

Back to the welfare state?

Étienne Goron

Amid the never-ending crisis of the welfare state and the waning of the principle of solidarity, Sacha Lévy-Bruhl proposes a new interpretation. Starting from the idea of collective responsibility, he pursues an important goal: rethinking social protection in the twenty-first century.

Reviewed: Sacha Lévy-Bruhl, [Le grand renversement de l'État social](#) (The great overthrow of the welfare state), Paris, PUF, 2025, 368 p., 25 €.

In France, the "crisis" of the welfare state has been the subject of constant debate since the 1980s. But what exactly is in "crisis"? The public financing of social protection? The bureaucratic organization of key welfare state provisions--the right to work, social insurance, public service, and government assistance? Or the entire project that defines the welfare state's contours and legitimacy? In his new book, Sacha Lévy-Bruhl maintains that the latter question encompasses all the others. Undertaking what he calls an "exercise in definition" of the welfare state (p. 10), he brings the question onto a theoretical plane. The book, based on doctoral research, proposes a new political philosophy of social protection intended to reshape the debate about adapting the welfare state to the twenty-first century.

The book consists of three parts. The first is a reinterpretation of the theories of the French school of sociology, with the goal of drawing from it a new understanding of the French welfare state's project, in the past as well as the present. These theories, the most important of which are Émile Durkheim and Paul Fauconnet, were the first to examine the responsibility of socioeconomic conditions in modern contexts. This

hypothesis is tested through a brief social history of the American welfare state since its beginnings in the early twentieth century. The political ideas and administrative categories that have shaped the welfare state down to the present follow the general trend towards the individualization of socioeconomic responsibilities--which Lévy-Bruhl challenges and which constitute the *reductio ad absurdum* of his thesis. In a final section, Lévy-Bruhl addresses from the same perspective the critique of the welfare state's direction in French since the late 1980s and the intellectual debates to which it has given rise.

It is unfortunate that Lévy-Bruhl prioritizes the deconstruction of rival positions over the systematic presentation of his own stance. Even so, through its quite original proposal to replace focus on solidarity with an emphasis on the transfer of responsibility, the book keeps its promise of presenting an argument that will revive debates surrounding the welfare state. This review will concentrate on the main points of his argument.

The waning of solidarity

To grasp Lévy-Bruhl's argument, it is necessary to revisit what he calls the "canonical narrative" relating to the French welfare state (p. 88), which he grapples with during part of the book. This narrative was constructed in the wake of François Ewald's landmark 1986 work. In *L'État providence* (The welfare state), Ewald maintains that the welfare state was born with the invention in the late nineteenth century of a new form of legislation, which introduced obligations of material solidarity between members of society (in the form of social contributions) to cover particular social groups against "risks" beyond their control. The intellectual theories that informed the first laws on social insurance in the late nineteenth century--the best-known of which was the law on compensating workplace accidents of April 9, 1898--are structured around this principle of solidarity.

Through the writings of Léon Bourgeois, a major figure in the turn-of-the-century Radical Party and author of *Solidarité* (Solidarity, 1896), the concept of solidarism came to refer to the recognition, in an industrializing society, of high levels of interdependence between its members, which became the source of new forms of public action. This philosophy maintained that individuals should have the right to be assisted and protected by the collectivity from life's hazards. For Bourgeois, it was a

mistake to see society in purely liberal terms, as no more than a collection of individuals. Society is an "interdependent whole," whose proper functioning depends on the ability of everyone to contribute to it (p. 107). The early Third-Republican state, as the guarantor of rights and social obligations, established relationships based on equality between the members of a national community, ensuring to each, as a matter of principle, the right to education and a minimum degree of economic security.

