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The rediscovery of family solidarity: Backgrounds and concepts?

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For long more specifically employed for the analysis of collective ties at global society level (Bourgeois, 1912; Durkheim, 1902)ⁱ and to an even greater extent for forms of mutual solidarity promoted by the State, sometimes qualified as the *État-providence* (Chevallier, 1992), the concept of ‘*solidarité*’ is frequently employed today to evoke practices of reciprocity and mutual assistance at family and kinship level. This double usage, “micro” and “macro”, is not however without its problems. Should we somewhat unconcernedly employ the term ‘solidarity’ both for what occurs in a family network on the occasion of an exchange of services or the donation of an amount in cash and what occurs when two persons are mutually associated through their affiliation to one and the same pension fund? Can it be considered quite the same form of solidarity when it originates in the private or public sphere and when it originates in the collective or family environment? What are the components of a solidarity behaviour that brings together different dimensions and may cause us to adopt a similar employment of the concept of solidarity that is at one and the same time both familial and national?

One way of answering these questions may consist, as Michel Messu suggests, in simply rejecting the expression “familial solidarity” and taking this to mean nothing more than a delusionⁱⁱ. But it may also be held that recourse to the concept of solidarity both at the level of society, of corporate entities, the family or kinship is freely adopted today to establish a bond between these different levels. If today one speaks so much about the role of familial solidarities, it is undoubtedly because the practices of mutual assistance are held to be one of the very numerous manifestations of contemporary social ties together with forms of solidarity that are said to be collective and/or state-sponsored, capable of responding to contemporary social problems. Use of the expression then becomes a symptom, the manifestation of a contemporary manner of conceiving our societies and the problems with which they are confronted.

In this way, one comes for example to consider, more or less explicitly, that these various forms of solidarity can compensate one another mutually. Consequently, to hold that when one of this form is intensified, the other declines and vice-versa, is but a

single step, often taken particularly in political rhetoric. For this reason, it is sometimes felt that the development of the *État-providence* has contributed to a weakening of the “*strong ties*” of family together with the obligations and norms of mutual aid which it assumed in conventional societies. This in turn called for a strengthening of familial solidarities to compensate for the limitations of collective solidarity. The profile of a “*minimum State*” or a “*weak State*” would render it necessary to develop a “*welfare family*” or “family providence” and vice-versa, that is to say, the development of an *État-providence* or Welfare State would contribute to the undoing of fundamental social ties and the consolidation of individualism and utilitarianism in social relationships. These are some of the implications of familial solidarities.

The contribution of sociologists to this use of the concept of familial solidarity is manifestly central. Many of them have sought to define this concept better, particularly by distinguishing between what appertains to material, instrumental mutual aid (from monetary exchanges to the provision of services capable of being themselves transformed into a monetary equivalent) and what appertains to social ties and inclusion in relational networks (Déchaux, 1994), the former being susceptible to guaranteeing protection and the latter social insertion. This triple economic, domestic and social function of familial solidarities is in itself witness of its complexity. Whereas for some sociologists accessibility is conditional upon the achievement of contacts and social ties of the ‘ego’ with a third party, for others it is necessary to avail oneself of the materiality of reciprocities, the importance and intensity of exchanges and flows.

It is not our intention in this chapter to propose a “substantial” definition of familial solidarity but rather it will be our endeavour to retrace the conditions that have allowed this concept to impose itself little by little whether on the work of experts, on political discourses or in everyday speech, not without giving rise to a number of amalgams, sources of confusion and misunderstandings. We propose to give pride of place to academic usage of the concept of familial solidarity. This entails both an understanding of the context in which this conception has taken root and the discussions or controversies that such academic usage has engendered, constantly interwoven as it is with political and media usages. We are therefore proposing an assessment, necessarily partial, of sociological writings on familial ties together with their consequences in terms of conception of what is entailed in familial solidarities giving rise to the belief that this concept causes us essentially to create a certain number of contemporary public problems. Its inaccuracy then becomes secondary in respect of this function of creating the public problems and solution scenarios which it evokes.

Emergence and apogee of the concept

The issue of familial solidarities in French contemporary sociological research is to be found in the course of two episodes relatively distinct from one another: the first of these goes from the early 60’s to the middle of the 70’s during which the theme of familial solidarity is linked with analysis of ties of kinship, the primary sociality; the second which is more recent covers the period from 1985 to 1995, when the concept of familial solidarity clearly imposed itself not only in terms of sociological research but also in public debate.

This rediscovery of familial solidarities now comes in a very different context from the preceding one: that of the withdrawal or crisis of the “protective” State with its consequences in terms of the risk of exclusion. Sensitivity to the concept of familial solidarity is observable in both its positive and negative effects, so to speak, in the sense

that one will examine the protective role of the family as closely as the devastating effects of the absence of familial social ties on isolated or “disaffiliated” individuals, that is to say, “those lacking in social ties”. Concern for the victims of social exclusion or for those without available familial resources to cope with the difficulties of their existence will serve to centralise to an even greater extent the protective virtues of the family and the assistance that it provides. By means of this, familial solidarity becomes ancillary to the shortcomings of public solidarities, an outer protective circle for the potential benefit of all social entities involved in socio-familial relations.

The kinship network: sociability and mutual assistance

From the early 60’s and up to the end of the 70’s, a certain number of anthropological and sociological researches were devoted to the study of kinship networks or blood ties as a relational and mutual assistance network. The aim therefore was to assess the density of social bonds within the system of kinships and to test the hypotheses of the conceptive contraction of kinship to the nuclear family or household. These studies also purported to ascertain the effects produced through organisation of the kinship system in terms of socialisation and normative production and also in terms of mutual protection.

