

## The Influence of Culture and of Institutional Factors in Social Policy: French Social Policy in Martinique

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*The standards and structure of social policy in Martinique are now very similar to those in France. However, in spite of its funding by France, welfare remains problematic. Although the staff are local, the structure and concepts are French, which technically makes policy implementation difficult, and creates uneasiness. The implementation of French welfare in Martinique runs counter to the local politics of identity and the drive for autonomy. Welfare focuses the chief ambiguity of Martinique, which craves for local control, but would like to maintain the current level of funding from Europe.*

Whoever studies social policy in Martinique is struck by a puzzling contradiction. On the one hand, the system is considered as befitting an 'advanced', or affluent society. On the other hand, it is criticized on many grounds, in particular for maintaining the area in a situation of dependency, towards continental France. It is in fact the case that social policy is central to the favourite conundrum of Martinique, the contradiction between the wish to maintain the financial links with the French Republic on the one hand and the drive towards local control on the other hand. This is particularly important not just for the future of Martinique, but in terms of the relationship between rich, northern democracies on the one hand and, on the other hand, a number of countries which maintain strong historical and human links with the former colonial powers. Political independence, which is only advocated by a small minority of people in Martinique, is not a magic wand. In a post-colonial context, all countries have to take stock of the social policy heritage, and of the relationship between models, needs, intellectual tools, and financial capacity. This paper will first of all discuss the contradictions of current social policy in Martinique, and relate this to the different interpretations and assessments of social policy.

The institutional interpretation sees social policy in terms of path dependency (Bonoli and Palier, 1998). The financial amounts mobilized by welfare systems, as well as the number of people employed by them, and the complexity of the procedures are such that existing arrangements are extremely difficult to challenge and reform is problematic. Existing institutions, with all their faults, will therefore deeply influence the shape of things to come. A country like France, which experienced a major political and social crisis in 1995 as the result of a welfare reform, can only find this approach attractive.

A major challenge to 'path dependency' is set by the functionalist view: social policy is seen in terms of regulation of social relationships (Jobert, 1996). Social policy, whatever its form of administration, is ultimately a way of striking a deal between social

forces. This can be the result of a social compromise, as was the case in the post-war world, or reflect the domination of a particular social group and political approach. In the circumstances of the 1980s and 1990s, the old fordist deal was gradually modified, to suit the needs of the dominant forces, steering societies towards a post-industrial model. In the case of Martinique, French social policy has difficulty fulfilling this function. Martinique follows its own rhythm, and its pace is therefore very different from that of 'continental France'.

The third possible interpretation is in term of culture. It sees social policy as reflecting values, ideology and norms. Unless governments purport to engage in large-scale social engineering, which is not the case in France, policies should reflect existing cultural values, or at least avoid major contradictions with them. Because of cultural differences, French social policy in Martinique, although very active and costly, has difficulty meeting local expectations.

### **The development of social policy in Martinique**

Martinique, with a current population of 400,000 was, traditionally, a sugar producing country. The social structure was dominated by slavery until its abolition in 1848. Even after that date, social relationships remained polarized between the planters' class (called the 'békés') and the former slaves. The aristocratic 'plantocracy' was able to maintain its power throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and owed its survival during the French revolution to the support of the British Royal Navy. From the 1930s, sugar cane declined and was replaced by banana as the main cash crop after the war. Authoritarianism still prevailed in labour relations and political democracy remained largely theoretical until 1945. Post-war politics were dominated by the left, in particular a Communist fellow traveller, poet Aimé Césaire, who became the mayor of Fort de France in 1945, and stayed in office until 2001. Césaire convinced both the left-wing French government and his fellow citizens that full assimilation of Martinique within French society was a more attractive option than independence. Indeed, when Martinique became in law a fully fledged French 'département' in 1946, the attractiveness of a European style social policy was a very convincing argument for the people of Martinique and their political elites (Nicolas, 1998). This played a part in the deal struck between the French Republic and Martinique: France avoided the need to shed its former colonies, and could develop a model of its own, independently of the USA and yet in an area which the US saw as their own backyard. In return for this, the ideal of equality in social coverage was accepted in theory. In terms of living standards, history proved Césaire right. GDP per head is 13,000 US\$, four times that of Martinique's neighbours, former British colonies St Lucia or Dominica. However, it took France 40 years to grant full social rights to local people. Countless local politicians and militants devoted their efforts, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, to the equalization of social rights between Martinique and continental France (Nicolas, 1998). This is an essential point if one is to understand the current support for parity of treatment, as well as the popularity of General De Gaulle, who expressed, more clearly than anyone before him, the new French policy of the 1960s: independence for those who wish, equal treatment for those who remain within the Republic. The equalization of family benefits, which are traditionally very generous indeed by European standards, between France and the Overseas French Regions (DOM) symbolizes this policy. Besides, the planters class never