This well-known doctrine was continually reinterpreted over the course of the twentieth century. The architects of the Social Security system had it in mind when they established it in 1945. Lévy-Bruhl gives particular attention to the intellectual uses made of this idea in the 1980s and 1990s. In those years, the theme of the "crisis of the welfare state" entered the public debate. Several major figures in the social sciences--including, among others, Robert Castel, Jacques Donzelot, François Ewald, and Pierre Rosanvallon--sought to reinterpret the welfare state's past from the standpoint of the present. For Lévy-Bruhl, the theories of the 1980s and 1990s, in presenting a distorted picture of solidarism, reveal the fragility that is inherent to its political project.

From this standpoint, Lévy-Bruhl's examination of Rosanvallon's *La nouvelle question sociale* (The new social question, 1995) is particularly eloquent (pp. 304-314). At a time when French was experiencing deindustrialization and high levels of unemployment, the book triggered a reexamination of the appropriateness of Social Security's general protection system. For Lévy-Bruhl, *La nouvelle question sociale* is an example of the depoliticization of the social theory that originated with the concept of solidarity. Rosanvallon embraces a narrow conception of social law as a series of risk-management techniques, the most important criteria of which must be efficiency (p. 307). Arguing for a redeployment of the social state around assistance mechanisms (the RMI, established by Michel Rocard's government in 1988, is his main example), he sought to reintroduce the principle of the personal responsibility of beneficiaries by establishing contracts between the latter and social services.

According to Lévy-Bruhl, solidarity in the late twentieth century lost the connection to justice that defined it at the turn of the century. As it found itself increasingly vulnerable to the concerns about balanced budgets and the moral defense of merit, the idea of solidarity could not prevent the "overthrow of the welfare state" that Lévy-Bruhl associates with France over the past three decades. This turn is particularly apparent in the increasing emphasis on the responsibility of beneficiaries, the creation of parallel protection systems, and the depoliticization of social justice (p. 355-373).

The welfare state in an age of individualism

Having established that solidarism does not provide the welfare state with a solid foundation, Lévy-Bruhl seeks a principle that could restore its political legitimacy in the present. To this end, he returns to the source of theories of the social in the French school of sociology from the early twentieth century. He draws from Émile Durkheim and Paul Fauconnet components of a new philosophy of social protection. The interest of this detour is twofold. After proposing a radical reinterpretation of Durkheim, the theory of material solidarity is replaced with a philosophy of the moral character of the social bond in modern times and its contradictions. From this standpoint, the welfare state appears as a set of institutions whose purpose is to preserve the moral conditions of shared life in a society of individuals.

Though often considered a theorist of the welfare state, Durkheim during his life never subscribed to the idea of solidarism (p. 109). His conception of the social in *The Division of Labor in Society* and *Suicide* has often been compared to Bourgeois', on the grounds that both adopt a morphological definition of social bonds (based on interdependence, the division of labor, and complementarity). Yet this theory underwent several revisions over the course of Durkheim's research, which separated it decisively from Bourgeois. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, published in 1912, Durkheim locates the social in the categories of thought that individuals adopt through foundational collective experiences. While this theory is based on a study of the religious rites of tribes located on several continents, it also allows sociologists to consider the specific nature of the social in an increasingly secularized modern society, whose cohesion lies not in a shared religion, but in the moral value assigned to individuality. This interpretation of the social bond put forward by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* was used by Paul Fauconnet in *La responsabilité* (Responsibility, 1920). In this sociological study of penal law, Durkheim's disciple shows the contradictions that are distinct to the moral categories that keep modern society together. In his view, moral respect for individuals can turn against itself when, as in the case of criminal procedure, it makes everyone fully responsible for their acts.

From the standpoint of the welfare state, the significance of Durkheim's theory for Fauconnet's interpretation was to pave the way for an account of the philosophical principles at stake in establishing social protection at the end of the nineteenth century. Lévy-Bruhl rejects the solidaristic principle based on the recognition of

interdependence in industrial society. In his view, the history of the "social question" during the nineteenth century instead illustrates Fauconnet's general principle that a society that tends to make each individual responsible for their fate engenders blatant injustice. Consequently, the welfare state is conceived as the various authorities to which responsibility for the social dimension of existence has historically been transferred. The institutions of social protection arose from reflexivity towards the moral conditions of collective life, in which the principle of personal responsibility yielded to the affirmation of the principle of justice. While social programs would seem to suspend individualism, their goal is in fact to achieve the fundamental modern promise of equal respect for individuals. "Every element of [the welfare state] comes together in the idea that it is necessary to deactivate the fiction of a responsible subject when its sacredness is at stake" (p. 152).