Anthropologists and ethnologists have never ceased to affirm the pertinence of the “network” concept to comprehend the familial environment or village community relationships. Rather than “family”, they preferred to speak of “kinship” to designate the grouping of individuals united by ties of blood and alliances or “parentèle” so as to include certain “acquaintances” with whom one “feels in close relationship”. The anthropological approach is not restricted to the study of traditional societies. In his work *Sociologie de la famille*, M. Segalen (1993) takes this important trend of research into account for the analysis of kinship networks in contemporary urban societies (chapter 4).

Most of these works on the study of kinship networks contest the thesis formulated by T. Parsons (1955) according to which the industrialisation process has contributed in isolating the conjugal domestic group from its kinship network and in promoting the “nuclear family” model, where the nucleus consists of a conjugal household based upon marriage and composed of the father whose “instrumental” role consists in assuring relations with the outside world, the mother who is entrusted with an “expressive” role within the family nucleus and a small number of childrenⁱⁱⁱ. Without entering here into a systematic analysis of these diverse contributions, one could just take a few significant examples to highlight certain essential points.

As early as 1957, two British researchers put T. Parsons’ hypotheses to the test. In effect, the study of M. Young and P. Willmott (1957) developed on *Bethnal Green*, a working quarter of London, describes the density of familial relations at the level of the urban area in question, the residential proximity, the frequency of encounters and exchanges and the role assumed by relatives in the creation of a friendly network. But these writers stress above all the importance of the mother-daughter relationship, of particular importance in the choice of residence, qualified as “*matrilocale*”. Most of the couples actually live with/near the wife’s relatives so as to enable the maintaining of ties, advice, mutual assistance etc., supported by the mother-daughter relationship. On the occasion of a second study, carried out some years later, these same writers found themselves in a position to evaluate some determinate effects consequent upon renovation of the urban district in question, by examining a section of the population of *Bethnal Green* relocated in *Greenleigh* (Young & Willmott, 1968). Thanks to this it was

possible to note that the physical removal of blood-relationships undermined the mother-daughter relations which was so important in the first study whereas this physical removal of blood-relations had consolidated the conjugal relationship thereby permitting a reduction in the logic of the clear-cut distribution of the roles assumed by the couple (thereby coinciding with the hypothesis of Elizabeth Bott mentioned hereunder). In the urban and more anonymous communities of this type “the status substitutes the relation network” (Segalen, 1993:107) and the nature of the sociability network is profoundly modified, freeing itself of kinship logics or the pressure of “strong ties”.

But on the issue of familial relationships, the theory of family-linked social networks is principally associated with the name of E. Bott (1957)^{iv}. The aim of this researcher is to understand to what extent conjugal relations and distribution of the roles assumed by the couple are connected with or independent of the household’s openness to, or exclusion of, the outside world and wider kinship network. Thus, she has proposed a hypothesis according to which the degree of division of roles assumed by the couple is linked to the density of the network of relations of the married couple outside the household. The more a sociability network has tightened around a familial nucleus and blood-relations with strong interconnections have been intensified by spatial proximity, the more one has to deal with families in which the division and hierarchisation of sexual roles predominate – a circumstance that corresponds rather to the working class model. In such cases a strong mutual social pressure is exercised. On the contrary, a more open, more flexible network, less localised and more diversified, permits a certain normative flexibility and corresponds to more egalitarian roles to be assumed by the couple, a circumstance more characteristic of the middle classes being less centred on kinship. The network will therefore include friends and colleagues. This is however in this work less a question of mutual assistance and solidarity practices than a question of the norm and distance to the roles prescribed by tradition and communitarian adherence.

In France, some studies in the mid 70’s were devoted to this perspective of analysis of the kinship network. They confirmed the permanence of the familial network beyond the strictly conjugal ties and the reduction in the size of households. L. Roussel and O. Bourguignon, in 1976, and C. Gokalp, in 1978, described the structure of this network specifically restricting themselves to relations with the more immediate next of kin (grand-parents, parents, children, brothers and sisters, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law). These studies assessed not only the proximity of residences but also the frequency of encounters notwithstanding the limited number of cases of married children co-residing with their parents, that is to say the density of relations within the blood-relations network. C. Gokalp thus showed that 63% of the persons interviewed during her inquiry were living at a distance of less than 20 kilometres from their parents. In the light of these studies, the French family would appear to be heavily concentrated in very limited areas, with the children seeking to maintain proximity with their parents and, later in life, with their own children, thereby prolonging a sort of “distant closeness” with the remainder of their kin network.

But in France the concept of familial solidarity is primarily linked with the work of Agnès Pitrou. In her research work, A. Pitrou (1977; 1978) went beyond a description of “*familial geography*” so to speak to broach not only the subject of the differential sociability of social classes in an urban environment but also that of the level of reciprocation and familial solidarity. Her study has once again clearly demonstrated the strength of kinship ties, their intensity, frequency etc. but above all the fact that they are vectors of a great number of exchanges of services, goods, counselling and information

^v. Reciprocations however appear to be structured differently according to the social class in which they are performed (between the “*subsistence aid*” in the more popular environments and the “*promotional aid*” among the middle classes), but also according to stages in the life cycle or even the size of communes.

