



Three Decades of Social Work in France: from Security within the Welfare State to a State of «Disembedded Modernity»

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1 Two decades of social work in France: from security within the Welfare State to a state of «disembedded modernity»

Over the past three decades a great deal of controversy, debate and uncertainty has developed about the status of social work in French society and about the need to redefine its fundamental aims. In this article, I will attempt to describe some of the main trends and to elucidate some of the historical reasons for this state of self-doubt among social work professionals and for the criticisms they have faced from representatives of the public authorities over the past two decades. These are due, in part, to changes specific to the French context where social work has evolved from a mainly generic role governed by the central state to a mainly project based, needs led activity controlled by decentralised public bodies and non governmental agencies. On a broader level, I will also suggest that changes and self questioning in social work are symptoms of a form of “disembedded modernity” as analysed by contemporary sociologists such as Anthony Giddens, whose analyses correspond in some ways to those of some contemporary French sociologists influential in the world of social work.

The sources for defining social work functions used for this article are a comprehensive reading of the quite numerous reports by government agencies, think tanks and professional associations produced over the past twenty years (Durrleman 1993, Lorthiois 2000, Pinaud 1993, CSTS 2004). I shall also draw on my own, inevitably biased, observations as a social work teacher involved in coursework, placement programs over the past fifteen years in the Paris region and as a member of the government consultative commission for the reform of one of the social work diplomas (*the Diplôme d'Etat d'Assistant de service social*). Much of the comment on social work during this period has been produced by writers in sociology departments of universities or research units, such as Robert Castel, Michel Autès and Michel Chauvière (2000, 1999, 1980). The voice of sociology has been one of the main sources of reflection on the nature of social work and its missions during this period, both in the professions and in centres of decision-making. The analyses offered here are also in large part inspired by studies and comments carried out by these writers, although I shall argue that they neglect the role of social workers themselves in producing a theoretical framework for defining their tasks. Indeed, that French social workers seem to have lacked a voice in the matter of defining their role is perhaps one of the symptoms of the identity crisis which seems to characterise the current position of social work in the French environment.

2 An increasingly complex system of recognition leading to a social work “identity crisis”

Perhaps the most striking feature of the French system today is the complexity of the social work professions themselves. A total of thirty-seven different diplomas have been created with a confusing array of titles, which make it difficult to carry out a full statistical survey.

Taking all these professionals as a whole, according to the Ministry statistical unit (SESI), in January 1998 a total of 800 000 professionals were working as “social workers”. The largest single body of these was made up child minders (380 000) who are considered as qualified “social workers” working within a professional contract since a law in 1992 defined their status. Others include various groups of “educators” (“moniteurs éducateurs”, “moniteur d’atelier”), care workers (aides médico-psychologique, auxilliaire de vie), domestic helpers (“technicien d’intervention sociale et familiale”) and mediators (“médiateur familial”).

The five core professional groups each of whose qualification is classified as an “intermediate profession” at level three of the professional nomenclature, also known as the “canonical” professions, have similar functions to the British “Social Worker” and can be recruited on the same salary scale within the French public service. These comprise (DREES 2000):

- 38 000 Social assistants (*Assistant de service social*). Mainly a feminine profession (97% are women), about half of these are state employed, the other half being employed by the state funded voluntary sector or for a small minority the “humanitarian” non-governmental organisations without state funding. Their role is close to that of generic caseworkers including work on access to rights, family intervention, long-term help to excluded populations living in the community such as the mentally ill, handicapped or elderly.
- 55 000 «specialised educators» (*éducatrices spécialisées*). Their role is largely concerned with residential social work in all its forms and with outreach family work with delinquent children.
- 7 000 Family economy guidance counsellors (*Conseillers en économie sociale et familiale*). Their role is similar to the Assistant social but more specialised in family issues, debt management and self-help.
- 9 000 Educators for young children (*Educatrices de jeunes enfants*), whose role is to contribute to all forms of professional child care from birth to seven years old.
- 37 000 Community, youth and cultural workers, (*Animateurs socio-culturels*), involved in youth work and local community work including cultural and artistic activities they are often found in positions of responsibility in local Community Centres.

