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# Covering Social Risks. Poverty Debate and Anti-Poverty Policy in France in the 1980s

Sarah Haßdenteufel\*

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**Abstract:** »Soziale Risiken absichern. Armutsdebatte und Armutspolitik in Frankreich in den 1980er Jahren«. This article analyses the influence of public discourse about the social risk of poverty on social policy. It examines the rediscovery of poverty as a political topic and the emergence of an anti-poverty policy in France in the 1980s. Drawing on parliamentary debates as well as on a variety of published documents, it answers the question of how welfare associations and political parties described and defined the risk of poverty during the debate, and with which political measures they wanted to combat it. Particular attention shall be paid to the different definitions of poverty. The article argues that formulating the poverty question and defining the meaning of poverty had a great influence on the conception of poverty policy.

**Keywords:** Social risks, poverty, welfare state, France.

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## 1. Introduction

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One of the central promises of the welfare state is protection against poverty. However, even in the *Trente glorieuses*, the three decades after 1945 which scholars consider as the 'golden age of the welfare state' (Kaelble 2004, 36) due to countries' economic prosperity, the Western European model could not truly fulfil this promise. Despite the expansion of the welfare state during that time, the poverty level remained high in most of the Western European countries (Room and Henningsen 1990, 20-7). In line with this general European trend, the number of people living below the poverty line was also high in France. After the end of the Second World War, old people were facing an especially high poverty risk in France. However, during the *Trente glorieuses*, the French governments had identified this group as particularly exposed to poverty and showed a great effort to improve their situation. As a consequence of several increases of the minimum pensions and pensions in general, old-age poverty had declined considerably between 1945 and 1975

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(Brodiez-Dolino 2013, 245). Nevertheless, poverty had not completely disappeared. Two studies published by the OECD and the EC in the middle of the 1970s trying to capture the dimension of poverty concluded that 16 per cent and 14.8 per cent of the French population respectively were still poor (Debordeaux 1988, 12). During the 1980s, this number slightly decreased, as well as the level of old-age poverty (Paugam 1998, 341). However, at the same time, the poverty risk for other sections of the population rose considerably, especially for young people. The unemployment was the main cause for their poverty: Similar to other Western European countries, the unemployment rate had substantially risen in France. Furthermore, young people, families with more than two children and single parents were also particularly exposed to poverty in the 1980s (Paugam 1998, 345). Poverty was present as a risk in the French welfare state, but not always present in the public debate. For in France – as in many other countries – the poverty question had disappeared from the public debate right after the country had mastered its post-war problems.

It was only in the 1980s that poverty re-entered the public debate after decades of absence. Then, political parties brought poverty back on their agendas and started to discuss it in parliament. Political decision-makers also started searching for political solutions to poverty to ‘prevent’ or ‘alleviate’ poverty in France, and implemented a series of anti-poverty programmes.

Previous research has analysed the evolution of poverty in France as well as the evolution of poverty policy in France (Brodiez-Dolino 2013; Gueslin 2013; Damon 2008). However, how politicians, the media and stakeholders communicated the risk of poverty has been neglected so far. Similarly, scholarship has also turned a blind eye to the interrelation of such a discourse and policy programmes. This article focuses on this interrelation. It analyses the rediscovery of poverty as a political topic in the 1980s and the first political measures to combat poverty. I will answer the question of how French politicians and welfare associations described and defined the risk of poverty, and by which political measures they wanted to combat it. My paper argues that how poverty was defined and described significantly influenced the conception of poverty policy, for poverty can be defined in many different ways. Material needs are certainly an important criterion for its definition, but psychological aspects, political and social participation can also play a role. These different ways of defining the problem correspond to different ways of fighting it. A change in poverty policy could therefore be explained by a changing definition of poverty.

The following analysis draws on a wide array sources, such as parliamentary documents, but also a variety of published documents (poverty reports and publications of welfare associations, for example).

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## 2. Discovering and Combating the New Poverty, 1980-1984

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Like in many other Western European countries, France discovered a “new poverty” in the 1980s. In France, a poverty report conducted by a government official from 1981 first made the distinction between “new” and “traditional” poverty (Oheix 1981). However, the report did not trigger a public debate on poverty. After its publication, neither new poverty, nor poverty in general were discussed publicly in France (Haßdenteufel 2014).

Even the change of government from the conservatives to the socialists in the same year did not change anything for the political discussion on poverty. François Mitterrand, who was elected first socialist president of the Fifth Republic in May 1981, began his first presidency by introducing a multitude of political reforms. None of the reforms he proposed concerned poverty policy, though. Especially during the first year of his presidency, Mitterrand initiated radical reforms concerning the French society, but also the economic sector. A decentralization programme, the abolition of death penalty, but also the nationalization of several French industrial companies and banks figure among his most spectacular reforms. Measures against poverty were not part of the reforms, but under the key term of “réduction des inégalités,” Mitterrand also introduced social policy measures. For example, he considerably increased the minimum wage, the minimum pension and the child benefits. However, the rise of unemployment and inflation, but also the economic difficulties brought a quick end to these reforms. In the summer of 1982, the French government was already forced to announce a first austerity programme – which was followed by more rigorous austerity measures in March 1983 (Chevallier 2004, 277-91).

