment. Reform indeed had been chosen by many defeated Conservatives or Monarchists as a retreat – either expecting better days in politics or engaging a second career. Meanwhile, members of the new and still shaky political elite were rallying the same causes – at least when they could boast some special ability : being a physician or an engineer, a progressive mayor or a local benevolent man of some repute, etc. Since then, reform had been invested both by the loosers and the winners, and so became a field of co-operation for men of good will who agreed to leave politics aside. Their common ground was love for humanity and a shared belief in science.

In the field of charities, in the beginning, the situation was not as simple as that. Poor relief in France had been characterized by two related features all along the 19th century.

First, it was a matter of competition between benefactors : protecting poor clients was a basic duty for the local gentry and notability, and (now) for the middle-class newcomers who competed with it. Being rich had never been enough to be acknowledged a natural right to rule localities and their people, and notability always had to be won again and properly maintained. In that big game which was played by thousands of charitables souls : visitors, nuns, hospital

administrators, and so on, there were many front lines. But it can be said that the Catholic Church and the local benefactors related with it had the upper ground, and their various competitors battled uphill.

The second problem was a consequence of the former : competition between benefactors meant that their clients had some space for developing their own tactics. A Catholic charitable gentleman lamented at the 1900 Congress : “Some people are on the roll of every charitable organization, they have the rent paid by M. de Rothschild, the stew by the baron de Schickler [a Protestant], and bread by M. le curé”[1]. We know that malingering was the nightmare of scientific philanthropists and their basic argument for the workhouse, the work test or, at least, charity organization.

One brief point about competition : it was also fought with words. “Charité/charity” was the theological term that was in use among Catholics. “Philanthropie/philanthropy” appeared some time before the French Revolution and was devised to disconnect the love of humanity from any religious overtone. It had remained the marker of liberal elites since the Restoration of 1815. Some neutral term was then required : “Bienfaisance/benevolence” was coined, first to refer to the municipal institutions (“bureaux de bienfaisance”) that were in charge of public relief in the 19th century : funded by voluntary contributions (not out of the rates), those bureaus were created by the mayor (on a non-compulsory basis) and managed by unpaid men of local repute appointed by the mayor. A fourth word was also in use : in the 3d Republic a duty of “assistance” by local authorities (as opposed to “benevolence”) was instituted by law for an increasing number of categories of people in need : the sick poor (1893), the old or disabled poor (1905), eventually the unemployed workers (1914).

Words were used by social forces. In the 1890s, “assistance” schemes and institutions were a stronghold of Republican municipal politicians, a handful of professional administrators of relief, and a rather light ministerial bureaucracy. But, at the same time, charitable/philanthropic/benevolent (all of these words meaning : voluntary, or private) institutions were booming : catholic charities were rather isolated, but quite powerful, and a number of new non-religious

[1] Louis Paulian, “Nécessité d’un lien commun entre les diverses oeuvres charitables publiques et privées”, Congrès 1900, vol. 1, p. 292.

endeavours (often supported by the Republican governement, or municipalities) were developing fast.

It has to be reminded that the limits between public and private, state and voluntarism were rather blurred. The “bureaux de bienfaisance” I just described were an example, the “Congrès d’assistance” too. They were private institutions convened (and partly funded) by the governement. The 1889 congress was named “Congrès d’assistance” and was a celebration of the new Republican ambition in the field. It was conspicuously ignored by Catholics, and the only private men of good will officials could boast were benevolent Protestants, Jews and atheists of the proto-eugenist type. Nevertheless, Henri Monod, the new Director of assistance in the Ministry who was to be in charge for the next 16 years, had two quite good cards in his sleeves : C.S. Loch, the secretary of the London Charity Organisation Society, and Nathaniel S. Rosenau, that of the Buffalo C.O.S. (in New York State). Both adressed the Congress, hammered the doctrine and were triumphally applaused: no relief to any one without an inquiry on scientific lines, no relief to the able-bodied without a work test, co-operation between relief agencies (private and public) to prevent malingering and to share and improve methods. Stubborn municipalists (like some socialists from the Paris municipal council) quickly understood that this was opening the door to private charities and muttered Gallic arguments as “we haven’t waited for the English to do that” – which implied they agreed with the new line[2]. Truly liberals caught the opportunity to criticize the inconsistencies of public bureaucraties. They kept doing it in any occasion, like Dr Gibert, a Protestant sanitarian from Le Havre and anglophile, who was a Loch-type hard liner opposing any public relief to the able-bodied men. At the 1897 Congress, Gibert had a public argument with Paul Strauss, a prototypical advocate of public assistance. In the end, Strauss was looking for a way out : “We do agree on a basic point : the methodical organization of charity.” and Gibert answered : “the same things [M. Strauss] wants to do with the State, I want to do without it.”[3]

What did this short dialogue mean ? This, I think : one can agree on basic principles, and still argue on the practical means for implementing them. But the basic agreement makes it possible to talk and work together. In my view “reform” can be so defined : it is the common language that allows disputes to

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[2] Congrès 1896, vol. 2, p. 549-50.

