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The New Global Politics of Poverty

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ABSTRACT   In recent years, governments, international institutions, and a broad array of social movements have converged around what an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report has described as an emerging 'global anti-poverty consensus'. This new global social policy agenda has changed the terms of the debate between the left and the right, and redefined the world of policy possibilities, in global but also in domestic politics. This article proposes a constructivist interpretation of this multi-scale shift in discourse, and discusses the political and policy implications of the new global politics of poverty.

KEYWORDS   *constructivism, global institutions, neo-liberalism, poverty, social policy*

Introduction[1]

The 2005 edition of the Davos World Economic Forum surprised many observers. Suddenly, the world corporate and government leaders seemed to discover global poverty and appeared willing to place the issue at the top of their collective agenda. Tony Blair, Jacques Chirac, Gerhard Schröder, and many others called for clear commitments and new approaches to address a problem that could no longer be neglected.[2] Meanwhile, on the other side of the planet, in Porto Alegre, more than 12,000 people attended the launch of the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP), an unprecedented, world-wide alliance of hundreds of organizations mobilized to fight poverty.[3] Governments of various stripes, international institutions, a broad array of social movements, and even business associations seemed to converge around

what an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report described recently as an emerging 'global anti-poverty consensus' (Kolk and Van Tulder, 2006; McDonnell et al., 2003: 11). Something has happened. On all sides, discourses and debates have shifted, to make poverty a foremost issue (Grusky and Kanbur, 2006: 1). A global poll covering 68 countries and conducted in May and July 2005 by Gallup International found that poverty, or the gap between rich and poor, was considered 'the main problem facing the world' by 26 percent of the world's citizens, far ahead of issues such as terrorism (12%), unemployment (9%), or war and conflicts (8%). Poverty was the top concern on all continents, and in 60 of the 68 countries surveyed (Léger Marketing, 2006).

This tendency runs deeper than the global emotion generated by the December 2004 Asian tsunami and deeper even than the world transformation produced by the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. First, it started earlier. Davos notwithstanding, the 'new consensus' began to take shape in the late 1990s and it took its most official and significant form with the adoption, in September 2000, of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, which made 'Eradicating Extreme Poverty and Hunger' the first of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), with specific targets for 2015 (United Nations [UN], 2000, 2001). Second, the change is truly global in that it concerns poverty in the North and the West, as well as in the South and the East. In March 2000 in Lisbon, a few months before the UN adopted its MDGs, the European Council agreed on a new strategic goal for the European Union (EU) – 'to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustaining economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (European Commission, 2004: 10) – and made the eradication of poverty an important and operational dimension of this objective. Through the open method of coordination, national debates were also influenced by this orientation, since the different member states had to prepare National Action Plans on social inclusion (NAPs/inclusion). Likewise, poorer countries now produce Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), with guidelines from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (International Development Association and IMF, 2002).

Poverty, of course, is a perennial political issue, which has always been important in social policy and in international development debates. One could even say that the issue is unavoidable, and indeed ontological in a liberal political order, because it points to the difficulty of realizing an ideal of equal citizenship in societies that remain profoundly unequal (Procacci, 1996: 409; Stedman Jones, 2004). Still, in the last 30 years of the 20th century, poverty often appeared as a relatively minor or residual preoccupation, for policy makers and social policy scholars, but also for political parties and advocacy groups. In Germany, note Lutz Leisering and Stephan Leibfried (1999: 196), poverty policy took various forms and evoked changing images over the decades, but the

word 'poverty' itself vanished from public discourse after the 1950s, to become 'virtually taboo'. By the end of the same period, even international financial institutions thought of poverty reduction mostly as a second-order problem, an eventual outcome of structural adjustment and economic development (De Bernard, 2002: 17–21; Stiglitz, 2002: 53–88).

What are we to make of this sudden interest in the age old problem of poverty? Can we really speak, in the words of Bernd Schulte (2002: 119), of a 'rediscovery'? If so, what does this 'rediscovery of poverty' mean? Is it simply a cooption by world leaders of the views from the streets? Are Davos participants merely reframing their discourse in the language of Porto Alegre? Or, is a more important transformation beginning to take place, one that could change global discourses and debates about social justice, raise new political issues, and lead to significant institutional innovations?

This article argues that a significant shift in the global social policy agenda has indeed taken place. This shift, however, can have a variety of policy implications, because the 'rediscovery of poverty' involves less the emergence of a new consensus than that of a new locus of opposition. In itself, a transformed global agenda does not determine specific or unique policy orientations, but it changes the terms of the debate between the left and the right and, in doing so, it redefines the world of policy possibilities. More specifically, debates about poverty bring back the issue of redistributive justice in a distinct way, after years of policies focused on productivity and social investment. These debates also have a genuinely global dimension. They reveal the connection between the fate, the claims, and the actions of poor persons and social movements in different areas of the world and at different scales. The first part of the article presents a theoretical framework in the constructivist tradition, which makes it possible to assess such a change in the global agenda. The second part outlines this broad, multi-scale shift in discourse, to establish its importance and significance. The third part briefly discusses the political and policy implications of this new global politics of poverty.

Deliberating Global Justice

Current accounts of social policy developments tend to emphasize continuity. Informed by comparative institutional analysis, they present reforms as highly constrained, and refer to images that evoke solidity: social forces are immovable, austerity is permanent, and welfare states are made of 'building blocks' that hopefully can come to fit into coherent 'architectures' (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 6; Pierson, 2001a). The welfare state thus appears less as a contested project than as a society's achievement, anchored in lasting institutions and relatively rigid social forces.

Authors working in this perspective tend to overlook policy debates and agenda setting because they distrust analyses that emphasize interpretation,

culture, or competing discourses. Gøsta Esping-Andersen (2000: 67), for instance, rejects the idea that paying attention to political deliberation could yield significant insights into the current transition, associating the analysis of discourse solely with the postmodernist view that 'everything from now on has no inner meaning'. Likewise, the editors of a book that presents itself more or less as the state of the art in comparative historical analysis simply state that scholarship concerned by meanings, cultures and interpretations appears questionable to them, and 'is not the kind of research considered in this volume' (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003: 11).

In the same book, however, Peter Hall aptly notes that the world may not have the simple causal structure assumed by the methodologies of mainstream comparative historical analyses. If causal mechanisms are complex and defined by strategic actions, as most scholars would agree, approaches and methods that pay closer attention to the interplay of structures, agency, and discourses seem necessary (Hall, 2003: 382–90). It would, therefore, be imprudent to discard discourses offhand, just because their analysis is difficult and 'less protected against willful selectivity' (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003: 23).