The debate on new poverty came up in this context of change of government and social and economic reforms which were quickly followed by economic difficulties and austerity. Yet it was not the new government who brought the poverty debate on the table as a part of its reform programmes. The political debate on the so called new poverty only started in 1984. The new public interest in poverty at that time was roused by the activities of two associations that drew attention to a phenomenon which they described as “new poverty.” The first was the *Secours catholique*, the charity association of the French Catholic Church, which described the rise of the demands in its local agencies as a “nouvelle pauvreté.”<sup>1</sup> In this analysis, the association was supported by the Social Commission of the conference of French bishops, who took up the topic in a public declaration (Commission sociale de l'épiscopat français 1984). The second was the *Association des Maires des Grandes Villes de France* (hereafter

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<sup>1</sup> See the issue *Pauvres aujourd'hui* of the association's journal: *Messages du Secours Catholique* 360, 1984.

AMGVF), which unites the mayors of all French cities. According to the AMGVF, the French cities were also concerned by a new poverty. Just as the *Secours catholique*, the association emphasized that a growing number of people in their cities were in need and were asking for food, clothes and a place to sleep. Most French cities were not able to fulfil this increasing number of requests any more (Association des Maires des Grandes Villes de France (hereafter AMGVF) 1985).<sup>2</sup> Through the activities of these two associations, the concept of “new poverty” entered the public sphere in reports by the media on the declarations (see, for example, Ambroise-Rendu 1984; Woodrow 1984). In October 1984, the French parliament also discussed the phrase, when during the question time, two members of parliament asked questions on new poverty to the government.<sup>3</sup> For the first time, after decades of absence, poverty was featured again in the parliamentary debate.

Local actors introduced the concept of new poverty to draw attention to the rising demand for assistance. How did these associations describe the phenomenon they called new poverty? Both of them emphasized mainly two characteristics of the new poverty: its material dimension affecting housing, nutrition and clothing and the fact that new social groups were affected from poverty that were hitherto largely spared from hardship. On the one hand, they stressed its material dimension. For example, the AMGVF stated: “The requests have changed: they now directly concern the satisfaction of vital needs (housing, food, clothes)” (AMGVF 1985).<sup>4</sup> The *Secours catholique* emphasized the rise of material needs, such as lodging, food, and clothing, when they describe the new poverty. They stressed that especially the requests for food had risen dramatically over the last years (Casalis and Druésne 1984). Also the bishops’ reflection on new poverty highlighted these aspect of mal-nutrition. They introduce their declaration with the words: “People are hungry today in France” (Commission sociale de l’épiscopat français 1984).<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the associations also emphasize that new sections of the population were confronted with these material needs. The AMGVF stated: “Social categories which have not been affected in the past are now involved.”<sup>6</sup> The association stressed that poverty now affected sections of the populations which were usually not facing a high poverty risk. They warned more precisely that especially young people were now affected by poverty (ibid.). The *Secours*

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<sup>2</sup> The association produced a report on the evolution of poverty in French cities (unpublished – the archives of AMGVF have provided a copy of the report).

<sup>3</sup> Adrien Zeller, in: JO. Débats parlementaires, AN, 3.10.1984; Loïc Bouvard, in: JO. Débats parlementaires, AN, 12.10.1984.

<sup>4</sup> In the original: “Les demandes de recours ont changé de nature: elles touchent directement à la satisfaction de besoins vitaux (logement, alimentation, vêtements).”

<sup>5</sup> In the original: “On a faim aujourd’hui en France.”

<sup>6</sup> In the original: “Des catégories sociales habituellement peu touchés sont dorénavant concernées.”

*catholique* came to a similar conclusion. Eager to know who these new clients actually were, the association analysed the statistics of its local agencies. As a result, they discovered that mainly single, middle aged men with French nationality had asked for the assistance of the *Secours catholique*. The association concluded that the new poor were basically “des Français moyen” (Casalis and Druésne 1984) – average French people. Poverty, under its ‘traditional’ heading formally a risk for social outcasts had now also caught on to threaten the average French. The association was surprised and notably worried about the extension of poverty to these new groups which it did not regard as his traditional clients (ibid.). It was the inconsistency of this new discovery with the traditional image of poverty that dominated the French poverty debate during the *Trente glorieuses*, explaining the association’s surprise. During the post-war decades, poverty was mostly seen as a problem that was passed from one generation to the next. Poverty seemed to be a risk that concerned a fixed and clearly distinguishable group of the population (Paugam 2008, 201-6). The extension of poverty to new groups which were not traditionally facing a high risk of poverty was incompatible with this image.

The *Secours catholique* explained the extension of poverty to this new sections to the populations as follows: “It is a new phenomenon that people now fall into a situation of precarity, which often results from an accumulation of handicaps: unemployment, of course, as well as illness, family breakup, difficult relations with the administration” (Casalis and Druésne 1984).<sup>7</sup> So they concluded that it was new that, as a consequence of unemployment, illness, family break-ups or difficulties with the social administration, people fell into poverty.

Two expressions feature in this quotation that would reappear constantly in the following descriptions of new poverty by the association. They were also important terms in the new poverty debate in general. Firstly, *précarité* (insecurity) – the expression which the *Secours catholique* uses as a synonym of new poverty. Secondly the verb *basculer* (to switch, to slide into, to fall) which describes how the new groups had become poor: Their situation had suddenly switched from a stable to a precarious situation. The bishops used exactly these two terms to characterize poverty in their declaration as well. They emphasized that the situation of the new poor was the consequence of a sudden slide into precarity:

The situation of these ‘new poor’ is often the result of a brutal fall into precarity, into vulnerability to every diminution of their purchasing power [...] The slightest shock – unemployment, illness, administrative delays,

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<sup>7</sup> In the original: “Le phénomène nouveau, c’est que les personnes basculent dans une situation de précarité qui s’opère bien souvent à travers un cumul de handicaps: chômage bien sûr, mais aussi maladie, rupture familiale, relations difficiles avec l’administration.”

family breakups [...] – makes them fall into the inextricable poverty spiral (Commission sociale de l'épiscopat français 1984).<sup>8</sup>

The different protagonists used these two words to express the same idea: They described new poverty as the situation of an 'average' family who suddenly slid into poverty. Even the government's poverty report from 1981 had also used the term of precarity to define the new poverty.<sup>9</sup> Its title illustrates the importance of the expression for the author. The councillor of State, Gabriel Oheix, whom the government had hired for this task, gave his report the title *Contre la pauvreté et la précarité* (ibid.). For the first time, the author had combined the terms of poverty and precarity<sup>10</sup> – a connection that proved to be durably established in the following years.