disappeared. It remained influential among banana growers and exporters, and widened its economic basis to import/export, and distribution. From the 1950s onward, assimilation was discarded by Césaire in favour of autonomy, and the autonomist party has been the central political force since that time. Demands for more local control were hushed after Mitterrand's victory in 1981, since the French Socialists' policy of devolution ('décentralisation') held promises for the 'overseas départements' (which include, besides Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guyana, and Réunion in the Indian Ocean, a total population slightly under 2 million). This process is now at a turning point, as the French government has encouraged Martinique and other Départements d'Outre Mer to make proposals for an evolution of institutions. Current demands include law-making powers, which are incompatible with the Constitution. This takes us back to 1946, and the basic question of the future of the link between Martinique and France, a debate in which social policy is absolutely central.

Social policy in Martinique is nowadays very similar to what it is in continental France in terms of benefits and social services. This is rather recent, in a number of areas. The administrative structure of the public funds which enable the health system to function was slightly different, in particular as far as agricultural labourers were concerned, but this did not affect adversely the level of social coverage (Fortuné, 2001). Standards of care vary in terms of waiting lists at the doctor's (but not for hospital treatment), since, in a quasi market, GPs are free to work where they wish, and the number of doctors relative to the population is much higher in Paris or other affluent, desirable areas, than elsewhere (11 GPs for 10,000 inhabitants in Martinique, against an average of 20 for the same population in France) (INSEE, 1997). The RMI, a minimum income for the destitute, was originally lower in Martinique, but will be the same as in France from 1 January 2002. It is paid to 29,000 individuals (INSEE, 1997). The benefit for single parents, which was traditionally very high in France, is lower in Martinique, and will only be aligned on the French rates in 2008. In 1996, a total amount of 3.2 billion FF (or 488 million Euros) was spent on health care benefits, for a population of 400,000. (INSEE, 1997). This figure excludes the labour costs of health service workers, and investment costs in hospital facilities. Pension rights are similar to those of France, which operates a Bismarckian type of system, closely relating rights to a person's past occupations and wage income.

### **Criticisms of social policy**

However, parity of treatment does not seem to have led to a high degree of satisfaction, for a number of reasons. French social protection in Martinique is usually criticized on three grounds:

- 1 It is blamed for missing the target widely, since it does not address the key issue of economic development. Martinique is widely known for not being self reliant economically, since its main cash crop depends on French and European protectionism, and its tourism industry is largely unsuccessful (Joly, 2001).
- 2 A second criticism is based on the first one, and accuses social protection of maintaining local people in a state of dependency. However, the term is fraught with a lot of confusion. It is never clear whether local society as such, including the wealthy classes and the middle class, is criticized for depending on French support,

or whether the term applies solely to the destitute and the unemployed. This liberal argument is compounded by another one, more directly focussed on the unemployed themselves. A high degree of social protection is said to create welfare dependency and annihilate the financial incentive of work. This is a well-known and serious issue, leading nowadays, in Europe, to more active labour market policies.

- 3 The third criticism is more political and cultural than economic. Welfare is designed by French society, and based on French cultural assumptions. Its implementation therefore contradicts the quest for local identity, and the drive towards a greater control of local affairs, which currently mobilizes a lot of energies in the area (Baret, 2000). Social protection is a key element of national identity. French welfare tends to reinforce the French element in the identity of local people, and is therefore resented by nationalists.

#### **Path dependency, regulation and cultural interpretations**

Path dependency leads us to see the task of reformers as particularly daunting, given the resilience of structures, and the amount of resistance to change. In Martinique, this is a powerful argument against change, since the current standards of social policy can only be guaranteed if the island remains French.