In the light of these results, A. Pitrou stresses the quasi-assurorial role played by relatives in the event of socio-economic difficulties and this all the more in popular environments where there appears to be greater dependence on assistance of this kind. The family plays a role both of daily assistance and protection in cases of “great blows”. Although in the more affluent environments solidarity of this kind may also be operative, it is achieved in a different way. On the one hand, families have a greater number of assets to exchange and, on the other, the aim is to enable the younger generations to accede as quickly as possible to a social condition which is at least equivalent to that of their parents. As against this, mutual assistance would appear to be more diffused, more concealed, less explicit.

In the course of this initial phase which introduces the subject of mutual assistance within the kinship network, the essential points discussed would seem rather to appertain to a theoretical struggle between those who give priority to the kinship and network aspect and those who hold with a micro-sociological conjugal approach, between the defenders of a socio-anthropological reading of kinship relationships in a somewhat holist perspective and those who subscribe to a more individualist perspective of the analysis of strategies and interests within the environment of the family and the couple. There is rarely any question, except in the work of A. Pitrou, of the protective capacity of kinship in respect of the limits of collective protection.

It is noteworthy that, in the 70’s and 80’s, studies on the blood-relationship network were relatively rare and awakened only a feeble echo in France by comparison with the flood of studies and debates on the subject of familial ties from the standpoint of the crisis and weakening of conjugal relationships. Following this brief parenthesis of interest, the subject of familial or kinship solidarities gave place little by little to concern for the crisis or even total collapse of the family and the focusing of attention on conjugal aspects.

Explosion of the subject: the new “kinship regime” and recognition of familial solidarities.

It was however during the end of the 80’s and even more in the course of the 90’s that the subject of familial solidarities really imposed itself both in public and political debate and in the forums of experts and decision-taking assemblies^{vi}.

The family – vector of solidarity: such would clearly appear to be the conclusion of the very numerous research studies which, during the period mentioned, undertook an assessment of the ties of kinship and stressed the role of familial solidarities in respect of economic support, the transfer of goods and symbols, access to accommodation, to ownership or employment, aid in the form of assistance with domestic chores and caring. This trend of research includes the work of J.-H. Déchaux (1988, 1990a and b, 1994) on “solidarités ou l’économie cachée de la parenté” (*solidarities or the concealed economy of kinship*), those of M. Marpsat (1991), R. Dandurand and R. Ouellette (1992), B. Bawin-Legros and J. Kellerhals (1991) on reciprocations and intergenerational solidarities, those of M. Anselme (1988), P. Cuturello (1988), A. Gotman (1988), T. Blöss and F. Godard (1990), C. Bonvalet (1991), Y. Grafmeyer (1993), Bonvalet & Gotman, (1993), on mutual assistance and familial mobilisation in

respect of access to accommodation, those of C. Martin (1992; 1994a; 1997) on sociability and social support following separation or family break-up, or again works that analyse the exchange of services in kinship relations in respect of gifts, indebtedness or other reciprocities (Bloch, Buisson, 1991; Godbout, 1992; Godbout & Charbonneau, 1993).

Similarly it may be noted that the study of reciprocity in kinship relations became, more or less simultaneously, the subject matter of important statistical enquiries both in France, in Belgium, Switzerland and Canada, for the purpose of assessing the intensities and flows. A mobilisation of this kind gives reason to believe that the social requirement of an understanding on the part of the public authorities had by then become more pressing. For France mention should be made of the enquiry carried out by C. Bonvalet, H. Le Bras, D. Maison and L. Charles of INED (national institute of demographic studies) on “relatives and parents” (1993); that of Fougeyrollas-Schwebel & Chabaud, (1993) on familial assistance and relations, in the enquiry entitled “Modes de vie” (*Lifestyles*) undertaken by INSEE and the CNRS, the enquiry by Claudine Attias-Donfut (1995) on familial solidarities among three successive generations. In Switzerland and Belgium similar enquiries were implemented, one by a team from the University of Geneva under the direction of J. Kellerhals (Coenen-Huther, Kellerhals and Von Allmen, 1994), and another by a team from the University of Liège under the direction of B. Bawin-Legros. In Quebec, two research studies were undertaken for a similar purpose, one guided by C. Lebourdais on the familial network and the other by J. Godbout and J. Charbonneau on gifts, exchanges and solidarities in kinship relations. Similar quantitative enquiries are undertaken at the moment in Spain and Portugal.

Clearly, the subject of networks and kinship solidarity again became topical. Thus for example mention may be made of the commentaries of H. Mendras (1988)^{vii} or J.-H. Déchaux (1990a) both of whom stressed the need to renew the examination of kinship in the contemporary period^{viii}. Both advance, each in his own way, the hypothesis of the emergence of a new “regime of kinship”. In the chapter devoted to this subject, H. Mendras insists on the relationship established by ethnologists between the size of the domestic group and the importance of the network; the more the domestic group is reduced, the more extensive the network becomes. This in turn implies a reorganisation of kinship relationship: “a strengthening of the ‘parentèle’ and restriction of the household go together inasmuch as separated dwelling places do not necessarily entail the weakening of family ties”(op. cit.: 243).

This new organisation of relationships in the kinship derives from a phenomenon termed “intimité à distance” (*distant-closeness*) without weakening the intensity or frequency of reciprocations. On the contrary, the author envisages the emergence of a new form of relationship that prioritises solidarity free of daily obligations. Such “distant-closeness” provides an important margin of manoeuvrability for the parties involved, children in particular, who can engage in complex strategies so as to utilise more advantageously these interconnected networks of kinship. This approach however entails a determinate risk: that of reducing the reality of the effective exercise of the relationship to the emerging practices of certain social categories: the educated middle class.