In conclusion, the different actors defined the new poverty as the extension of material needs to new sections of the population that were not considered as typical poverty risk groups. The fact that these 'average' people now slipped into precarity was characterized as new poverty. This description of new poverty calls to mind Ulrich Beck's theses about the risk society. At first sight, it seems to confirm his claim that in modern, industrial societies, risks are not limited to a particular class, but concern potentially everyone (Beck 1986). According to the associations, that was exactly the case for new poverty in France in the 1980s: it did not primarily affect the traditional risk groups for poverty any more, for example women, old people or migrants, but potentially everyone, especially the middle class.

However, statistics do not confirm this statement entirely. The associations had pointed out that it was mainly unemployment that caused the precarious situation of the new poor people. In fact, the unemployment rate in France had considerably risen just in the period when new poverty was discovered. In 1985, it had risen over 10 per cent for the first time in the Fifth Republic (Direction de l'animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques 1996, 363). This rise of unemployment was not a particular French phenomenon, but one which all other Western European states except the Scandinavian countries had experienced. During the 1980s, their unemployment rate never sank under 8 per cent (Doering-

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<sup>8</sup> In the original: "La situation de ces 'nouveaux pauvres' est le plus souvent le résultat de basculements brutaux en état de précarité, de vulnérabilité par rapport à toute diminution de leur pouvoir d'achat [...] Le moindre choc – chômage, maladie, retards et blocages administratifs, rupture familiale [...] – les fait basculer dans la spirale inextricable de la pauvreté."

<sup>9</sup> In the report, the author describes the new poor people as follows: "These families are in a precarious situation, which means that they are vulnerable to any reduction of their purchasing power"; "Il s'agit de ménages en situation précaire, c'est-à-dire vulnérables à toute diminution de leur pouvoir d'achat" (Oheix 1981).

<sup>10</sup> The term of precarity had already spread in the France in the 1970s, in the scientific debate as well in the political discussion. Politicians and scholars mainly used it in the context of the "*précarité de l'emploi*," the insecurity of jobs. The term as such was therefore not new, but the junction of the two terms of poverty and precarity (Barbier 2005; Cingolani 2011).

Manteuffel and Raphael 2012, 55). A structural economic change had caused this unemployment. The industrial sectors which had produced the economic boom of the post war decades were losing their productivity. Two oil crises in 1973/74 and 1979 had aggravated the situation that was already difficult since the late 1960s. By increasing the price of oil, both crises led to a collapse of industrial production. (Doering-Manteuffel and Raphael 2012, 52-60). Long-term unemployment was particularly increasing at that time. In France, it reached its highest level in 1987, with a number of one million long-term unemployed (Paugam and Selz 2005, 305). These people were definitely facing a high risk of poverty. However, they did not abruptly fall into poverty, as the associations suggest by using the verb *basculer*, but they rather experience a gradual degradation of their situation. According to their age and the duration of their previous employment, they had a right to receive the benefits from their unemployment insurance for a period from four months to five years. During that time, the benefit they received was gradually reduced though. For those who did not benefit from unemployment insurance at all – or any more –, the *allocation de solidarité spécifique* provided a last support for a period up to twelve months (Bode 1999, 99). However, when all these benefits had run out, the people had no other options than to ask for assistance at the communal welfare offices. A legal right to a minimum income did not exist in France at that time. While many other countries had introduced this welfare provision guaranteeing an income sufficient to live on for the whole population, France would only introduce it in 1988. At the end of this process, the people affected were particularly exposed to poverty. Even if they did not abruptly fall into poverty, their situation was unexpected for them, for they had believed themselves protected from every poverty risk before the gradual degradation of their situation had started. It were probably these people who, since the beginning of the 1980s, demanded increasingly the assistance in the municipalities or in the local agencies of the *Secours catholique*. Poverty statistics confirm that the extension of poverty caused by long-term unemployment is a new evolution of the 1980s in France. The discussion of new poverty therefore represents a reaction to new dynamics in the poverty statistics.

However, the risk was not equal for everyone, despite the new dynamics. Firstly because the risk of unemployment was not equally distributed among the population. It was especially high for blue-collar workers – and among these particularly high for those with a lower level of training (Schor 2005, 403-5). Secondly, because not all unemployed fell directly into poverty, but only those who had no savings, probably because they already had a low income before they had lost their jobs. Thus, at the beginning of the 1980s, poverty concerned a potentially bigger group of people, but not the whole population. Furthermore, poverty statistics show that traditional poverty risks, such as old-age poverty were in fact decreasing since the 1970s. But at the same time, the poverty line of children and young people rose considerably (Paugam 1998, 344). In this respect, even in the 1980s poverty risk was not equally distributed among all age groups;



it only had shifted from one end of the demographic to the other one. Besides, traditional risk groups for poverty as large families still faced a high poverty risk in the 1980s (Paugam 1998, 345). In spite of some new dynamics, poverty still concerned particular sections of the population.