That solidarism was conceived as the origin of the welfare state is thus a philosophical and political error. The introduction of social rights in the early twentieth century did not, according to Lévy-Bruhl, arise from a doctrine designed for contingent purposes--namely, to gain consent for taxation--but from a class compromise and a form of national unity achieved under the Third Republic. By reexamining the social theories of Durkheim and Fauconnet, his goal is to affirm social rights as instruments of political justice that are anchored in a specific representation of individuals as "social beings" (p.154).

Should socialism be reinvented?

While he sees his thought as building on Durkheim's theorization of the contradictions of modern individualism, Lévy-Bruhl follows especially in the footsteps of Robert Castel, whom we have yet to say much about. Yet it was Castel who approached, with the concepts of "support" and "social property," an understanding of the welfare state as an authority responsible for guaranteeing the socioeconomic conditions of genuine individual independence (see Robert Castel and Claudine Haroche, *Propriété privée, propriété sociale, propriété de soi. Entretiens sur la construction de l'individu moderne* [Private property, social property, self-ownership: Conversations on the construction of the modern individual], Fayard, 2001, quoted p. 141-142). Castel is also well known for having bequeathed a major problem for theories of the welfare state: that of the development of forms of social protection in post-industrial societies afflicted with chronic unemployment and highly individualized work. Lévy-Bruhl's

goal is to take on this question and respond to it with a theory of social citizenship that is premised not on the status of the salaried employee nor on the idea of integration into the national community, but on the very existence of the social in so-called individualistic societies.

To resolve this issue, it is no accident that Lévy-Bruhl revisits the Durkheimian tradition. The authors of this school embraced a sociologists' version of socialism, seeing public services and social legislation as a natural focus of workers' demands at the time. The particularly elastic definition of the welfare state that Lévy-Bruhl proposes--connecting its past, present, and future in the idea of a transferal of responsibilities for socioeconomic conditions from the individual to the collectivity, in the name of justice--ultimately goes in the same direction. To clarify the argument, consider the following hypothesis. As Lévy-Bruhl had made abundantly clear, the best way to adapt the welfare state to the present should not be a debate about the degree of solidarity required. The principle of solidarity can be too easily dissolved into questions of public finance or public opinion's spontaneous preferences. Rather, thinking about the welfare state should be organized around the types of social risks and contingencies that the collectivity should recognize and cover instead of individuals.

What are the social risks that affect the basic principles of a safe life, the satisfaction of essential needs, the preservation of human dignity, and that thus justify the existence of social policy in the twenty-first century? The author does not pretend to have an answer. But in the last few years, many social movements have delved into these questions, and it is only fair to mention them. The longstanding question of the kind of support and protection needed for victims of gender-related violence--a social phenomenon par excellence--fully belongs to this set of concerns (Lévy-Bruhl mentions them in a footnote on p. 372-373). More recently, a very interesting debate has begun in France relating to the incorporation of climate and ecological risks into the system of social insurance.¹ From this standpoint, Lévy-Bruhl's proposals are of political interest since they introduce concepts that would make it possible for demands for justice that currently manifest themselves disconnectedly in different social spaces to be grouped together. By giving welfare state institutions significance

¹ See the High Commission for Strategy and Planning's report, "Repenser la mutualisation des risques climatiques" (Rethinking the mutualization of climate risks), published online on 12/06/2025.

that goes beyond their financial, technical, and administrative characteristics, Lévy-Bruhl's book can be read as an invitation to "reinvent socialism."²

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² The author makes this very proposal in an article published by AOC Media in July 2022, "Changer de cosmologie ou refaire du socialisme?" (To change cosmology or reinvent socialism?).