J.-H. Déchaux for his part insists on the logics of reciprocation in these new patterns of kinship. Allying himself with the viewpoints of A. Pitrou, he again distinguishes between, on the one hand the concentration of less affluent families on blood-relations representing a sort of “counter-society” that the parties will always prioritise as against institutional solidarity and, on the other, the “logics of dissimulation of intentions” that

becomes, even outside the middle classes where it prevails, the new model associated with the wish for autonomy. This dissimulation of material interests in reciprocation is based on an important norm whereby parents are solidary with their children and provide them with assistance without any need on the part of these latter to request it at any time. According to the author, this dissimulation is linked to the contradiction between aspiration to a condition of autonomy and the reality of dependence which entails a rationalised discourse on the question of gratuitous reciprocity.

Finally, this same author stresses the importance of ties of filiation when confronted with the vulnerability of couples which is itself linked to the autonomisation of women through the taking up of employment. “Is family lineage becoming the only fixed point of a kinship system in process of segmentation owing to the multiplication of divorces?” (Déchaux, 1990b: 102). Having said this, he is of the opinion that novelty resides here in the fact that the solidarity of blood relations is today freely granted and that it is in process of substituting that of the couple in respect of the provision of protection. The functioning of the couple on the other hand will be increasingly comparable with other spheres of social and professional life: that of permanent negotiation, where nothing is definitively acquired. By comparison with the precarious nature of the conjugal relationship, the place of negotiation, kinship would become the place of permanence. From the traditional concept of the family tree, kinship would be on the way to becoming a network where “it is by now structured more by affinity and personal choice than by genealogy” (ibidem, 1990; 105).

But this return to the theme of the solidarity of kinship goes far beyond the narrow field of the sociology of the family. In effect, on the subject of research into the gerontology and sociology of health, a vast range of literary works also evokes this form of familial solidarity in terms of “social support”^{ix} adopting concepts to be found in Anglo-Saxon literature. What is at stake is the role expected of and/or assumed by families in promoting a condition of health and in regard to care of the elderly. Following a period of pronounced institutionalisation of care, especially for elderly persons, there developed in the course of this period recognition of “familial production of care” (Bungener and Horellou-Lafarge, 1988) or of “non-professional health work” generated within the family circle, more frequently by women (Cresson, 1991), what is known in the Anglo-Saxon world as caring practices.

From the standpoint of social and political demand, the aim of such valorisation of familial solidarities is twofold: on the one hand, it is a matter of reducing the cost of institutional care and on the other, the persons concerned are expected to find in such valorisation of familial solidarity the benefit of maintaining their environment and network. The studies undertaken nevertheless sought to show that the family has probably never ceased to fulfil its central role, supplemented by available public and private services (Lesemann & Chaume, 1989; Lesemann & Martin, 1993). Every appeal to the restitution of familial solidarities thus overlooks the requirement that these should be more stable and permanent than public services and/or formal services for families.

In this way one finds the effective establishing of the connection between the problematisation of kinship as a mutual assistance network and the matter of the withdrawal of State solidarities (Martin, 1995b). This has been underscored by M. Segalen in this way: “The renewal of sociological interest in the ties of kinship derives from the reversal of ideological positions and profound social and demographic changes that have produced an impact on the social body, and notably on its ageing process. Owing to the crisis that has arisen in the *État-providence*, other forms of solidarity, in

particular familial solidarities between the generations have been recognised” (Segalen, 1993: 233).

Private and public solidarity balance to face inequalities and social exclusion

The come-back of the familial solidarity issue in the late 80's was therefore linked to a new context, that of the crisis occurring in the social protection system. Thus, on the occasion of the 1983 *Symposium* entitled “Recherches et familles” (*Researches and families*), under the auspices of the French Presidency of the Republic, which was undoubtedly an indication of renewed interest on the part of political circles in the matter of the family^x, Giovanni Sgritta, greatly in advance of others, foresaw this change of perspective. He therefore wrote: “In the immediate aftermath of the War and up to the end of the 60's, social research tended to reflect the crisis occurring in the institution of the family whereas at present it reflects rather the crisis in a certain social pattern, it is the crisis of the *État-providence*, highlighting at one and the same time the maintaining and the function of the family in the implementation of important social responsibilities” (1983, p. 169). Giovanni Sgritta's hypothesis of an analytical shift from the crisis in the institution of the family towards that of public solidarities has subsequently been largely verified in the sense that this context of the *État-providence* crisis has imposed new categories of reflection on those responsible for the implementation of social policies. Sociability, mutual assistance, relational support and concern on the part of relatives have thus become instrumental in the formulation of public policies.

The example of the provision of care for elderly dependants is clearly one of the sectors where the matters outlined above have become more evident, quite often for the purpose of stressing the extent to which the family, and above all women, continue to be the cornerstone of the support provided^{xi}. Hence one is witnessing a recognition of this “deposit” of “natural” and gratuitous solidarity that is now being flourished as an alternative to the shortcomings and limits of collective solidarities.

The public authorities have since then become aware of the irreplaceable character of this non-monetary economy, this protective capacity on the part of “parents and relatives”. With the crisis of the Welfare State, the policy makers have acknowledged the impossibility of substituting the responsibilities inherent in domestic duties required of women in certain periods of their life-cycle with the development of public and institutional services whether at the level of the care of very young children or again, and to an even greater extent, of elderly dependants. Since the cost for the society would seem less and less bearable, the policy makers recognized and promoted these gratuitous services conceived as a moral obligation whereby certain tasks are assigned to private providers. In consequence of this, “what was until then considered as a residual of past times, destined to disappear gradually thanks to the development of institutional relationships, has reappeared under a new form as a network of basic social relationships that enables individual members of society to remain united and keep for themselves an area of social activities preserved from the market” (Insel, 1993, p. 221).