However, even these little changes were sufficient to create a new interest in poverty among the associations and the political parties. They triggered a debate which used not only new terms, but also revealed a new perspective on poverty and on the welfare state. New poverty was discussed as a question of insecurity. The term of precarity illustrates this, but also the definition of the problem as a sudden fall into poverty.

As Stefan Kaufmann and Ricky Wichum point out in their article in this HSR Special Issue, the sociologist Franz-Xaver Kaufmann already claimed from his contemporary observations of the late 1960s that insecurity had become a key term for the contemporaries. Kaufmann also states the thesis that, when contemporaries for example discussed economic insecurity, they did not only discuss the acute economic need, but also a possible situation of economic need in the future (Kaufmann and Wichum 2016, in this HSR Special Issue). For the debate on new poverty in France, this claim can be confirmed. Insecurity appears as a key term of the debate on new poverty. The analysis has shown as well that by the term of precarity, the associations did not only describe the acute material need of their clients, but also their future risk to be in need.

When Eckart Conze proposed to analyse the period after 1970 under the key term of security, he illustrated his propositions by analysing military risks (Conze 2010, 221). The analysis above has shown that security is also a key term for the debate on social risks in France in the 1980s. Not only military security, but also social security was a central question for the contemporaries. This article therefore agrees with Conze's proposition. From the perspective of social history, it also seems useful to analyse the period after 1970 under the common question of risk and security. This illustrates the advantage of the risk concept, which Arwen Mohun had already pointed out in her article in this issue (Mohun 2016, in this HSR Special Issue): It can link various fields of research, because risks are present in very different parts of human life.

Of course, the question of security did not appear only after 1970. As Meike Haunschild points out in her article in this HSR Special Issue, it already played an essential role as an argument in the debate on expansion of the Western German welfare state in the 1950s (Haunschild 2016, in this HSR Special Issue). Security is a central promise of the welfare state in general. However, in the rare cases when poverty was discussed in France before 1980, it was not discussed as a question of insecurity, but as a question of inequality (Paugam 1998, 339) – despite the fact that poverty statistics indicated that the welfare state had not fulfilled its promise. It was only at the beginning of the 1980s that the debate changed when the discussion on the extension of poverty to the

middle class also introduced the question of security to the poverty debate. This clearly reveals that the protection of the middle class was one central expectation of the contemporaries. With the discovery of new poverty, they realised that the welfare state did not fulfil this expectation. The debate on new poverty can therefore also be read as a debate on the discrepancy between the expectations on the welfare state and the actual poverty risk, which reveals an incipient loss of faith in the welfare state.

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### 3. Programmes contre la pauvreté et la précarité – An Attempt to Combat the New Poverty

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In autumn 1984, the question of new poverty had finally reached parliament. However, the topic was not discussed in detail in the *Assemblée Nationale*. Two members of the liberal-conservative opposition party UDF (*Union pour la démocratie française*) had confronted the socialist government with the existence of a new poverty. But the latter had replied only briefly, emphasizing that the French welfare state already protected the population from poverty in a sufficient way, such as providing minimum pensions and single parents benefits.<sup>11</sup> Seemingly, even the government itself was not convinced by this answer, but also considered it necessary to act against poverty. For only two weeks after these parliamentary questions on poverty, the government passed a *Programme de lutte contre la pauvreté et la précarité*. Social Service Minister Georgina Dufoix presented the programme on October 17th, 1984, to the cabinet (Communiqué du Conseil des ministres 1984).

As the programme did not have to be confirmed by parliament, it was not presented in the plenary session of the *Assemblée Nationale* before the government passed it. Only when members of parliament had to approve the budget law for 1985, which also included 500 million French franc for the anti-poverty programme, they required more information about the programme. In her answer, the Social Services Minister outlined the programme as follows: “Accommodation and housing, immediate help during winter, use of agricultural surplus.”<sup>12</sup> The programme budget also clearly illustrates these priorities. The biggest part of the budget, 41 per cent, was to be used for food distribution. 23 per cent were to be invested in emergency accommodations, while 20 per cent were reserved for a fund which helped to pay rent debts as well as electricity and gas bills. Essentially, the programme was supposed to

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<sup>11</sup> Georgina Dufoix, in: JO. Débats parlementaires, AN, 3.10.1984; Raymond Courrière, in JO. Débats parlementaires, AN, 12.10.1984.

<sup>12</sup> Georgina Dufoix, in: JO. Débats parlementaires, AN, 13.11.1984; in the original: “Hébergement et logement, secours d'urgence pendant l'hiver, utilisation des surplus agricoles.”

provide the people in need with a bed for the night and food – but only during winter, because government had limited the programme to the period of October 1984 to March 1985 (Damon 2001, 21-3).

The programme was the socialist government's attempt to resolve the problem that had previously been defined as new poverty. The date when it was passed as well as the term of precarity, which had been used as a synonym of new poverty in the debate, and which now appears in the title of the programme, illustrate this – as well as the programme's focus on food distribution and emergency accommodations. Of course, these measures represent a very traditional answer to poverty. It therefore does not seem to be an appropriate answer to a problem called new poverty, at least at first sight. At a closer inspection, the programme is perfectly adapted to one request the associations made. In their description of new poverty, they had stressed its material dimension, referring to the rising demand of food and clothes. The new programme attacked exactly this aspect of new poverty, by providing food and emergency accommodations. Although one may well say that the programme would probably not resolve this problem in a durable way, but it only improved the situation of poor people for a fixed period of time – six months, to be precise. In this respect, the French government had answered only partially the question the associations had raised. Although it was eager to bring a short-term solution to the problem of material need, it refused to find a permanent solution to poverty – and especially to the extension of poverty to new sections of the population.