The chief conundrum of the welfare system in Martinique bears some relation to welfare itself, but relates mostly to the issue of public expenditure. Welfare in Martinique is largely financed by the French State. Social Security contributions, in 1996, represented a total of 3,549 million FF (541 million Euros), when expenditure on benefits alone, not counting the operating costs of the system and investment, amounted to 7,800 million FF (or 1,200 million Euros) (INSEE, 1997). The French system is increasingly financed by tax, rather than social security contributions. Tax receipts in Martinique are low, for a number of reasons, including the poor economic performance of the area (INSEE, 1999). Only 25 per cent of the population are expected to pay income tax, against 50 per cent in continental France (INSEE, 1997). Income tax rates are 30 per cent lower than in Europe. Besides, tax evasion is widespread and not seriously countered. The yawning gap between expenditure and local contributions is perfectly acceptable in a framework of national solidarity. Nobody expects the local users of telephone lines or TV sets in mountainous areas of the Alps or the Rocky Mountains to pay the full costs of the service they enjoy. The problem of Martinique is that the relationship between the island and continental France is evolving in a way which takes the two further apart than ever before. The future is considered, and presented even by the French authorities, as fairly open ended in institutional terms. Welfare expenditure therefore finds itself in a strategic location. It is one of the chief arguments for remaining within the fold of the French Republic. The period which opened in 1946, in which welfare rights were gradually aligned on those of France, has come to an end. The goal of 'départementalisation' has been achieved, and a questioning of the status of the island as a part of France can only lead to a reassessment of the level of social coverage.

The argument according to which the French welfare system was developed in continental France, in order to meet the needs of the French, and bore little relationship with the situation of the Départements d'Outre-Mer is a serious one. But there is also a good case for minimizing the differences. The French system itself is the happy child of

unpredictable historical accidents, and conflicting influences. After all, the Bismarckian element in the French system defies logic, and is in absolute contradiction with the real state of French industrial relations. In practice, the current drive towards universalism fits in very nicely with the needs of the local economy of Martinique, in which people's identity is not defined by a single trade, but usually very flexible. Martinique never was an industrial society dominated by the wage relationship, and Bismarckianism was always more remote from local culture than other organizing principles. On the whole, the imposition of the French welfare system on Martinique is no more bizarre than the adoption of corporatism by post-war France. Path dependency conditions change, but does not prevent evolutions.

As far as 'regulation theory' is concerned, however, it is clear that the stakes are very different. Social policy plays no part in the relationship between local classes, but is essential to the deal with 'continental France'. In continental France, welfare plays the part of a regulator between social forces, i.e. between employers and employees, under the scrutiny of the State. Indeed, negotiations often take place at the government's behest, and within the budgetary constraints which the situation of the national economy allow (Jobert, 1996). In Martinique, where the stakes are entirely different, the terms of the debate bear little relation with those of France, 7,000 km away. The outcome of national negotiations, which determine the level of public expenditure devoted to welfare in Martinique as in the rest of France, have no relationship whatsoever with the situation of the local economy, luckily, so far, for local claimants. Social policy cannot play in Martinique the function it fulfils in France, and in other over counties, that of a clearing house between social forces, a social stock-exchange in which agents assess each other and barter over such things as health coverage, labour flexibility, training or pension rights. A meaningful, social policy in Martinique, would have to address this issue.

However, social policy is very much part and parcel of the global deal between Martinique and France. It acts as one of the channels pumping public funds into the local economy, and maintaining living standards on a European level. Martinique can be said to trade the prospect of sovereignty against high standards of welfare. This is sometimes admitted openly, and is a very serious argument: French and Creole speaking Haïti, independent since 1804, one of the poorest and of the worst governed countries in the world, is not very far, and Martinique shelters hundreds of economic refugees. The connection to the French (and European) public purse is justified, in public discourses, by reminders of the wrongs of the past, of the exploitation of Martinique under the mercantilist system, and of slavery.

The cultural interpretation of social policy developments highlights more contradictions. Defining local culture is a real challenge, just as impossible as offering a clear-cut analysis of 'national identity' in Martinique.