This function of “natural” and gratuitous support is nevertheless an undertaking that is very unequally distributed among genders. Clearly, this entails a highly important issue concerning the gender division of roles and responsibilities and even the recognition of domestic work as a real work which has to be retributed. A. Chadeau (1992) thus estimated, on the basis of the “time use enquiry” undertaken by INSEE, that the quantity of time devoted to non-remunerated domestic work (preparation of meals, shopping,

washing, ironing, caring for babies, children and adults, household chores etc.) was, in 1985, 25% greater than the time devoted by French society as whole to remunerated employments, allowing for the fact that the greater part of this work was performed by women. Nevertheless, for “anti-utilitarian” academics, this gratuitous work does not cover all the goods exchanged within the household environment and which to a considerable extent are not substitutable (the gift of life, affection, cultural enhancement, traditional gift-giving etc.). By adding this second circle of what might be termed “the gift-circuit” and reciprocations between households (monetary gifts between households through the intermediary of associations, foundations, charitable societies, traditional gift-giving etc.) A. Insel proposed early in the 90’s an initial, “very limited and very approximate assessment of donations in contemporary French society, that is to say a volume amounting to approximately three quarters of GDP (Insel 1993, p. 234). Since then, familial solidarity raises the evermore-complex question of the boundary between paid employment, remunerated or indemnified activities, the services sector, voluntary work and non-remunerated domestic activities (Evers, Pijl, Ungerson, 1994).

Relational vulnerability or the virtues of “close-up protection”

In evaluating the weight of this domestic economy or “close-up protection”, consideration has also been given to what might cause its absence. This is the other side of the rediscovery of familial solidarities; the impact of “life without family”, as A. Pitrou puts it, with the risks that the fact of being excluded from this insertion and primary socialisation pattern engenders, the risk of isolation, solitude and dependence in respect of public solidarities. Ever since the introduction in France of the Revenu Minimum d’Insertion (R.M.I. – *Income Support*) in 1988, the phenomenon of isolation has become a matter of increasing importance. Has it not been stressed on the occasion of the research work and assessments leading up to the R.M.I. that over 70% of beneficiaries were “isolated”, taking into consideration that this implied individuals who were single and without family.

The profound ambiguity of this *omnium gatherum* or cover-all category of “isolated” individuals is evident (Martin, 1993; Kaufmann, 1994). In effect, to say that an adult has not created a partnership or had children does not mean that he or she is isolated, without contacts or sociability. As against this, this percentage would seem sufficiently meaningful to support the following considerations: poverty and insecurity go hand in hand with isolation or solitude. Over and above the number of persons to be designated as “poor”, it was endeavoured to determine the number of “isolated” persons (those living alone) by attempting to establish what the growth of this phenomenon might signify: independence or an assertion of autonomy or, on the contrary, imposed conditions of isolation and instability (Lefaucheur, 1989; Delbes & Gaymu, 1990; Kaufmann, 1994). Although one should not allow oneself to be blinded by this phenomenon of isolation in respect of accommodation, since the pattern of mutual assistance is not just a matter of living together^{xii}, it is undeniable that a certain number of persons living alone are solitary, that is to say, living in a situation of vulnerability.

The “risk of isolation” is linked to the issue that, in the mid-80’s, was termed the “new poverty”, that is to say, a form of poverty affecting persons “ready and fit for employment” but who, following a hitch in their trajectory, find themselves drawn into a situation of precariousness. Among these hitches, one undoubtedly finds first and foremost the loss of employment, but family breakdowns also appear to be a source of “désinsertion” or exclusion. S. Paugam, J-P. Zoyem and J-M Charbonnel have thus highlighted the relationships that clearly exist between unemployment and conjugal

breakdown, insofar as one automatically entails the other thereby bringing about a situation of social exclusion (Paugam et alii, 1993).

R. Castel (1991a; 1995) and C. Martin (1993) even put forward the hypothesis of a “relational vulnerability” by envisaging a “dual form” of the individual’s fragility, corresponding on the one hand to non-insertion or professional exclusion and, on the other, brought about by the loss or absence of sociability and the support provided by the family. Castel also proposes a concept designed to qualify this process: “disaffiliation, a particular way of dissociation of the social ties” (p. 139). His hypothesis is as follows: “First of all, in pre-industrial societies, social interventions always had the aim of attempting to master a double shift, in respect of integration through employment and in relation to insertion in a relational pattern; secondly, the specific nature of the present situation can be understood as a new episode in this struggle against the double instability in the organisation of employment and the structuring of sociability” (ibid: 140). In support of these insertion/integration axes, Castel makes a distinction between four modes of existence in contemporary society: the “integration zone” where permanent employment goes side by side with relational supports; the “vulnerability zone” which associates employment instability with the fragility of social relations; the “assistance zone”, characterised by the absence of employment frequently linked to the impossibility of working and satisfactory social insertion; and, finally, the “disaffiliation zone” where the absence of employment goes hand in hand with isolation. “Today, the integration zone is breaking up, the vulnerability zone is expanding and continually strengthening the disaffiliation zone. Is the sole remedy to this scenario a reinforcement of the assistance zone? (ibid: 152).