By 1984, the socialist government had not accepted poverty as a serious and permanent problem of French society. It still considered poverty as a problem that could potentially be resolved by short-term campaigns. Because the government saw poverty as a temporary phenomenon, it was also not willing to modify the social security system. Instead of adapting it to a new problem, the government preferred providing assistance by temporary programmes that did not modify the social security system. On the other hand, the programme also illustrates that poverty was on the government's agenda, after a long period of disregard. In conclusion, as a consequence of the new poverty debate, brought up by locally acting associations, French government did not accept poverty as a permanent problem, but it accepted the problem in general.

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#### 4. From New Poverty to Exclusion: The Evolution of the Debate in the Second Half of the 1980s

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The government's hope to eradicate poverty with the help of a short-term programme was of course not fulfilled. Poverty statistics show that, in the second half of the 1980s, more than 11 per cent of the French population was poor. During that time, poverty neither extended to further sections of the population, nor did it increase or decrease considerably. Nevertheless, the same

problems as in the first half of the decade were still there – and still unresolved. Poverty risk remained high among young people, and unemployment was still an important cause of their poverty (Paugam 1998, 341).

The change of government in 1986 did not change this situation. After the elections of 1986, Mitterrand was forced to nominate Jacques Chirac as prime minister. It was the beginning of the first French cohabitation between a socialist president and a Gaullist prime minister. Even though Chirac reversed many reforms of the previous socialist government, he did not introduce any reform on poverty policy. Instead, he decided to take over the poverty policy from his socialist predecessor. In autumn 1986 and 1987, Chirac's social service minister presented a *Programme contre la pauvreté et la précarité*. The programme did not only have the same name as the socialist programme of 1984, but it also included the same measures (Damon 2001, 23-7).

As the problems discussed since 1984 were still unresolved, poverty remained an important topic in the public and political debate. However, it was now mainly the political left which triggered the debate in the parliament. Back in 1984, it had been the liberal-conservative party which had brought up the topic, now in the late 1980s it was mainly the *Parti socialiste* (PS) and the *Parti communiste français* (PCF) which brought the poverty debate to the table. Poverty continued to be a topic of the opposition since after the elections of 1986, neither PS nor PCF were part of the government any more. This confirms what Lutz Leisering already pointed out for the Federal Republic of Germany: that the political left parties are not a priori a lobby for the poor (Leisering 1993, 496). In France in the 1980s, it was mainly the opposition parties who brought up the poverty issue.

However, the semantics in the poverty debate changed. While the term of new poverty already had disappeared shortly after its appearance in the debate, “exclusion” now became the new buzzword in the debate. What was its origin and which – possibly new – ideas about poverty did it imply? The term of exclusion had already been used in France in the 1960s. Previous research on this term has pointed out two books at the origin of this term. The first was published in 1965 by Jules Klanfer and documents a conference of the French commission for UNESCO (Klanfer 1965). The second was published in 1969 by the economists and high-ranking officials Pierre Massé and Pierre Bernard (1969). Both books share the same definition of exclusion, which they understand as the exclusion from participation in the economic growth and the prosperity of the *Trente glorieuses* (ibid.; Klanfer 1965). While these two publications are often cited as the first references of the term of exclusion, a third one has been neglected so far: The association *ATD Quart Monde* already used the concept of exclusion in the 1960s and published one issue of their journal *Igloos* in 1967 under the title *Contre l'exclusion des pauvres* (Igloos 1967). *ATD Quart Monde* was founded in 1957 by the priest Joseph Wresinski as a non-party and non-denominational lobby and self-help organisation for poor people.

It was also *ATD Quart Monde* that would use the term of exclusion in the two following decades and contribute to its spreading in the public debate. Emmanuel Didier emphasizes that exclusion became the central concept for Wresinski's reflections on poverty at the end of the 1970s (Didier 1996, 9-12). The term also reappears in various publications by the association in the 1970s (see, for example, Vos van Steenwijk 1977; ATD 1978). The publications illustrate that *ATD Quart Monde* already used the term long before it became the key term in the French poverty debate. How can its diffusion in the second half of the 1980s be explained? Among others by the fact that during the 1980s, *ATD Quart Monde* had several occasions to spread their ideas on poverty in the public debate, and even to address them directly to political decision-makers. They did this primarily with their poverty reports. In 1982, the French minister for economic planning hired *ATD Quart Monde*'s leader Wresinski to write a poverty report for the government. In the report published one year later under the title *Enrayer la reproduction de la grande pauvreté*, poor people are already called "exclus" (Wresinski 1983). Another institution hired Wresinski for a poverty report in 1985. This time, it was the French Economic and Social Council that hired Wresinski to write it. The idea of *exclusion sociale* can be considered as the central theme of this report, which was published in 1987. "The fight against social exclusion" ("La lutte contre l'exclusion sociale" (Wresinski 1987)) is part of the main recommendations of the report. The adjective 'sociale' already gives a hint to Wresinski's definition of exclusion. The author characterised it as the exclusion from participation in social life. In the report, Wresinski precises that a large number of *ATD Quart Monde*'s clients complained about not having the means to participate in society:

People explained to our staff that they perceived it as one of the biggest injustices that they did not have the means to understand and to participate in the future of the society, that they did not socially exist beyond their families, that they did not contribute to solidarity and social development (ibid.).<sup>13</sup>

He also describes in detail the various levels on which exclusion becomes apparent: In Wresinski's opinion, exclusion manifests itself especially in the fields of work, law, family and education (ibid.). His description illustrates that the definition of exclusion had clearly changed since the first appearance of the term in the 1960s. In the 1980s, exclusion did not characterize the exclusion from economic growth any more, but the lack of participation in society. Furthermore, this perspective on poverty clearly differed from the perspective on the new poverty at the beginning of the decade. New poverty had mainly been discussed as a lack of food, clothes and accommodation. These aspects

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<sup>13</sup> In the original: "Une des plus grandes injustices exprimées à des équipes d'action est de ne pas avoir les moyens de comprendre et de participer à l'avenir de la société, de ne pas exister socialement pour d'autres au-delà du cercle familial, de ne pas apporter une contribution à un développement social plus solidaire."

are still discussed in the debate on exclusion, but they were discussed under a new perspective: the perspective of the consequences of these material needs towards the social participation of the people concerned. The new term therefore illustrates a new perspective on poverty.

