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Solidarity and History.
Institutions and Social Concepts of Solidarity in
19th Century Western Europe

There are some terms which have become such a part of our political language that we can no longer imagine it without them. One such term is “solidarity”. Yet when a new term denotes the social need to express linguistically an important change in the sociopolitical situation, i.e. to mark it as new and to render it open to discussion, then that term’s emergence, as well as its adoption in various ways by various countries with comparable cultural situations, refers to differences in the constellations of power and perceptions governing the discussion. Three significant examples help to illustrate this point in detail below.

I. REVOLUTION AND SOLIDARITY: FRANCE

The term solidarity has its linguistic roots in the legal world, in the category of group liability, whether of an organized group for its members, or of the members for the whole. French legal terminology adopted this category and called it “solidité”. After the Great Revolution broke out, the idea of mutual liability was politicized, gradually becoming the actual term “solidarité”, which was sometimes used colloquially to denote “fraternité” (Schmelter, 1991, p. 9). “Solidarity” thus characterized a new position which was bound profoundly to change the terminological spectrum covering poverty and aid for the poor (cf. Metz, 1985, pp. 1-26) handed down through society to date. For solidarity could be comprehended as cohesion amongst equals, i.e. horizontally, whereas the previously central concepts had been hierarchical, i.e. vertical. Social perception of the poverty-stricken seeking aid was governed more than anything by the terms “charité”, “mendicité”, and “philanthropie”. “Poverty”, i.e. the preservation of existence without resources, guaranteed merely through working day in, day out, was generally taken for granted as the state in which the vast majority of the population found itself. Where it was no longer possible to preserve existence through work, aid-seeking of the poverty-stricken emerged, which for a long time was perceived as being in the area of conflict between “charité” and “mendicité”,

between Church charity and State repression of beggary. Charity, as the mundane reflection of the absolute love of God, denoted the Christian act of loving one’s neighbor as oneself, made permanent through the institution of the Church as beyond the spontaneity of individual giving. A nexus of mercy was in effect here, a giving meaning to God and one’s own spiritual salvation, a giving which expected humility from the recipient and an acknowledgment of the social hierarchy. In the ancien régime, charity was drawn up as a matter for the Catholic Church, its cloisters and, what is more, the pious foundations and hospitals in its administrative charge. The State had an altogether repressive nature, with a legislation which had been becoming increasingly oppressive since the late Middle Ages, directed against a growing number of human beings who provoked the Old Order with their mobility and what seemed to be an unwillingness to work.

The problem, summarized under the general heading of “beggary”, became more acute as the result of an increasing number of human beings leaving the narrow framework of a peasant society and being forced into an existence as casual laborers. Neither Church charity nor State repression was able to have much of an effect here. With the old means, the problem had become insoluble. Philanthropy reacted to this as an active form of benevolence created within the critical, anti-clerical spirit of the Enlightenment. The human being itself became a normative basis, became the sole meaning of the aid. The philanthropy was anthropocentric and therefore pedagogical for, in granting every human being a right to happiness, it comprehends striving towards such happiness as the essence of all individuality; and it demands of aid for the poor that it instruments this striving educationally, namely by ensuring that the goal of self-improvement underlies each instance of help. Philanthropy consciously remained hierarchical, yet now with the intention of revealing inequality in order to provoke calls for equality as a reflex to self-help. Philanthropy did the groundwork for the “fraternity” of the Revolution, and yet the latter, comprehended as “solidarity”, brought something new. The Revolution programmatically overcame the old view of poverty and care of the poor, declaring aid for the poor and the needy to be a civil and human right. This started in September 1790 with the guarantee of State-subsidized minimum wages and a State subsistence guarantee in cases of an inability to work (Forrest, 1981, pp. 28-9), and peaked in March 1793 with the bestowal of a specific civil right to an upkeep for all French citizens in need of aid (ibid., p. 82). Both the Revolutionaries and the masses grasped this as a political redemption of the “fraternité” representing an emotional principle within a relationship, not founded until 1790, to the principles of reason, freedom and equality, which had been part of political terminology before 1790 (cf. “Fraternité” in Larousse, 1866-79). The ancient social context of