R. Castel interprets the fragility of couples, the reduction in the size of families, the relational complexity of new unions, as indicative of the contemporary force of disaffiliation, but also as the result of interventions on the part of the *État-providence*. “The undermining of the family structure may not be due to shortcomings on the part of the *État-providence*. Rather, it might be an effect of its relative success. In warding off a certain number of social risks, the State has left the family face to face with its relational fragility... Consequently, what has been left to the management of the modern family is to an ever greater extent its own relational capital.” (Castel, 1991b: 31).

J.-H. Déchaux is similarly oriented when he proposes to “show that new forms of poverty appeared as a result of the weakening of the social links, whereas traditional poverty, that takes root and proliferates on the outskirts of society, diminishes” (Déchaux, 1990c: 9). Among these new forms of poverty one finds single-parent families that are especially prevalent among poorer households (Martin, 1997). Although it is evident that disunion (the principal cause of single parenthood today) systematically engenders a more or less drastic economic impoverishment of the guardian parents’ household, it nevertheless does not entail conditions of poverty in all cases but merely accelerates the process of destabilisation of already vulnerable individuals^{xiii}. In 1997, little more than 20% of single parent families were considered as living in conditions of poverty (according to OECD) whereas in the United Kingdom nearly 60% of single mothers were classified as poor. In effect, the reason for this condition of poverty resides not so much in the family structure as in whether or not the single mother is in employment, with a full-time job or not. Equally, considerable importance attaches to whether or not the ex-companion contributes to the upkeep of the children and to whether or not assistance is forthcoming from relatives (Martin, 1997). But when these different factors add up negatively the situation of instability becomes extremely delicate.

To sum up, if kinship provides protection against the risks and economic difficulties inherent in contemporary society, it is easy to understand the importance of being integrated in a network of this kind. Whether it is a matter of young persons in search of their first job and who cohabit for an increasingly longer period of time with their parents (Blöss et alii, 1990a and b; Galland, 1990; Bozon & Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1994), couples who separate and avail themselves of the support of their relatives to surmount this critical period (Martin, 1997) or elderly persons who must count on the presence and support of their daughters to cope with their increased dependence (Lesemann & Martin, 1993), it would seem evident that such family protection may be needed throughout all one's life. Without it, the individual has no alternative but to rely in one way or another on public solidarity.

Solidary practices and social classes

Having imposed itself in scientific debate and as a political objective, the issue of familial solidarities raised a certain number of questions. The first concerns social stratification effects and differences in functioning according to social class. What is at stake is important since it is also a question of determining whether or not such primary forms of solidarity succeed in reducing social inequalities and if so, to what extent. But even more fundamentally the question arises as to the bases of such mutual assistance practices. Have they the same meaning for the protagonists according to social classes, or according to age and generation categories, according to the levels and nature of reciprocity and mutual help (whether monetary or otherwise) etc.?

In the light of available works, it appears likely that the expression of relational support and even the feeling of mutual obligation varies considerably according to social status. In more traditional circles (whether among the less affluent categories or at the other extreme the particularly well-off), the duties of solidarity and mutual help within the familial network will tend to predominate. On the other hand however, this obligation, this unconditional assistance, rules out any contravention of the norms currently in force in these background. This 'should-be-so' behaviour sometimes gives rise not only to a feeling of limitation and social control of one's private life but also, on occasion, to a sense of loneliness. This may perhaps be defined as a communitarian functioning with a degree of rigidity in the roles to be assumed (the role of the relatives, of the father, the mother, the brother etc.).

In other backgrounds, culturally more generously endowed, where the networks are more frequently composed of friends and non-family relationships, the forms of solidarity appear to differ distinctly^{xiv}. The rule from which one must not depart is rather that of autonomy. The integration norm is less the unconditional mutual obligation obtaining within the familial network than autonomy within the friendship network. In a situation of this kind, the important thing is to be able to decide for oneself whether or not to assume the obligations of the proposed relationship – an elective involvement, so to speak. One may also take care to ensure the reciprocation of any help and support given, a balance in terms of the exchange of goods and services; if this is not possible, it would inevitably imply dependence on one's network, which is unacceptable. Moreover, autonomy of this kind may be all the more easily advocated in the case of those who benefit from conditions of socio-professional insertion that frequently enables them to look after themselves. Additionally, although the kinship may be less central in the network, it is nevertheless present and very frequently assumes silently a role of unconditional support. One may therefore continue to be partially dependant on one's relatives while still conserving one's autonomy (as regards self-determination). In such

case, it is the distance from the roles or position prescribed by one's status that appears primordial, thereby revealing a desire for emancipation in respect of the conventional definitions of the roles in question.

This gap in the functioning of mutual help results also in differences in the level of help. The more affluent is a social network, the more important is the mutual help (Déchaux, 1994; Martin, 1995b; Paugam et alii, 1997). Those who are better off, with material means, commit themselves more readily than those who have little, whether in respect of material or financial help or for "subsistence" aid, "lending a helping hand" by taking over everyday responsibilities such as caring for the children, etc. (Pitrou, 1978 ; Degenne et alii, 1997; Paugam & Zoyem, 1997).

But assistance is not only an affair of available means. It relates also to differences in the meaning of mutual help. To take into account these differences in terms of practices of mutual help, we have proposed another explanatory mechanism (Martin, 1997): "One more easily support those who are less in need of assistance". In effect, in the perspective of the triple obligation of donation envisaged by Marcel Mauss (give, receive and return), the need involves the risk of dependence. Essentially, help is all the less easily granted by relatives and friends when the need for assistance is greater; this in turn is conditional upon each of the individual protagonist's perception of the autonomy or, alternatively, the risk of dependence on the part of the beneficiary. When support is synonymous with the development of a state of dependency, it tends to dissuade both giver and beneficiary since, on the one hand, there is a risk of not having any form of reciprocation and, on the other, of undergoing an excessively onerous social and relational disqualification^{xv}.