The concept of exclusion can neither be reduced to this one definition, nor exclusively be attributed to *ATD Quart Monde*. Serge Paugam reminds us that the concept had been used by so many different actors and in various contexts, that it is impossible to reduce it to one definition or attribute it to one single actor. In fact, different actors started to use the term since the end of the 1980s and especially during the 1990s (Paugam 1996, 8). *ATD Quart Monde* is therefore only one of them – but one of the firsts to use and define the term.

Besides, *ATD Quart Monde* was also one of the actors who spread the term in political debate. When political parties started to talk about exclusion in the second half of the century, we can consider this, among others, as a consequence of the poverty reports by Wresinski who exposed the concept of exclusion to the public – and to political leaders. In any case, the term of exclusion was present in the parliamentary debate since 1985. In the beginning, especially the *Parti socialiste* and the *Parti communiste français* used the new term in the plenary session. As they were also the parties which triggered the poverty debate in that time, it is not a surprise that they were also the first to use the new term. However, every political party in parliament gradually started to use the term of exclusion. “It is not acceptable to see more and more people excluded from French society every day. The exclusion makes them incapable of exercising their fundamental rights”<sup>14</sup> declared the socialist member of parliament, Martine Frachon, in December 1985. She was one of the first to use the term in the *Assemblée Nationale*. At the Socialist party’s conference in Lille 1987, exclusion was also discussed.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Mitterrand used the term in his presidential election campaign, where he presented his propositions to combat poverty under the title “Le refus de l’exclusion” (Mitterrand 1988). However, as the parliamentary debate illustrates, the government parties started to discuss exclusion as well. For example in October 1987, when the communist member of parliament, Muguette Jacquaint, questioned the government about their plans to help the “exclus de la société.”<sup>16</sup> State secretary Adrien Zeller from the UDF admitted in his answer, that he shared Jacquaint’s vision of a “real and difficult

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<sup>14</sup> Martine Frachon, in: JO. Débats parlementaires, AN, 3.12.1985; in the original: “Il n’est pas acceptable de voir chaque jour d’avantage de gens exclus de la société française et, de ce fait, incapables d’exercer leurs droits fondamentaux.”

<sup>15</sup> Marie-Paule Vayssade, in: Parti Socialiste, 10ème Congrès national, Lille, 3,4 et 5 avril 1987 <<http://flipbook.archives-socialistes.fr/index.html?docid=88650&language=fra&tuserid=0>> (Accessed May 2, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Muguette Jacquaint, in: JO. Débats parlementaires, AN, 14.10.1987.

problem of those who are deprived and excluded from society nowadays.”<sup>17</sup> The new Social Services minister Philippe Seguin from the neo-gaullist RPR (*Rassemblement pour la République*) also declared during a parliamentary session that he was worried about the “phénomène d’exclusion.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, he emphasized a priority of his ministry: “la lutte contre l’exclusion.”<sup>19</sup>

The quotations illustrate that the term of new poverty had disappeared, but political parties were still interested in poverty and continued to discuss it even in the second half of the 1980s. Meanwhile, the term of exclusion had replaced the term of new poverty, as well as poverty in general. Of course, the political parties could just have picked up this new term without changing their perspective on poverty. However, the debate shows that this was not the case. A new definition of poverty instead appeared also in the parliamentary debate. For example, at the Socialist party’s conference, a member considered it

essential to remind everybody [...] that poverty is not only a question of social policy, but also a question of society and of human rights, and that poverty is not only a question of social policy, but also a question of society and of human rights, and therefore must be discussed in its cultural and societal implications.<sup>20</sup>

She emphasises that poverty was not only a question of social policy, but also a question of human rights. In the debate on new poverty, nobody had defined poverty as a problem of society and a question of human rights. The quotation therefore illustrates the new perspective on poverty in the debate on exclusion. Other comments in the parliament confirm this, without even using explicitly the term of exclusion. For example, a member of parliament emphasizes the necessity of combating poverty by the words: “The social cohesion of the country is at stake.”<sup>21</sup> Other politicians express the same idea of poverty as a threat to the cohesion of society, when they point out the risk of a “*société duale*”<sup>22</sup> or a “*France duale*.”<sup>23</sup> In their opinion, poverty threatened to divide the society in two parts. Another member of parliament characterizes the existence of poverty as a “risk of the country’s decomposition.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, they all express the same

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<sup>17</sup> Adrien Zeller, in: JO. Débats parlementaires, AN, 14.10.1987; in the original: “problème réel, et bien difficile, de ceux qui sont aujourd’hui démunis et exclus de la société.”

<sup>18</sup> Philippe Seguin, in: JO. Débats parlementaires, AN, 2.11.1987.

<sup>19</sup> Philippe Seguin, in: JO. Débats parlementaires, AN, 3.11.1987.

<sup>20</sup> Marie-Paule Vayssade, in: Parti Socialiste, 10ème Congrès national, Lille, 3,4 et 5 avril 1987; in the original: “essentiel de rappeler à tous [...] que le problème de la pauvreté ne relevait pas seulement de la politique sociale mais était aussi un problème de société et des droits de l’Homme, que la pauvreté se posait en terme d’exclusion et en terme culturel.”