A turn toward discourse does not necessarily lead to some sort of postmodern nihilism. There is an entire research agenda currently being defined by constructivists in international relations and comparative politics, around the idea that human consciousness – 'ideas, norms, knowledge, culture, and argument' – matters in politics, and contributes to defining and shaping institutions (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 392). This agenda is composed of many streams and orientations, one of which is indeed critical and postmodernist, but overall it stands less in opposition to the rationalist and institutionalist traditions than as a complementary approach, better able to account for political debates and explain change (Risse, 2002: 597).

Constructivists seek to determine how 'social facts' such as rights, entitlements, or sovereignty are constituted through political conflicts and debates. They emphasize, in particular, the autonomous role of public deliberation (the 'logic or arguing'), in cases where norms (or the 'logic of appropriateness') and rational or strategic decisions (or the 'logic of consequentialism') are either impossible or insufficient (Risse, 2002). Constructivist studies have dealt with the influence of norms, identities, and ideas, and they have documented the role played by social movements, experts and institutions in the emergence of new social facts. In doing so, they have developed new vantage points and undoubtedly broadened the horizon for comparative and international research.

In continuity with the traditions and canons of the discipline, however, constructivists have tended to privilege the study of agents, at the expense of the logic of arguing as such (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 403). It is indeed easier to establish the pivotal role of specific actors than to demonstrate the persuasiveness of the best argument (Risse, 2002: 615). Hence, for all the weight they give to ideas and arguing, constructivist scholars have not gone very far

in specifying 'the conditions under which new principled ideas and new knowledge become consensual by "catching fire" among a variety of actors' (Risse, 2002: 614).

This is precisely the question raised in this article. How did poverty 'catch fire' so rapidly and so broadly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, among a number of actors from all sides, present at different scales? Following Thomas Risse (2002: 614–15), we can discard the vague idea that some arguments prevail because they fit better the existing normative and institutional context. This idea is not so much wrong as trivially true, and it is certainly insufficient for the task at hand. Risse (2000: 19, 32–3) suggests elsewhere that arguments matter mostly when opponents share a common life-world, when they are uncertain about their preferences, interests, or identities, and when they can articulate and share narratives that make sense of their experience. Again, this seems sensible and it tells us something about the deliberative context, but it only indirectly touches upon the core idea of persuasiveness, a difficult one admittedly. To consider the power of arguments, we have to look at arguments themselves, something that, surprisingly, constructivists rarely do.

An appealing hypothesis in this respect is that justice has a force of its own, and tends to prevail over time. Intrinsic to liberal thought, this idea lies behind T.H. Marshall's interpretation of the rise of the welfare state, and it is often implicit in the work of constructivist scholars, who tend to work on 'nice', progressive norms (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 403–4). As most would recognize, however, deliberative processes do not always yield progressive outcomes. Ethnic hatreds, xenophobia, and institutional racism sometimes win the day. Less dramatically, the California or Swiss experiences with direct democracy remind us that concrete deliberative processes may result in decisions of all kinds. This is the case not so much because arguments that appeal to justice are ineffective, but because in any serious debate all sides appeal to justice. Opponents simply refer to different conceptions of justice. The American debate over affirmative action, for instance, does not pit self-interest against the search for equality, but rather two contending conceptions of equality, both solidly anchored in the liberal tradition (Stone, 2002: 384–414).

This observation suggests a first formulation for our working hypothesis: ideas that catch fire tend to be anchored in conceptions of justice that matter to social actors. 'The main political reforms of the last century,' wrote Jon Elster a few years ago, 'have not been supported by instrumental considerations. Rather, they have been carried by social movements anchored in a conception of justice' (Elster, 1987: 89). In a similar vein, Esping-Andersen (1990: 21) noted that social actors mobilized around the welfare state never fought for 'spending per se', but cared for rights and social justice.

This first formulation does not mean that there is an irresistible, linear advance of progress against reaction. It can reasonably be argued that in the long run and on a global level there is indeed moral progress, some previously

admitted ideas becoming unacceptable or even abhorrent (Gilbert, 1990: 7–11, 111–16; Sayre-McCord, 1988: 9). Ongoing political debates, however, engage not one but at least two distinct conceptions of justice, in the name of which social actors argue and struggle. Without a genuine diversity of views, there would be no difference, no conflict, and no need for arguments. This observation leads to a more specific statement of the working hypothesis: ideas that catch fire tend to be anchored in *contending* conceptions of justice that matter to social actors.

The very presence of a debate supposes that the different sides share some common ethical ground to which they can refer to advance their arguments, and a common life-world establishing the normative framework for their conflict. It also suggests that the number of contending views is not infinite. In cases involving identity, there may be large and possibly growing numbers of what Rogers M. Smith (2003: 64) calls 'ethically constitutive stories'. In other cases, however, the threshold is probably very low. The different cultures of the world, observes Jean Laponce (1981), organize knowledge and social concepts primarily with binary oppositions, sometimes with trilogies, rarely with more. In the modern world, the politics of left and right is the universal translation of this preference for dichotomous frames (see also Bobbio, 1996; McManus, 2002). With respect to social justice, the dichotomy between an ethics of order and entitlements and an ethics of merit and needs is probably much older than the contemporary notions of right and left (Raphael, 2001: 4). Whatever the case, and this is an even better formulation for our working hypothesis, the contending conceptions of justice that transform the public agenda are likely to be few in number, probably with two opposing poles, and to be both distant – being anchored in a deep, enduring cleavage – and close – being part of an old, familiar opposition, that between what we now call the left and the right.

To my knowledge, no one has better captured this dual situation of distance and proximity than the American intellectual and militant Michael Harrington, who wrote in one of his last books:

> Every serious social idea in the contemporary world leads a double life. This is not because some mysterious symmetry is at work, but because only a very limited number of changes have any significant chance of succeeding. So the Left and the Right necessarily explore a relatively narrow range of possible futures and, when they are serious, respond to the same reality in fundamentally different ways. (Harrington, 1986: 15)

As they debate, opponents redefine themselves and open up new possibilities for the future. But they never reach a consensus, a situation where all would agree and debates would end. Deliberation need not and usually does not produce unanimity or even agreement. The 'give and take of reasons' works and can be deemed successful if the agents end up 'sufficiently convinced to continue their ongoing co-operation' (Bohman, 1996: 32). In other

words, a 'robust' outcome emerges if it integrates, in one way or another, the different standpoints and preoccupations of contending social actors and allows the collective deliberative process to continue in a democratic way (Callon et al., 2001: 16, 55). Even the deliberative framework, the rules of the game so to speak, may be contested. Poorly represented actors, in particular, are likely to demand inclusion and new arrangements. The process can nevertheless go on, as long as the rules remain open to challenge and can be altered over time (Tully, 2001: 14–15).