To appreciate the meanings and basis of mutual help or private solidarity, it would appear opportune to take into account the logics of reciprocal exchanges, inasmuch as these are themselves dependent on social classes and the types of network involved. Doubtless one finds in such cases the distinctions put forward by Agnès Pitrou (1978) that oppose on the one hand the centralising on the part of the less affluent classes on blood-relations and, on the other, the friendship networks and the promotional logics of familial solidarities among the middle classes. In recognising an increasingly important role for these informal types of support and in considering them capable of compensating for the limitations of collective solidarity, the public authorities refuse to take into account the very considerable divergences from the norm and make of the family a value in itself.

Conclusion

Although sociology has greatly contributed in popularising usage of the familial solidarity concept, it has not always done so in the same perspective nor has it always had recourse to the same concepts. The kinship network, the primary form of sociability, social support, social care, domestic work, the distribution of the roles between gender, are but some of the concepts entailed in this evaluation. The theoretical stakes have also evolved, that is to say, from the controversy taking place between those academic researchers who favour the anthropological approach of kinship and those centred upon the conjugal dimension, and that which has by now concentrated debate upon the balance to be attained between private and public forms of solidarity. So, we are not facing only a theoretical matter for the discipline that sociology constitutes, in the sense that this issue is becoming to an ever greater extent a political card to be played in the controversy that opposes a number of ideological trends regarding the future and forms of collective protection.

To be convinced of this, it will in effect suffice to examine the public and political debate more closely. The “family question” has today made its appearance both in France and in European public debate under the form of a certain number of issues including solidarities, familial responsibilities and/or obligations in association with questions such as poverty, insecurity, delinquency and incivility. The role of the family in respect of the protection of vulnerable individuals, whether it is a question of children, adolescents, young adults, those who have difficulties in respect of social integration or remaining in employment, chronically ill persons, the handicapped, elderly dependants etc., appears increasingly more centralised in the context of the reduction of public expenditures and the consolidation of social inequalities. Insertion in familial networks appears to an ever-greater extent to be a means whereby to ensure “social cohesion” and the avoidance of “social fracture”.

This central question is accepted as problematic on the basis of the following argumentation: on the one hand, nations would become subject to the need to control their public expenditures because of the elements of international competition and the globalisation of economic exchanges thereby leaving an ever-smaller margin of manoeuvre in the drawing up of policies which are by definition costly. On the other hand they would undergo rapid transformation as regards familial behaviours with a falling off in fecundity, the ageing of the population, the disruption of stages in the life cycle, the weakening of family ties or even obligations and solidarities of which it was once the vector. In consequence, these elements represent what is primarily at stake and the arguments advanced in discussion on the future of social protection systems.

In this way, the “familial question” would appear to be a component of the social question and occupies an increasingly important place in commentary on the crisis and evolution of social protection systems. It is no longer a matter of a sectorial question that could be reduced to an analysis of the policies relating to family or to what the State and social partners conceive for the support and protection of families, but rather of a more far-reaching question – that of allocations between private and public protections, that of the respective roles of the State, territorial communities, the services sector, the market and the family in respect of the protection of individuals and their trajectories.

For purposes of simplification, one may contrast two currents of opinion on this “familial question” as formulated here. The first considers that demographic and familial disruptions are largely the result of the development of the *État-providence* itself that, by substituting itself for the familial institution, has deprived it of its functions, thereby giving rise to an unruly and devastating individualism, but also to a de-responsibilising of citizens and their dependence on the State (Murray, 1984). The solution would therefore consist in shifting this trend in an other direction by returning to “initial values” and restoring the obligations and responsibilities within the primary networks of family relationships. This strategy therefore consists in handing back the responsibility for the solution of a certain number of problems to private networks and in not envisaging anything as an alternative solution. The State would thus rid itself in some way of familial solidarities. A strategic, less radical alternative would consist in the observation of familial obligations.

The second current of opinion considers on the contrary that the development of the *État-providence* and services rendered to families has only completed and restored balance to functions that had been very unequally fulfilled by the primary groups without ever having fully taken over such functions. In short, familial solidarities would continue to perform their role in conjunction with collective protection systems, and this inasmuch as the aim today is to assist the provision of aid on the part of the closer kinship networks

so as to enable them to discharge their responsibilities rather than to shoulder them anew with such obligations. In this perspective, such complementarity must be maintained at all costs so as to avoid social regression, the undermining of private solidarities or the disintegration of social ties. Two scenarios are however still possible according to whether one prioritises the development of professional services or, on the contrary, seeks to provide monetary support for the members of a family that finds itself in need of assistance.

As one sees, it is particularly difficult to claim that one has put the concept of familial solidarity to good sociological use in this context. It would be better therefore to admit that it constitutes a pertinent category to analyse public action, a manner in which to name and give meaning to mutual assistance practices within and between households, practices that, it so happens, have never ceased to exist.