[3] Congrès 1897, vol. 1, p. 161.

continue, the shared rules that contain fighters within the limits of a common frame. Around 1900, in France, the principles of charity organization provided that frame to all protagonists of private benevolence and public assistance. This is why it was possible for Catholics to rally the 1900 Congress, the name of which was accordingly changed to “Congrès d’assistance et de bienfaisance”. The irony of the situation was that C.S. Loch was playing such a prominent role in the reconciliation of the followers of the Antechrist in Rome and the lovers of the guillotine – besides : this took place at the very moment when the London C.O.S. was at the eve of loosing most of its influence to the advantage of Beveridge-like reformers and the New Liberals in Churchill’s Board of Trade. One could add that there was quite a distance between the COS doctrine and its actual practice. Once again, this might have been of scarce importance on the other side of the Channel : a model does not need to be true to be efficiently used.

Reformist consensus made possible by misunderstanding

Reaching an agreement on the means of controling the poor more tightly appeared to be a necessary condition for allowing the men of private benevolence and public assitance to get closer and work together. But this condition was not sufficient. Both sides must have good reasons to imagine they would benefit from this risky co-operation. Images of the future enter the picture at this point, and they are always related to a description of present and past. In other words, action implies a representation of history.

Historians of welfare in the 20th century are familiar with the narratives reformers wrote at the very time they were fighting for their causes : past, present and future were tightly linked in their texts (think of the Webbs or Beveridge before WWI). The epics of progress that pervades most of history-writing on those topics from the 1930s to (let’s say) Mrs Thatcher’s era, was based, I think, on the history of reform written by reformers themselves. We have not to forget that those who lose then, and were afterwards to be forgotten for a good while, also had their own vision of history.

We can document both sides’ vision by working on quite rich and coherent a set of data : the series of books or pamphlets on the “history of charity” or “assistance”. It was a literary genre at the time. Many authors used the evolutionary language which was quite common then, and made their stories begin either in Ancient Athens or Rome, or among the Hebrews, or with the

establishment of the Christian Church in late Antiquity. In all of the narratives, the French Revolution was a turning point. For some, it destroyed the magnificient array of charitable initiatives that had been developed by parishes, monasteries and lay benefactors since the Middle Ages. For others, it put an end to disorder and servility, and paved the way for new rights for the poor and scientific methods of implementing those rights. Both sides saw most of the 19th century as Dark Ages. For Monarchists, the Church had been constantly limited in its action by bad laws and hostile bureaucrats. For Republicans, authoritarian regimes constantly prevented progress. But now, things were about to change : the new Republic would set the stage for blooming initiatives. The field of action of public authorities would be enlarged indeed, but at the same time clearly limited to a series of well-defined categories of people in need : "assistance" would be the realm where rules are strictly applied by heartless public officers. The rest of the poor would then become a broad field of action for private initiative, at last renovated and inspired by a scientific spirit. Beyond this, the consensus broked : charitable Catholic men and women, promotors of secular benevolent work, men of the "société de secours mutuel" (the French equivalent of Friendly Societies), or even unionists did not envision the same future. But their common point was that they all imagined that, at the side of a limited public sector, the private one would rally many people and much money – as in Britain, or the United States (toward which tended to turn the younger generation of philanthropists and reformers).

This picture I sketched was supposed to describe England. It epitomized one of the possible uses of foreign references : look there, over the border, it's much better, it's high time we catch up with them; if they can do it, we can too. Reformers built an England they needed for talking of the France they wanted. A model is an eutopia, it is constructed by selecting features of the foreign experience one wants to show they are lacking at home. The British model of benevolent reformers indeed was partly an invention : mentions of the workhouse system were scarce (true, by 1900, that institution was in a fast process of change – but this was not perceived either), same thing for the municipal relief works which had been cyclically resorted to in the 1880s and 1890s.

The benevolent side of the reform consensus turned out to be mistaken. Big charities didn't develop in France, systematic co-operation between relief agencies did not take shape, commercial firms had a very limited impact in the field, friendly societies lacked impetus and funds, not to mention unions. On the

other hand, local authorities continuously increased their duties and powers, central governement stepped in with grants to them, later with compulsory insurance in various fields. The time of the reformist misunderstanding and consensus was short : some twenty years, starting in the late 1890s and ending after WWI. Nevertheless, it made possible a series of crucial developments as 1/ the common reference to scientific methods in poor relief, hence the opening of the field to specialists of various kinds, 2/ the lasting circulation of experiences and, mostly, personel between the private and public sector, and 3/ the peaceful retreat of private charities – until their recent upsurge in the present liberal times.