A consensus is never reached because no argument can be sufficiently persuasive to reconcile deeply embedded conceptions of justice that are defended by rival social forces and which, in fact, make politics meaningful. The power of arguments has limits. It shapes political discourses, conflicts and institutions, but never erases differences. Arguments do not neutralize power relations either. The literature on democratic deliberation tends to focus on ideal speech situations where the power of arguments would prevail unhindered. Most would recognize, however, that inequality and power are omnipresent, and that discourse itself is penetrated and fashioned by power relations (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 93; Risse, 2000: 17–18). A robust deliberative outcome, proposes Bruno Jobert (2004: 45–6), is precisely one that gives coherence to unequal social relations, by creating positions, identities, coalitions, and oppositions that make sense to the agents. This is the case, because deliberation is not only about policy objectives and instruments, but also about identity and recognition (Muller, 1995: 160–3). This observation leads to a final formulation of the working hypothesis: ideas that catch fire involve a few, and probably two, antagonistic conceptions of justice that together contribute to reshape social conflicts and debates around a core public policy issue.

As Peter Hall explains in his essay on ontology and methodology, such a working hypothesis about the contending conceptions of justice of the left and the right and about evolving social relations does not lend itself to a conventional causal analysis. At best, one can pursue a small-N comparison focused on process (Hall, 2003: 390–1). A few points of method can nevertheless be kept in mind.

First, in looking for the rise of a new political issue such as poverty, one should not seek an origin, the elusive point where it all began. In his work on agenda setting, John W. Kingdon (2003: 71–3) writes that such a quest is condemned to be fruitless, because it can only lead to an infinite regression toward older and older discourses. Poverty, for one, is an issue than is not lacking in antecedents. More important, writes Kingdon, is to understand the context, the 'climate' that makes social actors receptive to an issue and brings the process toward what a popular book has called the 'tipping point' (Gladwell, 2000). Second, because they involve contending conceptions of justice, ideas that catch fire are never carried by a single set of actors. Focused on agents, constructivist studies have tended to emphasize either social movements, institutions, experts, or politicians. Ideas that capture the world, however,

are likely to be carried in different ways by most if not all of these actors. Successful discourses come from many sources, and go up from below as well as down from above. In other words, 'nobody leads anybody else' (Kingdon, 2003: 73–4). In a similar manner, in a global deliberative process, there is no clear hierarchy of scales. If we understand globalization as a process of deterritorialization or denationalization (Scholte, 2000: 46–7; Zürn, 2002: 236–7), it implies that the different spaces of deliberation change over time and interact with one another, but not in a single direction or in a zero-sum manner. The emergence of a global public sphere (Taylor, 2004: 83–90, 169–70), need not be at the expense of other public spheres. With scales as with social forces, it seems best to assume that 'nobody leads anybody else' (Cox, 1998; Delaney and Leitner, 1997).

In practice, these theoretical and methodological guidelines suggest that we should look less for a single, linear process than for the convergence of various processes, or 'streams' in the language of Kingdon, in a global context that is conducive to change. This is what is done in the next section, with a discussion of the rise of poverty on the agenda in world institutions, in the EU, and in national states. These different evolutions may have been mutually reinforcing but, to a large extent, they were parallel and driven by distinct factors and agents.

The Rediscovery of Poverty

It is not possible within the limits of a single article to present a comprehensive survey of a long, multifaceted and global evolution. The brief outlines that follow, which focus on the road leading to the policy debates of the early 2000s, nevertheless indicate how at different scales, and through the efforts of various actors, poverty was rediscovered in recent years. The purpose of the presentation is less to probe closely each discourse or debate, but rather to show how a number of debates, or policy streams, evolved in a similar fashion at the turn of the century. In all cases, a rediscovery of poverty responded to a failure of past policy discourses, and it offered a new standpoint around which the different actors could converge, and debate further.

GLOBAL POVERTY

In the 1960s and 1970s, decolonization, the East–West conflict, and the collective demands of developing countries for a New International Economic Order created a relatively broad North–South consensus around development objectives and approaches. The general idea was to use states and international organizations to counter a historical and market legacy of poverty and underdevelopment. There remained, of course, major disagreements between the right and the left – or between those who emphasized modernization and those who stressed dependency (Maxfield, 2002: 464–8) – as well as important variations in priorities and methods across space and time. But, these differences and

divergences were all about development and planning (Geddes, 2002: 346; Kohli, 2002: 109; Stiglitz, 1998: 20–1). And, they gave rise to a specific deliberative framework, the North–South dialogue. Just as Keynesian approaches and the welfare state structured domestic policy and political debates in the North, so did development and planning in international organizations in the South (Thérien, 2002: 238–9). The aim was growth and progress, and the enemy was poverty (Lumsdaine, 1993: 228–44).

In the 1980s, priorities and approaches changed. In the previous decade, the apparent ineffectiveness of planning and a number of state failures had encouraged a neoclassical revival in development economics, around the idea that it was more important to 'get the prices right' through the workings of free markets than to try to find the 'right policies' for state intervention. When conservative governments assumed power in the leading countries of the North, they could turn to this new vision of development, which was very much in tune with their own monetarist orientations. The debt crisis that confronted many developing countries in 1982 sealed the fate of development planning and cemented a new consensus among the political elites and the experts in the Washington international financial institutions, which economist John Williamson dubbed the 'Washington consensus' (Maxfield, 2002: 469; Williamson, 1990). In a context of debt crisis, the idea was to make lending and aid conditional on structural reforms aimed at fostering market mechanisms and reinforcing macro-economic stability (Easterly, 2001: 101–3). Concretely, these structural adjustment programmes translated into fiscal austerity, market liberalization and privatization (Stiglitz, 2002: 53). For most of the 1980s and early 1990s, poverty became a secondary issue, connected less with the international order than with 'country-specific imbalances, policy errors, or political difficulties'; in this perspective, 'the primary responsibility for fighting poverty' rested 'with the governments and the people of developing countries themselves' (World Bank 1995 and 1996 documents, cited in Thérien, 1999: 729–30). At best, selective measures targeted at specific countries and populations could help the poor adjust to a fundamentally sound international economic order. In time, efficient markets and economic stability would assure growth, to the benefit of all (Thérien, 1999: 730).