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ⁱ. According to the Littré of 1877, cited by L. Bourgeois, definition of the term "*solidarité*" in everyday speech implies "mutual responsibility established between two or more persons". For Léon Bourgeois, there exists a universal law of solidarity founded on the interdependence of the human species and causing them to associate on the basis of a quasi-contract: "Each and every living person bears a debt towards every human being because of, and proportionate to, the services rendered him by the efforts of all. This exchange of services is the substance of the quasi-contract of association that links all mankind and the legitimate aim of social law is the equitable assessment of the services thus reciprocally rendered, that is to say the equitable sharing of profits and costs, social assets and liabilities. (Bourgeois 1998: 49).

ⁱⁱ. "Certainly, it is not in all these descriptions of the manner in which care, mutual aid, assistance, transmission can be put into practice... in short, in its various implementations at familial level, that the essence of familial solidarity can be found. Here, the concept of solidarity adds nothing to the concept of family"... "Hence the theoretical interest in distinguishing between 'social solidarity' and 'familial solidarities'." (Messu, 2000: 126-127).

ⁱⁱⁱ. For a critical analysis of T. Parsons' theses, reference may be made to the work of Andrée Michel (1972)..

^{iv}. One can again cite the works of M.B. Sussman (1953) and those of Burchinal and Sussman (1962).

^v. This mutual assistance is not only financial but involves as well the preparation of meals, household chores, DIY, the manufacture of children's clothing and above all child-minding

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- vi. It is noteworthy moreover that the work of A. Pitrou *Vivre sans famille* (Life without family) was re-edited in 1992 under the title: *Les solidarités familiales* (Familial solidarities). This is not a mere statement of fact since it is indicative of transition to this second phase. Ten years after the first edition of her work, Agnès Pitrou insisted above all on the reciprocal effects of these familial mutual assistance systems with social policies but also on the need for a better understanding of the impact of the precarious nature of conjugal ties on familial solidarity of this kind. “Is it possible to have solidarity based upon ephemeral and increasingly complex ties in cases where they unite a couple with children born of successive unions?” (Pitrou, 1987: 209).
- vii. Particularly Chapter XIII of the fourth part entitled “La force de la parenté” (*The force of kinship*), pp. 234-252.
- viii. Research carried out in Quebec at the end of the 80’s should be included in this same perspective inasmuch as it makes a comparison between workers sociability at the beginning of the 60’s and that of the 80’s (Fortin et alii, 1987). This research undertaking once again confirms, irrespective of the period in which they occur, the density of kinship relations that even polarises all sociability in the less affluent classes; geographical proximity which gives rise to numerous forms of reciprocation; the widening gap between the domestic sphere traditionally the competence of the woman and the professional sphere largely the competence of men, the strength of mother-daughter ties and mutual assistance given by mothers in everyday life (the care of children, household chores, domestic assistance etc.). These authors stress certain points already commented upon: the quasi-disappearance of inter-generational cohabitation, substituted by “localised ties of kinship”; the gradual diversification of the social ties as it ascends the social ladder; the materialisation among the middle classes of a “companionship” status which is more widely based on friends and colleagues than on the family (which is more easily abandoned) and which also entails a more egalitarian conception of the relationship in the couple.
- ix. Under its gerontological aspect, cf. the works of Favrot (1987); Frossard & coll. (1988); and Grand (1989) or those who studied the impact of social and familial support on the promotion of physical or mental health (Le Désert, 1985; Berkman, 1987; Cresson, 1991).
- x. This symposium followed the major turn of the French political life, with the election of François Mitterrand, who ask for a global assessment of the social sciences to Maurice Godelier and then express the interest of the left wing government for the family issues by organizing this symposium.
- xi. For French-language publications see: Grand et alii, 1989; Lesemann & Martin, 1993; Martin, 1995a; Joël & Martin, 1998.
- xii. H. Le Bras has criticised the overall picture given by households statistics. “*If households are considered in the usual way, they give an impression of isolation. The households of single persons or of couples account for more than half the total and isolated individuals a quarter of this. On the contrary, if one refers to the individual, one gets the impression of a gregarious society, fewer than one person out of ten lives in isolation, while half of the individuals are to be found in households composed of at least four persons*” (Le Bras, 1988: 29). What is important is not so much the proportion of persons who live alone as the degree of reciprocation taking place between non-cohabitants: “*Very frequently, members of a family in a wider sense live separately but in proximity and meet one another frequently or even share meals or expenditures. There is greater flexibility between family and accommodation*” (Le Bras, 1988: 29).
- xiii. This hypothesis of a form of relational vulnerability must not however dispense us from an evaluation of the terms of solitude and isolation; terms that one rightly associates with single-parent situations (notably in consequence of the creation of the single-parent benefit “allocation de parent isolé”). In effect, for some the fact of living in a single-parent situation does not automatically means social isolation. Such persons may have chosen to remain in this situation without however seeking to be cut off from their families, from their ex-spouse or companion and his or her relatives and/or from a close network of friends and colleagues. For others on the contrary, the same situation may engender a profound feeling of loneliness resulting in failure in the individual’s attempts to embark upon a new life. A person surrounded by relatives and friends may nevertheless feel lonely and, reciprocally, someone who is apparently isolated may not be in any way affected by his or her solitude. Everything depends upon the importance accorded the matter and the idea that each individual has of his or her own network, family life, conjugal condition etc (Martin, 1997).
- xiv. The structure of the sociability and mutual assistance networks is closely linked with the social status (Héran, 1988; Bonvalet, Le Bras, Maison & Charles, 1993).
- xv. As stressed by A. Petitat: “*A gift that cannot be reciprocated implies for the recipient that he is not worthy of it and is not qualified to enter with dignity into a relationship of reciprocity*” (Petitat, 1991: 55).