Social work qualifications are no longer limited to these well-recognised diplomas. A multitude of training programs now exist, each with a different form of certification. Alongside the “traditional” professions thirty two other diplomas have been created over the past decades, all of which have claims to intervene in social action but not necessarily as “social workers” – the term itself being controversial, each profession claiming a specific professional identify as “social mediator”, social “educator”, “counsellor”, etc. Current professional titles range from the diploma of “Auxilliaire de Vie” – Life auxiliary helper at

level five, the lowest level of national recognition, to the “Certificat d’Aptitude à la Direction d’Etablissement Social” (CAFDES), Directeur of a social institution, at level one (DREES 2000).

Reforms in progress of the «traditional diplomas» which must now replace their academically orientated knowledge based programs with «vocational referential of competency». The most recent reform of this nature concerns the social service assistants was voted by the relevant national professional committee in 2003 and is now entering into application (Journal officiel 2004).

With the reform of the national qualification procedures and the move towards validation of life experience decided by law in 2002 and the adoption of the competency approach in practically all fields of social work qualification, many of these «subsidiary» diplomas will be encouraged to dovetail with the five traditional diplomas.

At the beginning of the nineteen nineties, many training centres entered into partnerships with universities in a move to promote the status of the professions, perceived as «de-qualified». Since then the universities have created «professional BAs» («licences professionnelles»). Many new qualification procedures have appeared. The dividing line between university training and professional training has practically disappeared and the labour market for social workers with or without university diplomas is more open and more varied from one department to another. The focus of debate is no longer between universities and professions, but between rival definitions of the role of social work within an even broader knowledge base than that provided by the already «interdisciplinary» models of the nineteen eighties. Now, instead of learning about sociology, psychology and social psychology - the three mainstays of most training centres until the middle of the nineteen nineties, students are expected to develop communication, advocacy, legal and contractually based negotiation skills. They learn «strategic thinking» and are invited to carry out a neighbourhood profile analysis for urban development projects.

Another way of classifying social workers is to look at their status as employees. Here again, in recent times, the main trend has been towards a more complex and confusing set of possibilities.

Approximately half the generic social caseworkers (assistants sociaux) work as State employees in local agencies created and directly run by the State (ministry of social affairs) since 1958 and «decentralised» in 1986 (in French their agency is entitled «la polyvalence de secteur» and they number approximately 20 000 agents in 2003). Child protection social workers involved in prevention and placement of children at risk or in danger, also directly dependant on the state within the terms of legislation dating from 1958, now administered by a local authority with state regulated mandatory tasks (Brisset 2004). The judicial apparatus has its own Social educators involved in residential and preventive work with delinquent children who are still employed by the central state (ministry of justice) under the term judicial protection of youth (*Protection Judiciaire de la Justice*) (approximately 3500 social work posts today). To add to the opacity of the system, probation officers and counsellors working inside prison, also directed by the Ministry of Justice, form a separate body of social workers entirely independent of the judicial educators of young people.

While all these different kinds of social workers remain civil servants, their status has undergone a number of reforms. Where there were previously basically two grading systems

for employee rights there are now at least four within the state system, added to which the local councils employ more and more social workers on a contractual basis.

In the private voluntary sector, social workers can be found in a great variety of residential day care settings, units for handicapped children or adults, family placement, prevention of delinquency schemes or preventive probation type work with families. While their employee status is often controlled by nation wide salary agreements, employers can often decide not to opt from these agreements or to use them in more imaginative ways in order to afford opportunities for promotion or for rationalisation.

As we have seen social work qualifications have become increasingly orientated towards specific functions and their level of recognition has become more and more diversified. Parallel to this the salary and career development scale offers more possibilities for promotion but also much more flexibility for employers who wish to change their work structure. Some professional groups have reacted by reaffirming their specific professional identity others by trying to adapt to the changing scene. Both reactions have also to lead to doubts about the role of social work and to a feeling that it is undervalued and under defined. In short, a crisis of identity for reasons similar to those described by Giddens in the world where self identity is closely tied to personal identity (Giddens 1991).

3 Decentralisation of the state and new demands on social worker lead to a more politicised definition of its tasks

Another striking feature of French social work is its still very heavy dependence on state funding and management contrasted with a very confusing and constantly changing set of rules and procedures for carrying out its missions. This extends also to much of the voluntary sector which depends largely on state finance and carries out state defined mandates. The decentralisation laws brought through in the nineteen eighties and recently renewed gave the main powers for social action to the “département” level of local government. While these local authorities acquired a great deal of independency through these measures, they remain closely tied to central state powers both for financing and for the definition of the various missions and mandates they now carry out.