Poverty, however, did not vanish and in the late 1990s it came back on the international agenda. Failure was not for a lack of commitment or efforts. Indeed, structural adjustment programmes were pursued with conviction throughout the South. William Easterly explains:

> In the 1980s, the World Bank and IMF gave an average of six adjustment loans to each country of Africa, an average of five adjustment loans to each country in Latin America, an average of four adjustment loans to each country in Asia, and an average of three adjustment loans to each country in Eastern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East.
>
> The operation was a success for everyone except the patient. There was much lending, little adjustment, and little growth in the 1980s and 1990s. . . . The per

capita growth rate of the typical developing country between 1980 and 1998 was zero. The lending was there, but the growth wasn't. (Easterly, 2001: 102–3)

Damaging critiques first came from the social reformist agencies of the UN: the UNICEF, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD). In 1987, the UNICEF published a report entitled 'Adjustment with a Human Face', which outlined the consequences of structural adjustment policies for the children of poor countries and put forward an alternative, more social approach. In 1990, the UNDP started publishing its annual 'Human Development Report', which drew attention to the rise of inequality between and within countries and reinforced the call for a new focus on poverty. A few years later, in preparation for the World Summit on Social Development to be held in Copenhagen in 1995, the UNRISD commissioned a series of studies, which were released before the Summit, in a publication entitled *States of Disarray: The Social Effects of Globalisation* (Deacon, 1999: 236–8). Behind these public contributions, there were intense debates between and within international organizations (Deacon, 1999: 223–7, 237; Kanbur and Vines, 2000: 100–2). These internal debates emerged in the open in 2000 with the resignations first of Joseph Stiglitz, the World Bank's Chief Economist, and then of Ravi Kanbur, the Cornell University economist in charge of producing the Bank's 2000 'World Development Report', entitled 'Attacking Poverty'. Reportedly, both resignations followed interventions by US Treasury Secretary Larry Summers (Deacon, 2001: 63; Wade, 2001: 1435–6).

Amidst these tensions, and in the wake of a series of financial crises in East Asia and Latin America, the World Bank paid increasing attention to the social consequences of adjustment and to the importance of poverty alleviation. A growing proportion of World Bank loans came to include an explicit poverty focus, and the Bank restructured its divisions to grant more importance to the issue (Deacon, 1999: 224; Thérien, 1999: 729). In December 1999, the World Bank and the IMF introduced a new, comprehensive and country-based approach that involved the production of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (International Development Association and IMF, 2002: 3). Poverty has not displaced all other preoccupations, but it has certainly become a central preoccupation. 'The number of general, country-specific and methodological reports issued by the Bank that may be said to be poverty-related,' notes Peter Townsend in a recent article, now 'threatens to swamp us all' (Townsend, 2002: 3).

EUROPEAN POVERTY

In the EU, a similar evolution, albeit less spectacular, has taken place in the last decade. 'The observer who would have argued, in the middle of the 1990s, that themes such as poverty and social exclusion, public pensions, and health

care would soon be at the heart of the European Union social agenda would have been considered a very poor analyst,' notes Philippe Pochet (2002: 159, author's translation) in a recent article. Not only are these themes now considered and debated, but they are associated with a new approach, the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), which brings member states to agree on common objectives and indicators, to present National Action Plans (NAPs), and to share information and best practices. The social agenda defined in Nice in December 2001 even gives priority to the fight against poverty and social exclusion, followed by public pensions, the poverty trap, and health care (Pochet, 2002).

As in global institutions, the 1980s and early 1990s in Europe were dominated by a political agenda defined by monetarism and neo-liberalism. Overall, the developed democracies came out of the 1970s facing high levels of unemployment and inflation, important public debts, and new international constraints that effectively prevented the use of budget deficits or low interest rates to favour economic expansion. In most countries, the Keynesian view of macro-economic management appeared discredited. Gradually, policy makers, political parties, and mass publics came to accept a new approach centred on anti-inflationary monetary policies, fiscal austerity, and supply-side adjustments. Even parties of the left rallied, reluctantly, to this standpoint, adapting it to their own policy objectives and priorities (Franzese, 2002: 196–7; Scharpf, 2000: 51). In the European Community, the member states tended to emulate the policies of the countries with the lowest rates of inflation and the most stable currencies – Germany and the Netherlands – and the Bundesbank came to be perceived as 'Europe's de facto central bank' (Colchester and Buchan, cited in Cameron, 1998: 201). In this context, the old idea of a European monetary union was bound to return on the agenda, and it did, this time as a thoroughly monetarist project (Cameron, 1998: 202; Dyson, 1999: 98–102; Pollack, 2000: 276). The 1992 Maastricht Treaty on the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) established convergence criteria compelling member states to seek a budget deficit below 3 percent of GDP, a public debt of no more than 60 percent of GDP, and an inflation rate at or below 1.5 percent above the average of the lowest three countries, as well as to avoid devaluation and maintain long-run interest rates at no more than 2 percent above the average of the lowest three countries (Hen and Léonard, 2001: 74). Monetary integration reduced the policy autonomy of member states and favoured austerity policies, without creating strong policy capabilities at the European level, which could compensate for this loss of autonomy and allow Europeans to address the social and political problems associated with this new economic environment (Hooghe and Marks, 2001: 119–41; Jenson and Pochet, 2002: 4).

Soon, however, social preoccupations reasserted themselves. In the beginning of the 1990s, European countries were hit by a recession – reinforced by the governments' Maastricht commitment to reduce public sector deficits – and unemployment rates reached new peaks, above those of the early 1980s

(Scharpf, 2000: 68–9). Unemployment became a critical policy preoccupation, and a political issue sufficiently powerful to undermine the legitimacy of the EU (Scharpf, 1999: 122). In 1993, the European Commission released a 'White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment' that acknowledged the problem, and in December 1994 a European Employment Strategy was adopted at the Essen European Council. The real breakthrough, however, came with the Amsterdam Summit in 1997, when the member states agreed to include an Employment Title in the Treaty of the European Communities. This new title makes the promotion of employment 'a matter of common concern' and engages governments to prepare National Actions Plans that must be reviewed and synthesized by the European Commission (De la Porte and Pochet, 2002a: 34–8; Jenson and Pochet, 2002: 5; Scharpf, 1999: 158). It is important to stress that this new employment commitment did not challenge the conservative orientation or the primacy of economic policy (Kleinman, 2002: 187–8; Pollack, 2000: 279–80). The promotion of employment proceeded mostly through active labour market policies, on a national basis. Still, the Amsterdam Summit marked a turning point, made possible by a gradual shift in public opinion, by the movement of ideas within and outside European institutions and, most importantly, by the new strength of the left in Europe, following the election of Tony Blair's New Labour in the United Kingdom and of Lionel Jospin's Socialists in France (Arnold and Cameron, 2001; Jenson and Pochet, 2002: 7–8). At the very least, the 1997 European Employment Strategy acknowledged the importance of the problem and made it an important common priority. The Strategy also prepared the ground, and the method, for the adoption of a common approach against poverty and social exclusion at the 2000 Lisbon Summit.