The strands which form people's identity are extremely varied and a significant majority considers no type of culture as legitimate or as dominant. African cultures were obviously repressed and ground to dust by centuries of savage slavery, but they nevertheless resisted, survived, and are sometimes cherished. However, this is certainly not exclusive of other types of influences, in particular French culture, or contemporary trends, such as Rastafarianism or the street culture of 'African Americans'. The French usually approach culture as a body of classical knowledge and linguistic reflexes which

must be imposed upon people, but which can also be totally mastered by outsiders, and enable social mobility and excellence regardless of ethnic origin, thanks to the educational system. West Indian syncretism can only be at variance with this 'assimilationist', positivistic and rational approach: You can don several identities, and even use complexity as camouflage, so as to protect your strategies from the white man's scrutiny. Indeed 'opacity' is presented as a virtue by literary critic Edouard Glissant (Glissant, 1997). Several cultures coexist in every person's heritage, which explains unpredictability. The only conclusion one can draw from this is that the culture of Martinique cannot be taken for granted, and that it certainly cannot be equated with French culture. The French element is definitely present, at the moment, but represents merely one option among many others. Social policies are devised in France, even if the logistics and the implementation are often devolved to local agencies. The concepts are French, and the assumptions about the effect of policies are based upon French society. This makes the effects of policies all the more unpredictable. Two examples will be taken, unemployment and family policy.

Unemployment is indeed high, officially in the region of 30 per cent. One may wonder, however, whether the intellectual tools used to understand and describe unemployment in Martinique are adequate. The work ethic, which was so important in framing the mentalities of the protestant world, according to Weber, is non-existent in Martinique. It is weaker in continental France, and other catholic countries, than in Northern Europe, but it is sometimes replaced by the ethic of public service which is also seen as rather alien over here. Public employment is very desirable in Martinique, not for philosophical reasons, but for very practical ones. Regular, waged employment is not the natural pattern, for historical and economic reasons, and it should be no wonder people do not absorb and accept ideologies which bear no relationship to their lives. The extent of so-called illegal work cannot be assessed quantitatively, but is obviously considerable. For example, 50 per cent of restaurants and hotels claim to have no employee at all on their books, which is hard to believe (INSEE, 1997). Definitions of 'employment', as well as training policies have so far proved irrelevant, and inefficient.

Family policy is another area where the relationship between French culture and local conditions is far from smooth. Family policy is, obviously, a controversial subject in France, given the speed at which family structures are changing (Théry, 1998, de Singly, 1993). In Martinique, the demographic concerns, which used to inspire policy in France, applied differently. The expansion of the population was not seen as a goal. The issue of family structure is a burning one for Martinique (Dorléans, 2001). On the one hand, the administrators of the system, both in the public sector and in the voluntary one, have absorbed what is supposed to be the official norm, the nuclear family, and endeavour to reproduce it among claimants. The weight of Catholicism in the colonies, where it acted as a cultural ingredient of conquest and rule, was such that the state institutions themselves never really adopted the benevolent neutrality towards people's private options which is supposed to prevail in continental France. On the other hand, in practice, marriage is not the rule. The majority of children are born out of official wedlock. Male culture is not based on monogamy, and 'single parenthood' can certainly not be seen as a minority practice. Gender relations are publicly recognized and presented as problematic, unsatisfactory and unequal. Officials and policies therefore find themselves at variance with the way people actually live, and talk about their lives.

## Conclusion

With practically identical institutions, the welfare systems of Martinique and France have in fact entirely different functions, are not seen in the same way by the population, and face entirely different challenges.

It might be the case that the criticisms of the system are widely exaggerated, and that in fact, Martinique will become an ordinary French and European region, enjoying the same rights, and happily implementing European policies, based on European concepts and buttressed by European financial support. But on the other hand it might not. If social policy is to regain the function it is supposed to have in terms of social regulation, and materialize the bond of citizenship between individuals and the community, the management of social policy in Martinique should both reflect the needs and culture of the local society. In the long run, the system would have to be financed locally. The sheer distribution of funds coming from outside the area deprives decisions and choices of any significance. The transition process to a more devolved, regionalized system would therefore have to address the issue of local public finances, as well as those of the real needs of the area. This would naturally require both a clear strategic decision, on the part of Martinique, and of France, and a long period of transition, to ensure the economic and political viability of the process.

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