In order to understand the effects of decentralisation, we need to go back a little further in history. During the post Second World War period social action became heavily dependant upon the state which gradually built a very full legal framework, offered direct and indirect funding as well as an ideological base in republican values for social action. Among these values the ideal of an equal distribution of services to all parts of the territory and those linking social help to promotion of a work spirit and of family values remain central to much discourse about the role of social work.

After the Second World War, the liberation government founded an original form of welfare state. The system is a compromise between English and Bismarck inspired systems, based on the one hand on state funded well-being «from the cradle and the grave» and on the other, on an insurance based form of social protection. As in the English system, «universal» rights for citizens and for families were engraved in the French Constitution of 1948, including the right to work, to live together in a family and to have a roof over one's head. However, the finances (not necessarily sufficient to guarantee all of these rights...) were organised on a compulsory insurance basis, similar to the German model, involving independent funding bodies administered by a tripartite committee composed of civil servants, representatives of employers and trade unions. During the nineteen fifties, most social work organisations were

progressively integrated into the complex realm of state service. The central state thus redefined social work as a form of supplementary help to those not covered by the compulsory insurance system or needing extra services.

The culminating point of social work development during the «thirty glorious years» of economic growth (over 6% increase in Gross Domestic Product per year until 1974) and state welfare is observed in 1975 with the enactment of two major laws focussing on people with handicaps and offering an exhaustive set of rules and regulations governing all related institutions (Journal Officiel 1975). A minimum revenue is guaranteed to the latter and all medical and social institutions must conform to standards and procedures defined, controlled and inspected by central state authorities.

The economic crisis and the arrival of a socialist government in 1981 contribute to the realisation that the welfare state and social work within it is subject to limits. The beginning of this period is also marked by public campaigns in favour of the «new poor». Ferociously independent voluntary organisations such as «Médecins sans frontière», «Emmaus», «The restaurants of the heart» came to the fore and demanded help for the rising number of poor people whom they claim were neglected by traditional welfare services.

The move to decentralisation was presented by the government as a means for more democracy, better coordination of local services, more sensitivity to local demands and less bureaucracy. The welfare state and social workers within it should become manageable and accountable.

Four previous attempts had been made to «decentralise» the French state before the arrival of a socialist government in 1981. They failed because of resistance from local politicians who were meant to put it into action and because of the strong tradition in favour of a central unifying power that existed long before the French revolution and reinforced by Napoleon Bonaparte (Verpeaux 1993). The new socialist government's policy therefore needed much negotiation with the already existing but weak local authorities, but became politically acceptable within a context of economic and political change.

When their newly acquired powers were transferred local authorities obtained several guarantees relating to their means of action and status:

- Each geographical entity of power was maintained and reinforced. Unlike other European countries France has four, not three, levels of local authority: towns, departments, regions and the central state.
- The new powers transferred to local authorities were to be accompanied by state financing. No substantial reform of the local tax system has taken place since – consequently, the local authority is not really an independent economic unit.
- No hierarchy was established from one level of authority to another, in other words, neither the central state, nor the region can «instruct» the department or the town to carry out a policy within its own field of action. Each level of authority has its own prerogatives (Dessaint and Thévenet 2004).

The countrywide civil servant status was maintained. A civil servant recruited for example, in the town of Lyon is entitled to the same job status and pay when he decides to move to

Marseille. Thus social workers opting for civil servant status continue to benefit from job security and unrestricted mobility in exchange for relatively low pay.

The French «decentralised» local state authorities are therefore still dependant on the central state for recruitment procedures and for about half of their sources of finance. They must also conform to a great number of legal obligations decided by parliament and administered by the central state executive authorities. Nevertheless, decentralisation represents a major change in all fields of social intervention.

Within this context by 1986, all major social action programmes, including child protection, generic social work, services for the mentally and physically handicapped, residential services for all age groups and poverty programs, were transferred from the central state to the Departments (also called General Councils -Conseils Généraux). Only psychiatric services, prison and juvenile delinquency provision and hospitals remained directly administrated by the central state.

Decentralisation had many effects on the role of the state in social work. According to one eminent sociologist, Jacques Donzelot (Donzelot and Estèbe 1994), top down administration has been replaced by various forms of participatory management. In many cases temporary funding for project work has replaced government funded services delivered on a permanent basis. The demand for cost efficiency and ongoing evaluation of social work practice has increased, despite resistance from traditional sectors such as generic social workers who claim that human services cannot be evaluated according to the rules of a market economy.