Two careers in reform : Léon Lefébure and the London C.O.S.

We can provide a closer view, possibly more convincing, by changing the scale of description. Import indeed is a specialised trade and implies special resources and skills. In the late 19th and early 20th century, it was often the business of some of the competitors only and foreign models were used by some individuals for shaping their careers. Let's observe two of them

Léon Lefébure (1838-1911), in the second part of his life, was a prototypical benevolent person and a reformer. In 1877 (he was then 39), he was one of the founders of the Prison Society, the president of the Discharged Prisoners Society and secretary general of the Society for Protecting Apprenctices. Since the Paris World Exhibition of 1889, he would write for *La Réforme sociale*, the journal of the Le Play society, the most influential social science and reform movement among the (mostly Roman Catholic) traditional elite. One year after, with a strong support from the Republican politically moderate cabinet (some dubbed it "moderatly Republican"), he launched the "Office central des institutions charitables" (Central Office of Charitable Societies), explicitly modeled on the London Charity Organisation Society (and also on the Buffalo and New York COSs). Since then, he dedicated his life to this work (with a limited practical success), and in 1903 he was rewarded (at the age of 65) the honorific position of being a member of the Académie des sciences morales et politiques (Moral and Political Science Academy) : a branch of the Institut de France (the Académie française being another one) where worn-out conservative politicians and academics used then (and now as well) to be given an armchair protecting them from the tide of the time. To this rather official biography, two remarks can be added.

One, this was for Lefébure a second career. The first one was that of an ambitious young civil servant and politician, in spite of his rather modest social origins. Starting not surprisingly as a lawyer, he was appointed by the Napoleon III regime a member of various local councils in Algeria (where he owned land), then in Alsatia (where his family was rooted). He was an official candidate (hence elected) for parliament in Alsatia in 1869, and after the fall of the Second Empire elected again in Paris in 1871, taking advantage of the monarchist tide that followed the slaughtering of the Commune. All went then rather well for Lefébure until he was suddenly wiped out from all of his official positions after the political rout of the Monarchists in 1877. He then managed a rather successful reconversion into social reform, thanks to resources he happened to have accumulated previously : some authority as a learned man because of the books he had published on social issues, and good connexions among the (supposedly non-political) prison reformers - among whom followers of Le Play were many and Lefébure had belonged to the Social Economy Society since 1862. I wish to underline the fact that an itinerary of this sort was then common to a good deal of first- or second-rank politicians and administrators who began their careers as supporters of the Second Empire or as Monarchists but had lost any opportunity since the final victory of Republicans in 1877-1880.

Second observation, Lefébure was very well acquainted with British experiments in scientific charity and had been clever enough to capitalize on this knowledge. He regarded scientific charity principles as the only possible common ground for federating charitable forces of various persuasions : Monarchists and Catholics one the one hand, Protestant (even Jewish) and Republican on the other one, all united by a common concern with helping the poor without demoralizing them. Since 1890, Lefébure worked at creating a non-denominational and even non-religious organization (in the language of the time : “neutral”) which closely mimicked the anglo COS’s methods : all-encompassing census of charitable organizations, public and private (tentatively published as a yearbook); building up of a city-wide network of institutions in Paris, then enlarging the experiment to a number of provincial towns – in most of the cases with the unofficial but actual support of the préfet (the central governement representative in the “département”); attempts to setting up a central file of cases and to devising a common form for case description and evaluation; launching work-relief organizations for work-testing able-bodied men, all procedures which were thought of as the cutting-edge of a new charitable era. Let’s take note of the

change of name of Lefébure's organization : from "Office central des institutions charitables" in 1890, it was renamed "Office central des oeuvres de bienfaisance" in 1896. If "charity" had too much of Catholic overtones, "benevolence" was supposedly acceptable to all in those more secular days.

Two careers in reform : Max Lazard and New York City Employment Bureaus

If Lefébure was a man of the 19th century, Max Lazard (1875-1953) definitly belonged to the 20th. He became publicly active in 1910 – when he was 35, one year before Lefébure died – being instrumental in organizing in Paris an International Conference on Unemployment. Lazard could have been an investment banker, but he chose to be a philanthropist and a reformer. He was born to the French branch of the Lazard family, which federated three banking firms located respectively in Paris, London and New York. It was usual in the French "High Bank" families, that sons would be privately educated, then tour foreign relatives' establishments for learning the trade at the counter. So Max did. When in London in 1896-97, he got acquainted with Toynbee Hall, and when in New York in 1899 with University Settlement, and the Columbia University professor of political economy Edwin R.A. Seligman, a reformer and a leader of major learned societies of the Progressive Era. Back in Paris, Lazard dropped the idea of becoming a banker, got married and settled on the left bank (what was outrageous to his family which had its residence in the affluent new Paris of the West). He then enrolled to the Law College and started to visit the poor with the Society of Visitors for the Uplift of Miserable Families. This was a brand new benevolent society which had been organized in 1896 by two young men : one a Catholic who had accepted the Republican regime, and the other the son to a Jewish family of industrialists. They also followed the lines of scientific charity but, unlike Lefébure, had a solidly Republican background. Indeed the young founders of the society had thought of offering their talents to the O.C.O.B., but they changed their minds when they realized it was rather poorly Republican[4]. Indeed, the Visitors' Society raised financial support among the Protestant and Jewish high bourgeoisies, and recruited visitors among young public servants and teachers-in-training. That way, Lazard met with students in philosophy at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and became a follower of Emile Durkheim and his "Sociological School". He wrote a Ph.D. dissertation on unemployment with a