To some extent, this turn toward poverty and social exclusion was an extension of the employment agenda, as unemployment was seen as the primary cause of poverty and social exclusion, and gave rise, in particular, to concerns about new forms of poverty (Kleinman, 2002: 176–8). This development, however, also had roots in the European debate about the future of the welfare state. This related but distinct debate emphasized the rise of new social risks associated with more unstable employment and new family forms, and the growth of constraints related to population aging and rising social costs (Pierson, 2001b), and it led to ambitious proposals to rethink the architecture of the welfare state, so as to better achieve social inclusion and justice (most notably, Esping-Andersen et al., 2002). Whatever the case, by the late 1990s, writes Vivien Schmidt:

> . . . most governments in power seemed to have turned their backs on the starker neo-liberal rhetoric of individual responsibility that had flourished in particular in the 1980s in favor of a more 'humane' discourse which promised to afford the very poor greater protection even as the welfare state was cut, and which pledged to balance efficiency with equity in the reform of the welfare state. (Schmidt, 2000: 301)

The EU evolved in this direction as well, at about the same pace, to end up making employment and the fight against poverty and social exclusion matters of 'common concern'.

As the quotation from Schmidt suggests, similar evolutions took place at the national level. It is not possible, here, to go over the different cases systematically. A few words can be said, however, about the evolution of some particularly significant cases, in the North and in the South.

NATIONAL POVERTY

As mentioned earlier, in Germany the very mention of poverty remained for a long time a political 'taboo' (Leisering and Leibfried, 1999: 196). Until the end of the 1990s, for instance, the German government still blocked European poverty programmes, contesting European relative measures of poverty and arguing that the country's social assistance system was sufficient to eliminate absolute poverty (Breuer, 1999; Leisering and Leibfried, 1999: 195–6; Schultheis, 1996: 428–9; Union nationale interfédérale des oeuvres et organismes privés sanitaires et sociaux [UNIOPSS], 2001: 32). Debates were rising about the 'new poverty' induced by high levels of unemployment and the risks of a 'two-thirds society' that would permanently leave aside a large proportion of excluded persons, and the reunification of the country in 1990 added to these concerns by integrating an entire region well below the country's level of wealth and development (Leisering and Leibfried, 1999: 188–91). Still, for the most part, the core question remained not poverty but unemployment, a problem that Germans have identified as the most pressing for the last 25 years (Silvia, 2002: 3). In 1998, however, the Greens made the acknowledgement of poverty and the preparation of a report on poverty and wealth a condition for their participation in the new Schröder government (European Anti Poverty Network [EAPN], 1999: 44). The publication of the poverty and wealth report in April 2001, followed in May by the cabinet adoption of the National Action Plan to fight poverty and social exclusion, confirmed that poverty was increasing in Germany, especially for families with children, and it was received very positively by trade unions, churches and social actors, who saw these findings and the NAP as the beginning of a new debate on poverty and inequality. The government mostly emphasized better support for families and additional efforts in favour of labour market integration (Scheele, 2001). Still, belatedly a taboo issue had become a significant policy question.

Likewise, in France, one of the few countries of Europe without a guaranteed minimum income before the introduction of the *Revenu minimum d'insertion* (RMI) in 1988, a broad debate on poverty and social exclusion was triggered by rising unemployment in the 1980s, and the issue – often ignored until then – became a defining feature of the country's political debates (Levy, 2000: 322–9; Paugam, 1993: 23–7; Paugam, 1999). In the UK, the Blair government, elected in 1997, promised to redress the inequalities and poverty created by 18 years of

conservative policies and to combat social exclusion. It adopted a new welfare-to-work approach that emphasized mutual responsibility, but also a minimum wage law, new union recognition rights, and various redistributive measures aimed at the poor and the middle class. Poverty is still more important in the UK than in most countries of Continental Europe, but reducing it is now on the country's political agenda (EAPN, 1999: 95–104; Rhodes, 2000: 52–63; Schmidt, 2002: 78). American debates have echoed these concerns, with little impact, however, in national politics (American Political Science Association [APSA] Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, 2004).

In the South, the most telling change was the introduction of new transfer programmes specifically targeted at poor families. In countries where those without stable jobs in a formal environment traditionally received few if any benefits, and where social assistance schemes remained at best limited and usually poorly designed, funded, and implemented, policies aimed specifically at the poor represented a significant shift. The first country to move in this direction was Bangladesh, with its Food for Education programme introduced in 1993. This programme offered food aid to poor families on the condition that their children attend primary school. By 2000, it reached around 13 percent of primary school students in the country, and amounted to about 1.5 percent of total government expenditures. Brazilian municipalities and states developed similar but cash-based transfers in 1995 (the *Bolsa Escola* programmes), and so did the Mexican federal government in 1997, with the *Progresa* programme. Programmes of the same type were later developed at the national level in Honduras (2000), Nicaragua (2000), Brazil (2001), Colombia (2001), and elsewhere in Latin America, as well as in Jamaica (2002) and in Turkey (2003). These programmes reached a significant proportion of the population and they seemed effective in alleviating poverty and improving school attendance (Coady et al., 2004; Morley and Coady, 2003; Rawlings and Rubio, 2005). Aid donors and multilateral institutions actively supported the diffusion of these conditional cash transfers (Kakwani et al., 2005: 12). At the origin, however, in Bangladesh, in Brazilian municipalities, and in Mexico, these initiatives were largely 'home-grown' solutions to domestic political problems (Ahmed and del Ninno, 2002: 3–4; De Britto, 2004: 43–6).

Poverty, then, is now on the political agenda, in the South as well as in the North, and in international organizations as well as in national states. The level of concern varies from one institution to another, and there is no consensus on specific objectives and solutions, but, at the very least, poverty alleviation has become an issue of 'common concern'.

HOW DID POVERTY CATCH FIRE?

Summing up his analysis of the transformation of French social policies in the 1990s and early 2000s, Bruno Palier concludes that change became possible in a relatively 'immovable' continental welfare state when old approaches became discredited. They were superseded by new solutions, which could be

legitimated in different terms, acceptable at once by the right and by the left. An 'ambiguous consensus' could then develop around ideas and policies that would have been previously unthinkable (Palier, 2002: 398–9). Like Kingdon (2003: 86–7), who points to the joint importance of problems, policies, and politics, Palier rightfully stresses the political underpinnings that make possible a change in the public agenda. But why does one solution in particular emerge at a given time, in a given place? In a national context, such as the French one, it is plausible that this solution was already present at the margins, besides being present in the main institutional arrangements. In a global context, however, such an incremental hypothesis seems more difficult to sustain.

As Palier or Kingdon would suggest, poverty rose on the global agenda because past policies proved deficient, and because the political context was relatively favourable. More significantly, however, poverty became a new focal point because it is an issue closely tied to the dominant neo-liberal agenda, an agenda that is supposed to be effective in reducing poverty at home and abroad, through stronger economic growth and more selective social and development policies. Pointing to rising levels of poverty thus allows social actors to challenge the prevailing policies in their own terms. In other words, the poverty argument has power in our contemporary global public sphere. A number of factors contribute to this situation.