A further consequence of decentralisation was more frequent contact between social workers and elected politicians. Under the decentralisation laws the “département” is both an administrative and an elected body. The traditional dividing line between executive and legislative powers is blurred at the local level. When an elected politician sees one of his electors for a problem such as housing, he can now contact the field social worker about it, or even give instructions over the head of line management. Middle management workers experience problems controlling the narrow frontier between political imperatives and service-based objectives.

According to Brigitte Bouquet, a renowned social work researcher (also a sociologist) who occupies the only existing university chair of social work within the French higher education system, the philosophy of decentralisation and its effects on social work can be summarised as follows (Bouquet 1991):

	<i>Before decentralisation</i>	<i>Since decentralisation</i>
<i>Context</i>	Multiplication of numbers of services	Saturation
<i>How innovations take place</i>	By creation of new services	By creation of links between services
<i>Initiator of innovations</i>	Central state authority	Actors in the field
<i>Mode of institutionnalisation</i>	By governmental decree	By empirical testing

<i>Goals</i>	Coherence	Interaction
<i>Relationship to the centre</i>	Linked	Un linked
<i>Type of necessity</i>	Consciously thought out (rational planning)	Based on experience
<i>Dynamics</i>	A state of affaires	An ongoing process

Since decentralisation, social action budgets have progressively increased both in absolute terms and as a proportion of local authority budgets. Many Departments are currently in deficit because of the exponentially rising costs of social welfare. It would therefore be a simplification to conclude that the process of decentralisation is a form of disengagement by the (local) state authorities. However, we can see from Donzelot and Bouquet's analyses that the central state is no longer the principal agent in social policy delivery; its role is no longer that of responding to need. Local authorities now promote demand led projects in a tight economic environment. They no longer administer services solely on the basis of perceived need. We no longer have a monolithic state but a complex set of state organisations composed of various political, technical and administrative units. Rather than speaking of «disengagement» of the state we prefer the term «differentiation».

Perhaps the most important consequence of this move towards decentralisation is the fact that policy decisions can no longer be made on purely technical grounds. The state became decentralised leading to closer contact between social workers and elected politicians and a less stable institutional environment (Journal Officiel 1982, 1985, 1993, 2005). Social workers have been made to realise that they are accountable to political decision makers. And local politicians have been led to redefine social problems as political ones.

From the author's point of view, "traditional" social work paradoxically has also been considerably reinforced in many of its principles and original tasks by this process of decentralisation. The five main professions continue to increase in numbers and their training programs are overwhelmed with increasing numbers of students. The effects of decentralisation, far from destroying the ethics and techniques of social work, have indirectly strengthened it by obliging social workers to explain and account for their actions.

4 Towards a new focus

Within this context of increasing diversification and complexity of the political demands made on social workers two main themes emerged as priorities: insertion programs and urban development.

The new social work role as an agent of «insertion»

With the realisation of growing numbers of the poor, the second socialist administration which came into power in 1988 carried out its electoral promise of creating a minimum income, the «revenu minimum d'insertion» (RMI). For readers not familiar with the system, let us mention the two main points that contribute to the originality of the French approach:

- Monetary benefit is conditioned by efforts on the part of the individual towards «insertion». This term was defined in contractual terms as mutual engagement by the

social work authority and the person living in poverty to find means for a return to «life in society», mainly via work. The definition of the concept of «insertion» was enlarged in 1992 to include efforts by the service user towards better health, lodgings, personal accomplishment and training. But work is still the main objective and the current government plans to replace the minimum income for insertion by a minimum income for «activity» (work with low or no pay).

- The administrative process of obtaining benefit and helping beneficiaries is no longer automatic but involves several layers of decision making.

The Departments are obliged by the 1992 law to make an annual plan defining their priorities and budgets aimed at insertion. Within the new decentralised state organisation, the monetary benefit remained the responsibility of the central state while the insertion projects were run by the department. Procedures for access to services involve commissions.

Social workers' roles are no longer targeted to the needs of the «family» across the whole population, but towards the demands of individuals belonging to the ever growing population living in poverty (*National Observatory on Poverty and Social Exclusion* 2004). Social workers play an increasing role in the labour market as gatekeepers to training systems and offer individualised personal support to the poor unemployed via return to work programs, under the heading «insertion» (Brevan 2004). For field social workers this new disposition operated a mini-revolution both in terms of practice with the introduction of institutionalised contracts and in terms of social workers' freedom of action. The "RMI" package came with increasing controls on procedures and results. Social workers were no longer independent advocates for clients claiming benefits. They became administrative gatekeepers both to the monetary benefit and to the means for realising each individual «insertion» project. Furthermore, social workers are now obliged to measure the results of their work by proving how many people have been «re-inserted» into work-like occupations and to explain and justify the contracts they prepare. These contracts have to be approved and signed by their political and administrative masters, the Department.