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[4] Note that Spire gave this information in the Glasgow COS Bulletin in 1906.

strong durkheimian inspiration and, once he had won the title of Doctor in Law, endeavoured to fund and organize the Unemployment Conference.

The conference was quite successful. It was subsidized by the Ministry of Labour and the City of Paris, as it was patronized by French centre-left politicians, notably Léon Bourgeois – who would be eight times a member of the council of ministers (and once its president) and chaired scores of reform organizations in the country. Lazard aimed at spreading the idea of labour exchanges and unemployment insurance schemes that representatives of both employers and employees would jointly manage at a local level with the assistance of experts and the support (and partial funding) of public authorities. This was being experimented in a number of trades of New York City with some success and the help of the American Association for Labor Legislation which provided practical expertise and non-political (both civic and scientific) legitimacy to the experiment. On the other hand, Lazard was aware of the British Unemployment Exchange Act (1908) and interested in the management of the local exchanges by union and employer representatives assisted by (or presided over) neutral experts. He was also informed that the blue-prints of what was to become the 1911 National Insurance Act, were being prepared in the British Labour Department. To put it briefly, Lazard and some other French reformers envisioned the future labour exchanges in Paris as a first experiment in a non-Statist management of social reform institutions. Actually, it turned out that agreements between unions and employers did not take place, and the Paris unemployment bureaus were taken over by local authorities during the war. By the same token, Lazard had his offer to collaborate turned down. This failure was a big disapointement to him and, after the war, he joined his friend the mild socialist Albert Thomas at the new International Labour Bureau in Geneva.

Visions of an Anglo future

The characters I just presented had not much in commun, but this : they envisioned a promising future for French private benevolent institutions, along the lines they observed in Britain or in the United States, or both. Lefébure had invested in what was to soon become rather an obsolete form of reform action : relief to the poor, whereas Lazard had chosen an almost unexplored but promising field : organisation of the labour market and unemployment insurance. Lefébure was a Conservative and a former Catholic politician, who tried to become a professional reformer as a second career – he actually needed to make

a living on his reform activities. He hoped to be the scientific organizer of federated private charities which would be in a position to sharing the ground and negotiating with public relief institutions. Lazard, instead, had nothing to do with the old Catholic and Monarchist elites, he had a Jewish background, was of independent means and a solid Republican. Like Lefébure, he believed in scientific philanthropy. Unlike him, he had evolved toward social science and more comprehensive an approach to reform : he thought that acting directly upon individuals was not enough (or even useless), as institutions themselves should be changed. Even though he did not need a salary, he also wanted to become a professional reformer as an expert in the organisation of the labour market.

Both had found on the other side of the Channel or the Atlantic a model to be followed (after due translation), but much more than that : an experimental ground for believing that an Anglo future could be contemplated for France.

They were not isolated in this vision. The Anglo-Saxons (it was the phrase of the time) were observed with attention, envy or fear by a number of writers. In 1897, Edmond Demolin (1852-1907), a follower of Le Play's social science who was soon to found and run an exclusive private school with pedagogy with progressive methods and money from progressive industrialists, published a best seller : "For what reasons are Anglo-Saxons superiors ?" In the 1900s, an important reform institution, the Musée social, sent observers to England and the United States to study garden cities and employers welfare work. A number of industrialists also sent engineers to document American scientific organisation of labor. Even though academic exchanges were still mostly directed toward Germany, since the turn of the century growing international tensions tended to redirect curiosity, praise and the collection of models and references toward actual or potential English-speaking allies.

More specifically in the field of benevolence, both countries were used by French competing protagonists as a key to reading the future, a means to reconstruct the past, and a tool for acting in the present. My point is not now to appreciate the degree of accuracy of the description of what happened there : in a way, it doesn't matter much, I think. What has some historical efficiency is not what is usually called "influence" of a country A upon a country B, but the image or construction of A which is mobilised by protagonists in B for their own purposes. Be it false of true, or partly both, the historical impact of a model does not lay in the truth of it, but in the action of those who invent and use it.