Consider, first, the social and political context. Overall, income inequality has increased in the last two decades of the 20th century. When incomes are measured at market exchange rates and expressed in US dollars, this trend leaves no doubt. Between-country comparisons using purchasing power parity (PPP) conversion factors yield more optimistic results, but this conversion raises a number of methodological problems and, even in this case, the improvements in income distribution disappear if the single case of China is left out (Wade, 2004: 576). Most studies that look beyond broad global trends suggest in fact that inequality has worsened, both between and within countries (Wade, 2004: 579). According to the World Bank, about one person out of five in the world still lives in extreme poverty (less than US$1 a day), and nearly half of the world's population lives in poverty (less than US$2 a day; World Bank, 2006: 9).

Such evolutions obviously contributed to make poverty a significant policy issue. But, these are long-run trends, for which measurement remains difficult and highly contentious, and alone they cannot explain the emergence of a new preoccupation around the end of the 1990s. There were already vast numbers of people living in poverty in, say, 1985.

In this respect, a more momentous event, the East Asian financial and economic crisis that started in July 1997, probably acted as a critical trigger. The most important crisis since the Great Depression, this recession rapidly spread through Asia, Russia and Latin America, shook the world, and raised questions about IMF policies and the 'Washington consensus', precisely meant to preserve economic growth and stability, and often legitimated by the success of the East Asian 'models' (Gore, 2000: 799; Stiglitz, 2002: 89–132). Amidst debates

on the causes and on the significance of this major policy failure, critical voices could at last be heard, inside and outside international institutions, and concerns for social justice were reaffirmed (Eichengreen, 1999: 205–7).

At about the same time, protests were rising around the world to denounce globalization. Acknowledging that policies are never designed in the streets, Joseph Stiglitz nevertheless presents this new popular movement as important:

> For decades, the cries of the poor in Africa and in developing countries in other parts of the world have been largely unheard of in the West . . . But until the protestors came along there was little hope for change and no outlets for complaints . . . it is the trade unionists, students, environmentalists – ordinary citizens – marching in the streets of Prague, Seattle, Washington, and Genoa who have put the need for reform on the agenda of the developed world. (Stiglitz, 2002: 9, 20)

Stiglitz probably exaggerates the coherence, representative character, and impact of these protests. But, the political context was certainly changing. In the main countries of the EU, the left was also coming back to power, in some cases after a long time in opposition, with programmes meant to reaffirm social-democratic values.

Different causal mechanisms were thus at play. In global institutions, the Asian crisis revealed the limitations of orthodox approaches and opened a breach that could be used by those who, for many years, had advocated, from the inside and from outside, more social approaches. In Europe, the almost simultaneous electoral victories of the social-democratic left in the UK, in France, and in Germany shifted the balance of power and opened up new possibilities for reform. Elsewhere, and at other scales, other avenues were taken. In Quebec, for instance, the provincial government adopted in 2002 a law to 'combat poverty and social exclusion'. Unique in North America, this new law was truly the result of a popular initiative (Noël, 2002). Promoted, indeed designed, by a broad social movement organized under the umbrella of a Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty, the project was met initially with scepticism not only by the social-democratic *Parti québécois* government, but also by most social policy experts. The anti-poverty movement nevertheless succeeded and it became a strong and legitimate actor in the public sphere (Noël, 2004, 2005). Hence, poverty could also be rediscovered without an economic shock, and with little contribution from established political parties or policy experts.

Different roads and vehicles, then, led more or less to the same destination, and this happened in different places and at different levels of action. It is therefore not possible to attribute the general evolution to a single factor, whether it is an increase in the incidence of poverty, an economic shock, new orientations from experts, a wave of mobilization, or partisan changes. The process seemed rather to belong to what Anton Hemerijck and Martin Schludi describe as a '*system-wide search* for a new, economically viable, politically feasible, and socially acceptable profile of social and economic regulation' (Hemerijck and Schludi, 2000: 127, emphasis in original).

In other words, something more than 'learning' by experts and governments was at play. A movement like Quebec's Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty, for instance, was not so much 'puzzling' to solve policy problems as affirming important political values and principles. The same could be said, in a different way, of the United Nations Millennium General Assembly or of the European Union Lisbon Council. These meetings were less about policy problems and responses than about common values and broad objectives, or about what Hemerijck and Schludi call political and social feasibility. Debates about basic principles and values played an important role, and this helps explain the convergence on poverty reduction of very different actors and institutions, active at various scales.

The language of social policy is primarily a moral and democratic language, and only secondarily institutional and technocratic. The pivotal role of principles and values in policy making can be seen in their propensity to extend beyond the policy domain with which they were first associated (Noël and Thérien, 2002: 645, 650). The power of established conceptions of justice also tends to prevent democratic societies from going back radically in terms of rights (Schnapper, 2002: 82).

This is why neo-liberal policies first had to be justified in terms that were compatible with the values and principles embodied in the post-war welfare state. Monetarist and austerity policies were thus presented as ways to better achieve the values of social justice embodied in existing welfare state institutions (Beauchemin et al., 1995: 19; Jobert and Théret, 1994: 22–3). Inflation had to be tamed and public deficits reduced to generate economic growth and high levels of employment, so as to create the conditions necessary to maintain the welfare state and promote social justice. For the right, this rhetoric was necessary, but it was not costless. It contributed to the resilience of established welfare state institutions, and exposed the limits of a neo-liberal approach that could not deliver on promises of social justice. At the same time, this endorsement of welfare state principles and values placed the left in an awkward situation, insofar as it appeared to fight only for the status quo ante, a status quo that it had often criticized in the past and that remained to a large extent recognized and embodied in the new orthodoxy. The conflict between the left and the right came to look like a limited debate between 'standing pat' and 'dismantling', and public deliberations and the policy process appeared more or less frozen into permanent austerity and incremental adjustments (Pierson, 2001a: 417–19).

Just as the right never quite 'dismantled', however, the left never really 'stood pat'. While neo-liberalism prevailed, and while much of the social and political left was busy defending established entitlements and programmes, new concepts and principles were gradually emerging on the left. Some of these ideas responded to and were shaped by neo-liberalism, and they moved the left closer to the dominant agenda. There was, to use the terms of John Bohman, 'uptake' in the deliberative process. In such cases, fundamental disagreements persist, but their shapes and forms change:

> Each speaker incorporates and reinterprets the other's contributions in his or her own. After a sufficient length of time, speakers begin to use expressions that they did not employ before; the process of trying to convince others may alter not only one's own mode of expression but also the reasons one finds convincing. (Bohman, 1996: 58)

The Third Way, for instance, brought the British left closer to the conservative views that had prevailed in the UK for almost two decades. Likewise, it can be argued that the new consensus on development – a sort of 'Global Third Way' – has moved the more progressive UN institutions toward the more conservative 'Bretton Woods' financial organizations, without making the latter change as much (Craig and Porter, 2003; Thérien, forthcoming).