Another complication is furnished by the development of numerous voluntary agencies offering training programs for return to work to an increasingly heterogeneous population of unemployed people. Training schemes may or may not be defined as «social work» and belong to various different agencies within the new complex state. They can be run at the level of the town (youth employment missions), the department (minimum revenue insertion projects) the unemployment agency (for the unemployed receiving mandatory benefits) or even the labour inspection authority (whose principal role is to control employers and employees within protective labour law). The current government plans to streamline this confusing array of reinsertion programs within the new decentralisation laws that were voted this year and await application.

When the RMI law was introduced it met much resistance on the part of social workers opposed to the new social work role and to the management procedures that accompany it. The procedures were not applied to the letter. Some departments, such as the poor Seine St Denis area in the inner suburbs of Paris, still have a low rate of «insertion projects» compared to their high rate of benefit receivers. The present government's project of transferring both the monetary benefit and the social work component to the department within new decentralisation laws is designed to give all powers in this field to a single

authority. This project will probably generate even more disparities between different geographical areas and perhaps more resistance on the part of social workers.

The introduction of the RMI laws paved the way for other similar contractual procedures, such as those introduced by the law relating to cities (*Loi d'orientation sur la ville*) and the Besson Act, named after the minister who proposed it, both of which introduce new forms of benefit (monetary help to avoid being evicted from housing for example) conditioned by contractual procedures administered directly by social workers. Faced with these increasingly individualised complex procedures social workers have held many debates about such subjects as: the meaning of individual project work, how to formulate objectives that can be empirically tested, psychological paradigms for helping people to increase their «self esteem» or «self identity». Traditional theory about the helping relationship based on psychodynamic and psychoanalytical frameworks has not kept pace with the increasing complexity of means tested benefits or with the increasing managerial demands that came with them.

Urban development policy: an alternative world view

Urban redevelopment has regularly been presented as a «new» policy designed to respond to riots and various forms of gratuitous violence in urban priority areas (much public emotion has been called upon by the media about events varying, on the one extreme from incidents of gang rape, to on the other hand, spitting in schools) and to «re-qualify» depressed urban zones by developing pride, reducing stigmatisation and facilitating solidarity between citizens of these zones. The long history of these programs is one of waves of enthusiasm followed by long periods of inaction and public criticism.

These schemes encounter several obstacles specific to the French scene:

Zones for redevelopment are identified independently from the state decentralisation process. Zoning crosses political and administrative borders. The boundaries are decreed by an inter-ministerial central state authority and not by the local state. The new local authorities are therefore often confronted with rival interlocking prerogatives of different political powers intervening on the same redevelopment zone. For example, the «greater urban projects» (Grand projet urbain, GPUs) was a procedure designed to redevelop a large urban zone by actions such as demolishing high rise lodgings, bringing new economic and social activity to the area and redesigning transport and public facilities, introduced in 1995. The GPUs depend for their implementation on more than one town council covering the zone. They also depend upon the participation of the central state authorities and on voluntary organisations, all of which have their own agenda and priorities. In one area known to the author, actions were blocked for several years because of a disagreement between two town councils - one with an extreme right wing mayor, the other socialist.

Positive discrimination techniques and programmes constitute a direct challenge to republican ideology contained in the 1789 Declaration of the Human Rights and renewed in successive French constitutions since. All men (and women, now) must have equal rights of access to public dignities, powers and privileges. The socialist Minister for Social Affairs in the previous government, Martine Aubry, preferred global large-scale urban renewal to localised positive zoning for this reason. The current Minister for the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, pronounced himself in favour of positive discrimination in 2003 and was instantly contradicted by the president of his own political party. Another example of how little enthusiasm «positive discrimination» generates is furnished by measures designed to bring more social work and more teachers to schools within urban development zones. Teachers in

the east of the Paris region on strike in 1999 had no difficulty in proving that the «positive» discrimination their zone benefited from was insufficient to bring them to the same level of services as rich (non positively discriminated) areas in the west of the region.