<sup>21</sup> Gisèle Stievenard, in: JO. Débats parlementaires, AN, 2.11.1987; in the original: “Il y va de la cohésion sociale du pays.”

<sup>22</sup> Adrien Zeller, in: JO. Débats parlementaires, AN, 10.10.1988.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Bonhomme, in: JO. Débats parlementaires, AN, 19.11.1986.

<sup>24</sup> Adrien Zeller, in: JO. Débats parlementaires, AN, 4.11.1985; in the original: “risque de décomposition du pays.”

idea of poverty as a potential danger for society and its cohesion. Poverty was no longer considered only a threat to the individual, but also to the whole society.

The semantic change in the debate reveals the evolution of the poverty definition. Mainly two new aspects appear in the definition. Firstly, not only the material needs of poor people were discussed, but also their participation in society. Secondly, poverty was no longer considered as a risk only for the poor themselves, but also discussed as a potential danger for the cohesion of society. All in all, the beginning debate on exclusion in the 1980s introduced the social dimension of poverty to the French poverty debate.

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## 5. The Law on the Minimum Income as a Response to the Debate on Exclusion

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When exclusion penetrated the parliamentary debate in the second half of the 1980s, French poverty policy still consisted in the distribution of food and the provision of emergency accommodations. The *Programme contre la pauvreté et la précarité* had ended in march 1985, but had since then been renewed every following autumn. I have already pointed out that the programme did not provide a permanent answer to the problem discussed as new poverty. It is obvious that it did not provide a coherent response to the phenomenon that was discussed as social exclusion as well and focussed on the lacking participation in society of one section of the population. Seemingly, also the political parties came to this conclusion and started to look for new solutions to poverty. In any case, the new socialist government presented – after the re-election of Mitterrand as president of the Republic and the following parliamentary elections who brought the socialists to power again – a law to combat poverty as one of its first laws.

In justifying this law, the Social Services Minister explained its necessity by the words: “The implementation of new measures against social exclusion is indeed urgent” (Evin 1988).<sup>25</sup> The final version of the law, passed in December 1988, states as the aim of the law: “to eliminate every form of exclusion.”<sup>26</sup> Undoubtedly, the new law can therefore be considered as a reaction to the debate on exclusion. How did the government want to combat exclusion?

The law was called *loi sur le revenu minimum d'insertion* – law on the guaranteed minimum income. It basically introduced the right of a monthly minimum income for all people in need.

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<sup>25</sup> In the original: “La mise en œuvre de nouvelles mesures énergiques contre l'exclusion sociale est en effet urgente.”

<sup>26</sup> Loi n° 88-1088 du 1er décembre 1988 relative au revenu minimum d'insertion. 1988. *JO. Lois et décrets*, december 3; in the original: “supprimer toute forme d'exclusion.”



At that time, such laws already existed in almost all Western European countries. Apart from France, only Spain, Italy, Greece and Portugal had not introduced a minimum income system (Paugam 1999, 13). With the new law, France therefore caught up a delay, compared to its neighbour countries. But the French government also introduced some new elements in the law that I cannot find in any other European minimum law at that time. Just as the other European laws on minimum income, the French law accorded to all poor people – after they had proved their need, the minimum age of 25 years and their regular residence in France – a monthly income of 2000 French franc.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, and in contrast to the other European models, the law also included so called ‘insertion activities’ (*activités d’insertion*). In the previous parliamentary debate, ‘insertion’ had been discussed as the antonym to ‘exclusion.’ The text of the law included training programmes, further education and internships, but also community services as examples for these insertion activities.<sup>28</sup>

Because of these insertion activities, researchers have previously classified the law of 1988 as workfare policies. Especially since the 1990s, several countries had introduced these policies where the benefit payment is linked to the obligation to work (Morel 1996, 43-6). In this perspective, the law from 1988 appears as an imitation of other countries’ poverty policies at the same time. I want to object to this interpretation. With the law on the minimum income, the French government did not imitate other countries’ social policies, but it tried to resolve the problem discussed as exclusion and realized its own way of poverty policy. I will substantiate this claim by pointing out three aspects.

Firstly, the text of the French law clearly states that the individuals should not be forced to carry out a certain kind of activity. Instead, social workers were supposed to propose several types of activities to them and help them choose the one that corresponded best to their capacities.<sup>29</sup> Secondly, the precondition for receiving the minimum income was not the completion of these activities, but the financial need. The individuals received the minimum income when they had given proof of their low income and not when they had carried out any other activities.<sup>30</sup> Thirdly, the law explicitly stated that the insertion activities listed in the text were only examples for possible insertion activities. It emphasized that beyond these examples, social workers could propose as insertion activities all kinds of “measures that intend to help the beneficiaries find or develop their social autonomy.”<sup>31</sup> Consequently, insertion meant a lot more than a simple obligation to work. The French law on minimum income can therefore not be

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<sup>27</sup> Loi relative au minimum d’insertion, article 1-8.

<sup>28</sup> Loi relative au revenu minimum d’insertion, article 37.

<sup>29</sup> Loi relative au revenu minimum d’insertion, article 37.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.; in the original: “actions destinées à aider les bénéficiaires à retrouver ou à développer leur autonomie sociale.”

classified as workfare policy. We can rather diagnose that by this new law, France clearly distinguishes itself from other countries. While many other countries were mainly interested in obligating the beneficiaries to work, France tried to propose activities to them that could potentially help them regain their social autonomy (Leisering, Buhr and Traiser-Diop 2006, 59). Of course, one can question the success of these measures, asking in how far social insertion can be achieved by a law. Obviously we do not want to claim here that the French government successfully resolved the problem of exclusion by this law. But we want to stress that the government made a great effort to resolve the problem of exclusion, which illustrates that the social insertion of the individuals was high on the government's agenda.