In other cases, new ideas emerge that are not simply 'uptakes' of ideas and terms defined by the dominant standpoint. This happens, for instance, when social actors respond to new problems caused by public policies, or when new collective identities and actors are created. New ideas and projects can also be stimulated by the undelivered promises of the prevailing approaches.

When new critiques and approaches appear in this way, ideas also develop in interaction with the dominant views, but they do so less to bring the left closer to the mainstream than to raise new challenges and issues for the future (Blyth, 2002). In the 1990s, for instance, the notion of a guaranteed basic income was put forward as a plausible response to poverty and insecurity (Atkinson, 2002). The idea was amenable to gradual implementation, even within a neo-liberal framework – through negative income tax measures or child benefits for instance. But, it also contributed to the affirmation of important principles regarding income distribution, inequality and poverty. Likewise, in recent years new principles and values associated with democratization and empowerment, with the recognition of diversity and pluralism, and with the promotion of the social economy were advanced and made inroads into policy debates (Noël and Martin, 2002; Rice and Prince, 2000).

The rediscovery of poverty took place in this deliberative and political context, at the end of the 1990s. In part, this evolution stemmed from a debate within the confines of neo-liberalism. Poverty is indeed the core liberal/neo-liberal problem, and the left was able to highlight the issue, and address it on terms that were compatible with the dominant standpoint. In doing so, social democrats pointed to a failure of the dominant approach but also integrated some elements of this approach, in welfare-to-work policies for instance. Even then, beyond superficial similarities in activation measures, important differences in values and strategies remained between the left and the right (Dufour et al., 2003). In any case, the question of poverty also came to the fore through discourses and actions outside the realm of neo-liberalism, discourses genuinely anchored in social-democratic values such as democracy and equality. This is why social movements, far removed from the circles of influence, could also raise the issue as their own, and promote responses that were ambitious, challenging, and at odds with the orthodoxy. The distinction between

these two movements, from within and from without, is analytical. In practice, the two developed together and influenced each other.

Neo-liberalism's New Clothes?

Many observers perceive this recent 'rediscovery of poverty' with scepticism. Some stress the primarily symbolic character of the new discourse, and underline the limited number of effective measures and concrete achievements that have accompanied its formulation. Others see the new emphasis on poverty as fundamentally in continuity with neo-liberalism, or as a complement to the still dominant monetarist objectives and fiscal austerity policies.

SYMBOLISM

Consider, first, the question of symbolism. Many authors have presented the emerging preoccupation with poverty as primarily a question of marketing, a way to give, at least rhetorically, a human face to austerity policies that produce unemployment and increase inequalities. Easterly (2002: 30), for instance, characterizes the new approach of international aid organizations as a form of 'spin control'. Likewise, observers have evoked the possibility that the new European employment and poverty strategies merely produce a 'justificatory discourse' that masks 'the absence of action in the social sphere' (De la Porte and Pochet, 2002b: 15; see also Scharpf, 1999: 158). Indeed, these strategies have been much discussed but their implementation and impact have been uneven and, overall, limited (De la Porte and Pochet, 2002a: 39–43). Likewise, at the international level, the new emphasis on attacking poverty has hardly been matched by increased aid efforts.

There is obviously a symbolic and legitimacy dimension to the rediscovery of poverty. Marketing cannot explain, however, why poverty in particular was chosen as a key issue, and it also appears insufficient to account for the magnitude and the scope of the actions that were undertaken. In Europe, poverty and social exclusion are now the object of common objectives and guidelines, operationalized with common indicators, benchmarks and timetables, and they give rise to an elaborate process of national and community monitoring, with evaluations and peer reviews designed to facilitate mutual learning (Ferrera et al., 2002: 230). In the international community, the donor countries have also designed a comprehensive approach to poverty reduction, with common guidelines and concepts, partnership models, frameworks and instruments for country programming, as well as means to promote policy coherence and mutual learning (Middleton et al., 2001; OECD, 2001). But are not these ways of doing – the setting of objectives and guidelines, with partnerships and performance indicators – the hallmarks of the new public management and, more generally, of neo-liberalism (Jobert, 1995: 115; Merrien, 1999)? This question leads us to the second, more serious, source of

scepticism regarding the rediscovery of poverty, its association with neo-liberalism. The suspicion here is not that the new approach is merely symbolic but rather that it does not represent a significant departure from past policies.

NEO-LIBERALISM

The argument about neo-liberalism comes in three variants. First, some authors note that poverty reduction policies remain at the margins of basically orthodox economic policies. Mark Kleinman, for instance, observes that the EU's focus on reducing unemployment, poverty and social exclusion is anchored 'firmly within a general policy commitment to economic orthodoxy, tight control of public finances, and priority to anti-inflationary rather than full employment targets' (Kleinman, 2002: 189–90), a situation which privileges welfare-to-work more than redistributive policies. Mark Pollack presents the same evaluation, and speaks of 'reforms at the margins' (Pollack, 2000: 281). A second variant of this standpoint goes a step further, to claim that the very design of poverty reduction policies is neo-liberal. Jean-Claude Barbier, for instance, writes that the new activation and targeted policies of Europe are meant to improve the labour supply and selectively reduce poverty, in a fashion that 'corresponds perfectly' to the prevailing neo-liberal consensus (Barbier, 2002: 327, author's translation). Likewise, David Craig and Doug Porter present the poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) promoted by the World Bank and the IMF as 'a "Third Way" re-morphing of neoliberal approaches' (Craig and Porter, 2003: 54) that places global economic integration as a first, good governance as a second, and limited poverty reduction as a third priority, primarily meant to support economic growth and stability. Finally, the very project of reducing poverty may be portrayed as a neo-liberal idea. In the post-war period, note Bruno Jobert and Bruno Théret, policies were anchored in an ideal of equality. Neo-liberalism replaced this ideal by the more limited notion of solidarity and it made poverty and exclusion, rather than inequality, the central social issues (Jobert and Théret, 1994: 64, 74–7). 'To speak of poverty,' notes similarly a recent study on the World Bank, 'is to postpone speaking of development' (Sindzingre, 2004: 176).