The recent riots in November 2005 have reactivated this debate but it seems that the “republican” approach emphasising equality of treatment and the school as the major factor of integration in urban areas stays dominant in political discourse.

Urban renewal program coordinators have regularly called for more social work involvement in schemes aimed at “re-qualifying” the status of urban areas. However, social workers express feelings of disempowerment when faced with the need to work in partnership, to contribute to collective action and to negotiate with strategic, «project orientated» authorities. Traditional generic social work agencies governed by the departments have stayed out of urban renewal projects, leaving the field open to project managers with backgrounds in management, sociology or urbanism who know little about social work as such. In opposition to this development, some generic agencies employing «traditional» social workers have gone so far as to develop their own community work projects outside the urban renewal programs (Annuaire 2005).

Within this context, calls for the development of new competencies and expertise have become more insistent on the part of political bodies. Much more attention is paid in training programs to law, social policy and project development methods. «Partnership» has become the «buzz» word and negotiating skills are highly prized when social workers are asked to deal with housing authorities about rent arrears, for example. Here, as with poverty programs, traditional theory has found it hard to keep up and no new model has emerged to replace the «unitary approach» in generic social work, despite a very clear perception of its limits and failures on the part of employers and social workers themselves (De Robertis 1981). While social services were instrumental in introducing community work methods in the 1970s, participatory community work, project management and conflict resolution are now often perceived as alternatives to social work and not an integral part of it.

Thus Urban development programs have been developed in parallel to traditional social work agencies. They offer a rival ideology, new sets of procedures and a new group of differently qualified social development agents, who do not necessarily recognise themselves as «social workers» despite their evident role in contribution to social cohesion (Ion and Ravon 2001, Jovelin and Bouquet 2005).

5 Conclusion

Most contemporary commentators would agree that the following changes have taken place over the period described (Bouquet 2005, De Ridder 1997, Castel 2004.)

- Social works has a more complex relation to political power (mainly because of decentralisation)
- The political goal attributed to social work is more targeted. It has more precise, specific objectives orientated towards the growing population living in poverty.
- The period is marked by a constant but as yet unsuccessful quest for a firm territorial and ideological base in urban development.

- Training programs are more diversified. In many cases, action based knowledge has replaced academic paradigms.

Much debate has taken place about the viability of “traditional” social work within these trends. For the sociologist and social work teacher, Phillippe Mondolfo, for example, a new paradigm focussed on collective action, social development programs and “self help” involves a radical change in the structure of training and employment of the traditional professions (Mondolfo 2004). According to Michel Autès, the trends identified above lead to a extension of the many paradoxes of social work : torn between political priorities and ethical principles, searching for an ever more individualised approach but faced with an ever increasing workload, firm advocates of community action but unable to promote it because of the complexity of the procedures involved (Autès 1996). These views sum up well the terms in which social workers express their crisis of identity that seems to have coloured the whole period within the social work profession and of which we have tried here to show some of the features.

Furthermore, within the context of decentralisation social work has been perceived as lacking a sound knowledge base and encounters difficulties when faced with increasing poverty, conflicting demands from public authorities and doubts from within among professional forums. Contrary to the views presented by those same sociologists, these difficulties are perhaps not only a consequence of the largely political issues concerning the role of the state and the crisis of faith in the welfare state so often invoked. I would suggest that they are also a result of the lack of a clear territorial, institutional base, an absence of “embeddedness” to borrow Giddens term designating the importance of abstract exchange system (“symbolic tokens”) and the expertise they generate (Giddens 1991, 18). Thus the interpretation of social problems is often a matter of categorisation of the person in symbolic terms (“tokens” according to Giddens. For example, the minimum income schemes create a set of categories such as “rmiste” (rmiste...”minimum incomer”), “handicappé” (handicaper), “apiste” (single parent allowance beneficiary), etc. The social workers’ job being to work out which definition is most suitable to the person concerned. This work of symbolic definition is made more difficult by the ever increasing complexity of organisational bodies and the lack of clear boundaries in many areas of social policy. The social worker becomes an expert in manipulating such systems.

Finally, the crisis in the professions is also a product of the professions themselves since they lack well organised, powerful professional bodies capable of making themselves heard in the public and political arena. The multiplication of professional diplomas whose objectives are often very similar to each other is also partly due to this difficulty of finding a credible and coherent means of expression. For the general public, and to a large extent for the public authorities, the “voice” of social work has been drowned out by that of sociology and of political science.

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