This new law to fight exclusion clearly breaks with some principles of the French welfare state. Some researchers have previously emphasised that the minimum income reproduces the logic of French social assistance (Guyennot 1998, 15-8), which is organized in a variety of *minimas sociaux* (Bode 1999, 89-119). However, the minimum income clearly distinguishes itself from these other measures by its universality (Duvoux 2008, 187). Since 1988, the French state guaranteed a monthly minimum income not only to special groups of the population, like old, disabled or invalid people for example, but to all people in need. This universality clearly breaks with the former logics of French social assistance. What is the cause for this new orientation in poverty policy? I propose to explain it by the new communication of poverty risks. As on the one hand, the new law can be considered as a delayed answer to the problem that was discovered as precarity at the beginning of the decade. Precarity had been discussed as the growing poverty risk of a section of the population that, presenting no visible common handicaps, could no longer be clearly identified. The new, universal minimum income was a possibility to reach these people. On the other hand, the insertion activities included in the law can clearly be considered as a reaction to the problem previously discussed as social exclusion. Political parties had discovered the lacking social participation of poor people. Interpreting it as a threat to the cohesion of society, they tried to resolve it by a law on social insertion. The communication of poverty risks even permits us to explain why only France and no other European country regulated social insertion of poor people by law. For only France in the late 1980s had discovered and discussed poverty as a problem of social exclusion. Only in the following years, other countries would discover the concept of exclusion and the ideas linked to it (Kronauer 2010, 40-52). This example illustrates that different ways in communicating a social risk can potentially also explain different ways of evolution of European welfare states.

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## 6. Conclusion

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This article has retraced the French poverty debate in the 1980s. After decades of absence, poverty came back to political agendas in 1984, under the key term of new poverty. The debate came up after a new government had come to power, which introduced radical social and economic reforms, but which was quickly blocked by economic difficulties. Yet it had not been this new government who brought the debate on poverty on the table in the context of its reforms, but the topic was brought up in a bottom-up approach. Two associations, the *Secours catholique* and the *Association des Maires des Grandes Villes de France*, drew attention to the rise of demands in their local agencies, describing the phenomenon as a “nouvelle pauvreté.” Through the activities of these two associations, the poverty question entered public sphere in reports by the media on their declarations. Since October 1984, new poverty was also discussed in parliament again. When describing new poverty, the associations emphasized two main characteristics: its material dimension as well as the fact that now the middle class was also affected by poverty. Even if poverty statistics do not entirely confirm their ideas, the associations discussed new poverty as the problem of the middle class that suddenly fell into poverty. They therefore discussed poverty as a question of insecurity.

In the second half of the 1980s, poverty was still discussed, but under a new key term. “Exclusion” was now at the centre of the poverty debate. Again, it was an association who coined this term. *ATD Quart Monde* had used the expression since the 1960s to draw attention to the social dimensions of poverty. The political parties took up their term as well as their definition of poverty. After they had discussed poverty as a question of material needs at the beginning of the decade, they now focused the consequences of these material needs towards the social participation of the people concerned.

The analysis had therefore revealed that the definition of poverty had considerably changed during the 1980s. Furthermore, it has shown that the poverty policies followed these changes. In autumn 1984, the French government adopted a first anti-poverty programme. For the first time in the decade, the government passed a programme that was explicitly dedicated to combating poverty. Although the programme illustrates that the French government had not accepted poverty as a permanent problem yet, it also shows that poverty had become an issue on the government’s agenda. The programme included traditional measures as food distribution and emergency accommodations. With its focus on food distribution and emergency accommodations, the programme seemed to give a traditional answer to poverty. Yet, the programme was also perfectly adapted to the request of the associations, who had stressed the material needs of their clients and the rising demand of food, clothes and accommodations.

In 1988, the government passed the law on the minimum income, which guaranteed a monthly minimum income to all people in need. The people who received it were also obliged to participate in so called insertion activities. The government had introduced this part of the law not only with the goal to force people to work, but also to help them to regain their social autonomy. This clearly illustrates that, by the new law, the government tried to combat the phenomenon discussed as exclusion in the debate.

The law on the guaranteed minimum income can be considered as the most important decision in poverty policy during the 1980s, and maybe even as its most important turning point since 1945. With this new law, the French state provided for the first time a monthly income to all people in need, beyond categories of age, disability or unemployment. This universality clearly breaks with the former logic of French social assistance. Not only this universality, but also the idea of insertion activities for the beneficiaries was new to the French welfare states. In a European perspective, these insertion activities also distinguish France clearly from the poverty policies of other European Welfare states within the same period.

In social sciences, the concept of path dependence is frequently used to explain the evolution of welfare states (Schmidt and Ostheim 2007, 210-5). Emphasizing that the current evolution of welfare states is still strongly influenced by decisions taken in the past, this concept allows explaining a continuous evolution of welfare states. The evolution of French poverty policy in the 1980s has shown continuity, but also changes. During the 1980s, especially in 1988, the French welfare state left its former path – at least partially. This article has stressed the change in communication of poverty risk as one explanation for this change. It therefore has stated the thesis that different ways in communicating a social risk can potentially explain different ways of evolution of welfare states. For the French case it has demonstrated that the different definitions of poverty discussed in the debate had great influence on poverty policy: poverty policy changed according to the definition of poverty prevailing in the debate.

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