There is no doubt that the rediscovery of poverty is intimately associated with the dominant policy paradigm of our times. If it were not the case, this movement in policy ideas would be marginal, not really important. As such, poverty reduction policies and approaches are likely to be intertwined with orthodox economic policies, at once inside and outside these policies so to speak. Yet, it is hard to deny that a change has taken place in public discourse and in policy debates. Consider, for instance, that until recently global poverty and the poor were 'virtually invisible' to international relations and international political economy scholars, from the left as well as from the right (Pasha, 2000: 188; Tooze and Murphy, 1996). At the different scales discussed here, new approaches are being debated and designed that make

poverty an important policy consideration, and these approaches are the object of fierce debates, which basically oppose the left and the right (see for instance Kanbur, 2001; Pollack, 2000; Sachs, 2005). In the short run, these debates may be largely confined to the politics of adjustment and recalibration, but in the long run they may also indicate avenues beyond neo-liberal prescriptions (Gore, 2004: 282–3). What is taking place, observes Bob Deacon (2005: 25), is not so much the expression of 'a global hegemony' but instead the working of 'a war of positions'. In the tension between the alternatives, which are driven by different social and political forces referring to distinct conceptions of justice, the global politics of poverty will be defined gradually, and with it, more broadly, the global politics of social justice.

Conclusion

In a recent essay on the transformation of the welfare state, Neil Gilbert (2004: 4, 67, 180) denounces what he sees as a general surrender of public responsibility in the name of market-oriented policies, a surrender that the political left has encouraged more than fought, by wrapping it in progressive but 'vaporous' terms. For all practical purposes, no difference would remain between the policy orientations of the left and of the right, and concerns for social justice would have receded in the background. As a result, writes Gilbert (2004: 66), 'today, poverty per se is a much less fashionable topic of discourse'. Coming at the issue from a different standpoint, one that presents the new policy orientations associated with the idea of social investment in a more positive light, Jane Jenson and Denis Saint-Martin agree that poverty as such has declined in importance in recent years, at the expense of the more specific and politically appealing preoccupation with child poverty (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2003: 13).

These assessments about the politics of poverty may appear odd in light of the trends and debates surveyed in this article. They make sense, however, if they are understood as an indirect indicator of the relative rapidity with which the poverty issue 'caught fire' in recent years. First visible in global policy discourses, the 'rediscovery of poverty' has only recently become an important domestic policy theme, and policy scholars may still have to catch up with public discourses. Poverty is also a divisive theme, and it is likely to contradict exaggerated statements about a convergence between the left and the right.

From a constructivist perspective, the recent rediscovery of poverty can be understood as a reconfiguration of the enduring debate between the left and the right, one that takes into account the legacy of neo-liberal policies and proposes to move forward, to better achieve social justice. The theme is a powerful one because it resonates for the right, which claims to have the best approaches to reduce poverty, as well as for the left. The poverty question also opens up a number of new debates about policy objectives and priorities, often

with new collective identities and institutional actors. The theme, finally, is powerful as well because it works at different scales, where it can be promoted by the same or by like-minded social forces. In other words, a new debate about poverty took hold in recent years because it made it possible, for all social forces, to move beyond the relatively old and sterile opposition between the status quo and retrenchment, and beyond as well a vague convergence around ideas related to social investment. Poverty reduction works well as a locus of opposition because it allows the right to claim that market-oriented policies and globalization are not inimical to the poor (see for instance Bhagwati, 2004: 51–67; Brooks, 2004), while it helps the left bring back redistribution and social justice and make them once again central political issues.

There is much that is old in the rediscovery of poverty, and much that belongs to liberalism and to neo-liberalism. Social debates and innovations cannot start but from where we are. The welfare state, for instance, was both a break with and a prolongation of the old liberal order. Likewise, neo-liberalism was defined within and against the post-war welfare state. In this sense, the new global politics of poverty could provide an opening, a new frame of reference to challenge neo-liberalism and move policy debates ahead. The theme could also be interpreted more narrowly, however, as a call for modest adjustments within the current policy framework. In one way or another, the new global politics of poverty will have consequences, and it will matter for a wide array of social and political forces, at various scales.

Stressing the difficulty of qualifying our own times, Esping-Andersen (2000: 66) writes that we cannot avoid 'wandering in the fog of process'. In this fog, he suggests, all we can rely upon is 'purposeful empiricism dedicated to variance-seeking' (Esping-Andersen, 2000: 75). This is not wrong, and much can be said for this research strategy. It may also be a good idea, however, to pay attention to what the actors that have to move ahead in this fog actually use as guideposts. In highly uncertain situations, proposed John Maynard Keynes, agents can only rely on social conventions and on their motives. Sometimes conventions themselves become irrelevant, even misleading. Motives, then, come to the fore (see Fitzgibbons, 1990). In the fog of process, public deliberations about such motives, the democratic debates about what should be done, may well be our best indicators of what is coming. At the very least, we should pay attention to these deliberations, without presuming that no valid conclusion can be drawn from the political debates that define our times.

NOTES

1. This article was completed while I was a visiting professor at the Politiques publiques, action politique, territoires (PACTE) research centre of the Institut d'études politiques de Grenoble, in France. An earlier version was presented in March 2005 in Bremen, Germany, at the 'Social Justice in a Changing World' conference, and later at the School of Political Studies of the University of Ottawa (October 2005) and at the School of Policy Studies of Queen's University

(Kingston, March 2006). I am grateful to the organizers and participants of these events for their helpful comments. I wish to thank, in particular, Lutz Leisering, Bruno Jobert and this journal's referees for their careful reading of the manuscript and constructive suggestions.

2.   See http://www.weforum.org
3.   See http://www.whiteband.org

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RÉSUMÉ

La nouvelle politique mondiale de la pauvreté

Ces dernières années, les gouvernements, les institutions internationales, et un grand nombre de mouvements sociaux ont convergé autour de ce qu'un rapport de l'OCDE (Organisation de coopération et de développement économiques) a décrit comme un nouveau 'consensus mondiale' contre la pauvreté émergent. Ce nouvel enjeu de jour de la politique sociale a changé les termes du débat entre la gauche et la droite et a redéfini l'univers des possibilités tant à l'échelle mondiale que sur le plan national. Cet article propose une interprétation constructiviste de ce changement de discours sur plusieurs échelles, et discute les implications politiques de cette nouvelle politique mondiale de la pauvreté.

RESUMEN

La Nueva Política Globale de la Pobreza

En los últimos años, gobiernos, instituciones internacionales y un gran número de movimientos sociales han coincidido en señalar la importancia de lo que un informe de la OCDE ha descrito como un emergente 'consenso global contra la pobreza'. Esta nueva agenda de la política social global ha cambiado los términos del debate entre la derecha y la izquierda y ha redefinido las posibles políticas tanto a nivel mundial como a nivel doméstico. El presente artículo propone una interpretación constructivista de este cambio y plantea las implicaciones políticas de la nueva política globale contra la pobreza.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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